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Trimming Texas higher-ed board's power won't cut college costs

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BY THOMAS K. LINDSAY
Special to the Star-Telegram

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Well-intended legislation aiming to preserve struggling college majors would hamstring efforts to reverse years of skyrocketing tuitions.

House Bill 1351 (with Senate Bill 857) would deprive the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board of its power to end or consolidate academic programs at public colleges and universities. HB1351 is being discussed in committee, but SB857 was placed on the Senate's Intent Calendar this week, which means it could come up for a floor vote any day. The bills would reduce the board's role to that of recommending only, allowing university regents to decide whether to follow the board's counsel.

As someone who studied French, Greek and political philosophy, I appreciate the bill's intentions: Some areas of study should not be subject simply to consumer demand because they are essential to a full education.

Alas, this defense of low-attendance majors died a half-century ago when universities killed a required common-core curriculum. Today, they offer "cafeteria-style" education based primarily on each student's choice. Having abdicated their authority to require core courses, universities should not be surprised that students now vote with their course schedules.

But the cost to the university of supporting low-attendance majors persists and is borne by students in the form of higher tuitions and by taxpayers, who subsidize public colleges and universities.

In our stagnant economy, tough choices must be made. Since its creation in 1965, the Coordinating Board has been charged with putting students' and taxpayers' interests above those of particular schools. Enforcing minimum productivity standards is essential to fulfilling this charge.

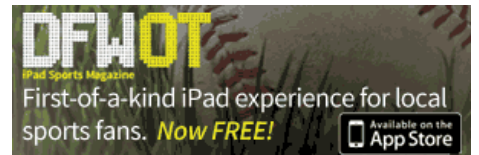
Low-attendance academic programs must face scrutiny to ensure that tuition and taxpayer dollars are employed efficiently and distributed fairly. But if the bills strip the board's power to close or consolidate programs, students and taxpayers will bear the burden.

A recent survey finds that closing or consolidating low-producing programs is the No. 1 action used by Texas public institutions to reduce costs. Without costs being cut this way, tuitions and taxes will rise further, faster.

The bills' defenders assume that regents will close or consolidate programs as needed. But the Coordinating Board's studies show that such evaluations are far too rare.

In 2011, more than 500 programs throughout Texas were not meeting minimum levels of productivity and efficiency yet continued to operate. Regents have been loath to overrule university administrators, who often receive immense pressure from professors, student groups and other campus stakeholders to preserve such programs. Facing life-tenured faculty, administrators quickly discover that they have more responsibilities than power.

This is precisely why the Coordinating Board should retain its authority. It alone can evaluate programs



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from a properly statewide perspective, making difficult decisions when needed.

Moreover, compared with other states, Texas' standards for low-attendance programs are a model of flexibility. Twenty-one states have institutionalized such standards, and Texas' are among the most lenient. Texas requires that programs at the associate and bachelor levels graduate five students a year; at the master's, two; and at the doctoral, one.

Aside from the unintended consequences of the bills, their good intentions are superfluous. the Coordinating Board's data-driven protocol for identifying low-attendance programs already guarantees schools a full opportunity to present their case before final decisions are reached. And any school may submit proposals for new, related programs when workforce needs change.

The Legislature is to be commended for the concerns expressed in the bills. But the bills offer a solution without a problem. For the sake of making college affordable for all Texans, we should let the Coordinating Board continue to do its job.

Thomas K. Lindsay is director of the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation and former deputy chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

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