Editorial: Seeking more accountability in higher education



Published 18 February 2011 03:14 PM

Dallas Morning News: http://www.dallasnews.com/opinion/editorials/20110218-editorial-seeking-more-accountability-in-higher-education.ece

What's an efficient university? What can be done to keep taxpayer money from going to waste? How can state schools be held more accountable for students they sign up but never graduate?

It's good to see lawmakers in Austin focused on those questions as they decide how to spread around the hurt in their painful budget exercise.

We agree with policymakers who stress that higher-ed dollars are the state's down payment on the workforce of the future. For that reason, we'd like to see legislators stave off crippling cuts to colleges and universities and to student aid programs.

Texas lags behind the national average in education rates, a statistic that could compromise the state's economic outlook as it competes for growth industries and high-paying jobs.

Still, the atmosphere of belt-tightening demands better performance out of Texas colleges and universities in return for the scarce dollars they do get.

A package of bills filed Thursday by Rep. Dan Branch, R-Dallas, chairman of the Higher Education Committee, heads in the right direction. They draw on research and recommendations by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

One bill, HB 9, would change the practice of tying the state's support formula solely to the student headcount at the beginning of the semester. Many of those students never complete their coursework, yet a university collects money as though they did. Branch's proposal would use an outcomes-based approach by tying part of the formula to graduation rates and other measures.

The amount of resources lost on students who don't graduate is astounding. The Coordinating Board says two-thirds of those who enrolled in post-secondary education in 2003 failed to graduate by 2009. That translates into taxpayer support for the unsuccessful college careers of more than 100,000 students in that time, a waste that the schools should be pushed to help minimize.

Another Branch bill, HB 10, would more wisely spend money in the TEXAS grant program for needy college students. That program now operates essentially on a first-come, first-served basis for low-income applicants, without considering differences in academic preparation. The Coordinating Board calls the awarding of grants "often random and arbitrary." That's a disservice to the best-qualified candidates and to taxpayers.

The legislation would give a common-sense priority to students who rank high on college-readiness indexes, class rank or other standards.

Before adopting such a measure, lawmakers must be clear that it would not clamp down on support to promising minority students. The majority of Texas grants now go to blacks and Hispanics. Hispanics are particularly under-represented on college campuses, and new funding mechanisms must not allow that picture to deteriorate.

These proposals to economize with higher-ed dollars may have been hatched to get though rough economic times, but they have the potential to make college and universities better performers over the long haul.

Inside the Texas student pipeline

2003-09

159,824 — Texas students entering college in 2003

54,335 — Students who earned post-secondary credentials in 2009

Students lost along the way

105,489 students — 66 percent of those enrolled did not graduate

Money lost along the way

\$713.2 million — financial aid

\$330.3 million — state revenue

\$67.5 million — local revenue

Average student loan debt of non-completers

\$10,800 — university students

\$6,700 — community and technical college students

SOURCE: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board