

Performance standards for universities examined

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UT says the future of funding for higher education depends on broadening how progress is measured

By Laura Heinauer

It happens every time the Legislature meets.

The state's public universities band together to ask for more money and the policy-makers resist, saying the schools need to more adequately explain what the public gets in return.

University of Texas System Chancellor Mark Yudof said Thursday that both sides would profit if the public universities did a better job measuring what it is they do.

"It's an issue of trust," Yudof told a symposium on accountability in higher education held at the UT campus Thursday.

"We've done a lot of things, but we're still in a very primitive state," he said. "Unless we do a better job explaining what we do, we'll continue to put ourselves at risk for cuts and for the kinds of regulations that hinder our ability to find other funding sources."

This problem is not Texas' alone.

The two-day conference attracted university presidents, federal regulators and other dignitaries in higher education from around the country.

It also allowed UT to showcase its own efforts to improve the way it tracks performance.

A 360-page accountability report, released by UT System administrators in March, is the model that Gov. Rick Perry wants other state universities to emulate.

UT system officials have said that the report, which measures everything from faculty salaries to graduation rates, was the first time such a comprehensive, systemwide analysis had been prepared.

And it's only the beginning, Yudof said.

"By tracking things like graduation rates and student-faculty ratios, we are only scratching the surface in terms of showing the public and policy-makers what we do," he said.

"We need to really track things like income levels and job placement and mobility of our graduates. We need to conduct surveys to see how well students feel we prepared them for the workplace."

A state Senate Finance Committee hearing this week highlighted the alternative.

UT President Larry Faulkner, when talking about a budget cut, warned that it could have a negative effect on the future of the university. State Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, basically asked him to prove it.

"Your board and other leaders are going to have to help us educate the public," Whitmire told Faulkner. "I don't think the average Texan knows the tough decision that we're all facing in the state. And I don't think collectively we're painting a clear enough picture of where we're likely to be in 20 years if we don't do something about it."

University of Virginia President John Casteen III, who attended the symposium Wednesday, said such a disconnect is common across the country.

Casteen lamented the Virginia Legislature's repeal of an automobile tax several years ago. The lost revenue, he said -- as Yudof and Faulkner exchanged knowing looks -- had a crippling effect on universities across the state.

Thursday's conference ended as the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, which oversees the state's public institutions of higher education, formally adopted a statewide accountability system that will force other universities to compile reports similar to the one UT released in the spring.

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