

A&M Bases Bonus on Student Input

By VIMAL PATEL
vimal.patel@theeagle.com

The head of the Texas A&M University System wants to give faculty members bonuses, but many are saying no thanks.

"I've never had so much trouble giving away a million dollars," Chancellor Mike McKinney said, laughing.

That's because he's never spent it like this. McKinney plans to give up to \$10,000 bonuses to instructors based on anonymous student evaluations.

Texas A&M University, along with two other schools in the A&M System, are the first public universities in Texas -- and among a few in the nation -- to offer financial rewards based on the end-of-the-semester critiques. The program is voluntary.

Faculty members have voiced concern about the program's fairness, the possibility of it becoming a popularity contest and the wisdom of relying on a single evaluation method.

"I don't believe teaching awards should be given based solely on student evaluations," said Martha Loudder, an accounting professor and former speaker of the faculty senate. "I fear that some very good teachers will be left out."

McKinney's \$1.1 million pilot initiative is also unfolding at Prairie View A&M University and Texas A&M University-Kingsville. He said the initiative fits with higher-education reforms supported by Gov. Rick Perry.

Having student evaluations determine instructor rewards was one of seven "breakthrough" reforms that came out of a higher-education summit in May organized by Perry's office and a conservative think tank, the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Though details are preliminary, officials said, the aim is to offer awards starting at \$2,500 to the top 15 percent of participating instructors.

"This is customer satisfaction," McKinney said. "It doesn't have to do with tenure, promotion, status. It has to do with students having the opportunity to recognize good teachers and reward them with some money."

Students and university officials said they plan to hand out the first awards in February.

Texas A&M University President Elsa Murano couldn't be reached for comment. Her spokesman said the decision to include Texas A&M University in the pilot program came from the system level. The Texas A&M University System encompasses nine universities, seven state agencies and a health science center.

Shortcomings

Loudder has received the most prestigious award at the university, the Presidential Teaching Excellence Award, given to two faculty members each year. In addition to the \$25,000 award, she has won others, including one from The Association of Former Students.

And, she said, she generally gets positive evaluations from students.

But she is at a disadvantage with this program, she said. She teaches an accounting course known as a "weed-out" class -- usually one of the toughest courses of the major in which students often realize accounting isn't for them.

"My scores would never be high enough to be competitive, so there's no point of me participating," Loudder said. "They're either going to love me or hate me."

A few low scores would have a significant impact on the evaluations, she said.

Research is varied on both sides, but the Texas Public Policy Foundation acknowledges that there is some correlation between lenient grading and better student evaluations.

Karan Watson, Texas A&M's dean of faculties and associate provost, admitted that the bonus program has shortcomings, including a disadvantage to professors such as Loudder. It's also more likely that the instructor of a fun elective is going to get higher ratings than someone who teaches a mandatory class, Watson said.

But the fundamental purpose of this program, she said, is to measure student satisfaction, not teaching effectiveness.

Watson worked with a student-led committee to oversee the bonus program. She said the initiative will continue to be refined.

"I think we're going to see good results in the program," Watson said. "When I saw preliminary data, I wasn't surprised at the faculty that were showing up on the list. The people who are coming up through this list are generally the people we see getting accolades for being effective teachers."

'Breakthrough solution'

Educators have not only criticized the model of such an endeavor, but the origin of the idea as well.

The primary audience at the summit where the idea was talked about was regents from Texas university systems, a spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation said.

All nine Texas A&M regents attended, and all were appointed by Perry.

"The perspective of the summit was very limited to the specific conservative ideology of the Texas Public Policy Foundation and probably does not fully represent the views of the general public about higher education in Texas or the views of those who work within the field," said David Weissenburger, president of the Texas Council of Faculty Senates, in an e-mail.

At the end of the summit, regents walked away with a notebook containing what were billed as seven "breakthrough solutions" to higher-education reform, including linking bonuses to student evaluations.

"Universities were created for the education of students, not as a jobs program for adults," said David Guenther, a spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation. "Reforms such as performance bonuses based on student evaluations will improve the quality of education students receive by making universities more responsive to students, parents and employers."

The American Association of University Professors states that faculty members should have a primary -- though not exclusive -- role in evaluating an individual faculty member's performance.

"Basing financial awards on student evaluation seems to be taking consumerism to a new level," said Gregory Scholtz, director of the department of academic freedom and governance for the Washington-based group.

The seeds of the foundation's idea came from two schools, Guenther said: The University of Oklahoma and the Acton School of Business.

Voted off the ... school?

The 28-student Acton School of Business has recognized faculty members based on student evaluations since it was founded about six years ago.

"The highest-rated professor gets a plaque ... and recognition," said Chase Pattillo, director of programs at Acton. "The lowest-rated professor is asked not to return for a period of time."

In addition to sitting out for a year, the teacher must undergo a training program.

"It forces them to learn and get better," Pattillo said. "The biggest deterrent is that it's publicly posted."

Pattillo said the system has worked out well for the school of about 10 teachers. But the Austin school is unusual. It has a highly motivated class of students that finish a master's in business in one year, often studying 90 to 100 hours a week, Pattillo said. And the teachers are all successful entrepreneurs.

The University of Oklahoma has a program more similar to the A&M System initiative.

About two years ago, the university proposed offering awards of up to \$10,000 to instructors based on student evaluations. That program faced some of the same opposition from faculty members as the A&M program.

Officials from the University of Oklahoma couldn't be reached to speak about the program, but an instructor there said she hasn't noticed any changes of teaching styles to manipulate the awards system.

"I don't think faculty are going to pander to students for a few thousand dollars," said Traci Carte, an associate professor of management information systems who was awarded money through the program.

Checks and balances

The implementation of the process at Texas A&M began with a letter from McKinney to faculty announcing the program in September.

Shortly after, the faculty senate passed a resolution opposing the initiative for various reasons, including undermining awards already given by The Association of Former Students that take student input into account, and the possibility of manipulating evaluations by easy grading.

That's when the student government got involved, alleviating some concerns of faculty members.

Mark Womack, a political science major, co-chairs a student-led committee at Texas A&M University that aims to guard against concerns such as grade inflation.

"First and foremost, I believe that students at A&M can distinguish between a popular teacher and a good teacher," Womack said. "But [we'll have] checks and balances."

Details about how the program would be implemented at Kingsville and Prairie View were not immediately clear.

Texas A&M has identified the top 25 percent of instructors from student evaluation forms filled out in November. Womack said there were 511 courses reviewed for the program. Participating instructors could sign up for more than one class but are only eligible to win one award per year, he said.

The student questionnaire included 16 statements, such as "Course expectations/learning outcomes were clearly communicated at the beginning of the course" and "My instructor seems to be very knowledgeable about the subject matter." Students were asked to bubble in answers on a five-point scale -- from strongly agree to strongly disagree.

When the student committee meets again this month, it will choose the winners after collecting information from department heads, reviewing course syllabuses and teaching philosophies as submitted by each instructor, as well as a statement on the appropriateness and rigor of the material covered.

The review is meant as a check against concerns such as grade inflation.

McKinney, faculty and administrators heaped praise on the student effort.

"The unsung heroes are the students," said R. Douglas Slack, a former speaker of the faculty senate. "They took this program with no background, no experience and made it work."

Slack said he didn't sign up for the program to "show solidarity with faculty members who have expressed concern."

Don't call it an incentive

McKinney said he prefers not to refer to the initiative as an incentive.

"Money is not an incentive for [faculty]," he said. "They show up every day and do the best they can. They can't logically do better than their best. I call it a reward."

The chancellor said he is committed to the initiative. The initial funding came from existing sources, but he has put in a legislative appropriations request for \$12 million to continue funding the program.

"If I had to prioritize my entire budget, this would be first," he said. "If I have to take money out of administration, that's what I'll do."

He said he has faith that students won't turn the process into a popularity contest, at least not any more than adults are capable of creating.

"I've sat in on some tenure and committee meetings, and some of those look pretty close to a popularity contest," he said.

IN SHORT

The Texas A&M University System is offering instructors bonuses -- up to \$10,000 -- based on positive student evaluations. The \$1.1 million program is being implemented at the system's College Station, Prairie View and Kingsville campuses, but some faculty members worry the awards are unfair and amount to a popularity contest.

Students are asked to evaluate participating instructors on a five-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Among the 16 statements are:

- * My instructor seemed to be knowledgeable about the subject matter.
- * Whenever possible, my instructor taught the course in a way that stimulated my critical thinking.
- * My instructor created a classroom atmosphere that was productive/conducive to learning.
- * My instructor was enthusiastic about the subject matter of the course.
- * My instructor set high standards that challenged me in the course.
- * By providing helpful feedback on assignments/tests, my instructor encouraged me to actively participate in the learning process.

* I would take another course with this instructor, if possible, or recommend this instructor to other students.

* I recommend this instructor for a teaching excellence award.

Source: <http://www.theeagle.com/am/A-amp-amp-M-bases-bonus-on-student-input>