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Texas voters want more bang for the buck in higher education

New public opinion poll provides valuable guidance to lawmakers on budget solutions

AUSTIN – A public opinion survey commissioned by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and released today found that Texas voters think our state’s public colleges and universities can reduce their operating costs while improving on how they teach students.

Eighty percent of Texas voters think Texas colleges and universities can be run more efficiently, with 50 percent strongly believing so. Only 5 percent of voters think it is not possible.

Seventy-one percent of voters—44 percent strongly—believe that Texas colleges and universities can improve teaching while reducing operating costs, while a mere 13 percent disagreed.

“Texas voters want more value and higher quality teaching for the tax dollars they pay to support higher education,” said Justin Keener, TPPF vice president of policy and communications. “The results give lawmakers and university officials clear marching orders for how Texans want them to address budget shortfalls and rising tuition costs: put our students first and cut higher education overhead.”

Voters emphatically want professors to spend more time educating students in the classroom, even at the expense of research. The survey found 87 percent of Texans believe that the most important purpose of a university is to educate students, while only 6 percent say it is to conduct research. By a margin of 81 percent to 14 percent, respondents believe that tuition dollars should be used to teach students and not be used to subsidize research.

The survey results echo what state policymakers are saying and hearing from their constituents. House Higher Education Chairman Dan Branch said at a Texas Tribune TribLive event last Thursday that Texas needs professors of public colleges and universities to carry a heavier teaching load. The TPPF survey found 87 percent of voters believe college professors should be required to teach in the classroom at least six hours per week (9 percent disagree).

Voters also want to see more rewards and accountability for professors who are in the classroom teaching. By a margin of 73 percent to 23 percent, they agreed with the proposition that professors should be paid based on how much work they do, especially how many students they teach.

When asked how universities should deal with budget shortfall, the top three choices of voters were:

Option	First Choice	Second Choice	Total
1) Reduce administrative overhead	33 percent	20 percent	53 percent
2) Delay new facilities	18 percent	20 percent	37 percent
3) Require professors to teach more students and do less research	14 percent	16 percent	30 percent

Raising tuition or taxes were the least favorable options, at 6 percent and 10 percent respectively.

The need for greater efficiency in colleges and universities is mirrored in the beliefs of parents with a child who currently attends a Texas public university. Eighty-one percent believe that colleges and universities can be run more efficiently.

A recent report by the [American Council of Trustees and Alumni](#) (ACTA) exposes rising tuition costs among Big 12 institutions at the cost of taxpayers and students. The report reveals that three major Big 12 public universities in Texas—University of Texas, Texas A&M University and Texas Tech University—charged 23.6 percent more on average for tuition and fees in 2009-10 than they did in 2004-05.

Additional findings of the survey show voters believe student evaluations are a valuable means for determining the quality of instruction received. Ninety percent of voters believe there should be measurements in place to determine the effectiveness of the education delivered and material learned by students at colleges and universities, while only 7 percent disagreed. Eighty-five percent of voters believe if they were students that they could effectively evaluate the job the professor did at teaching them. Only 10 percent felt they could not, while 5 percent were unsure.

“The quality of education delivered should be a top priority at all colleges and universities,” Keener said. “Evaluating the performance and effectiveness of faculty and universities will help decision-makers and university governing boards make informed decisions on improving our higher education system to best educate and prepare our state’s future generations.”

The survey was conducted by Baselice and Associates on November 7-9, 2010 with a sample size of 800 respondents. The margin of error to the results of this survey are $\pm 3.5\%$.

[Justin Keener](#) is vice president of policy and communications for the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

The [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) is a non-profit free-market research institute based in Austin.

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TEXAS VOTER SURVEY

Baselice & Associates, Inc. was retained for the purposes of studying attitudes and opinions regarding higher education in Texas. The following are key findings from a telephone survey among N=800 randomly selected registered voters in Texas conducted on November 7-9, 2010. The margin of error for a sample of this size is $\pm 3.5\%$ at the .95 test level.

- Eight in ten voters (80%) think public colleges and universities in Texas can [Version X: be run more efficiently / Version Y: manage the money they have more wisely], while five percent do not think so and 15% are unsure. Note: half of the respondents were read the Version X language and the other half were presented with the Version Y phrasing. There was no statistically significant difference in the responses to the Version X and Version Y language.
- Just over seven in ten voters (71%) believe public colleges and universities in Texas can improve upon how they teach students while reducing operating costs (13% do not believe this and 17% are unsure).
- When combining first and second choices, a majority of respondents favor reducing administrative overhead (53%) if Texas public universities have less revenues because of the state budget shortfall. This choice was followed by delaying new facilities (37%), requiring professors to teach more students and do less research (30%), increasing class size (22%), freezing faculty pay (17%), raising taxes (10%), and raising tuition (6%).
- When asked to choose between the two, 87% select “educating students to prepare them for fruitful careers” as the most important purpose of universities while six percent choose “conducting research led by professors to create new knowledge” (seven percent are unsure).
- Nine out of ten (90%) respondents agree that there should be measurements in place to determine the effectiveness of the education delivered and material learned by students at colleges and universities (seven percent disagree and three percent are unsure).
- Eighty-five percent (85%) of respondents said that if they were a college student, they would be capable of judging [Version X: the job the professor did at teaching them / Version Y: whether or not they learned the material presented to them] (10% percent said they would not and five percent are unsure). There was no difference in the responses to the Version X and Version Y language.
- Nearly three-quarters (73%) of respondents agree that professors should be paid based on how much work they do, especially how many students they teach (23% percent disagree and four percent are unsure).
- Eighty-seven percent (87%) of respondents agree that college professors should be required to teach in the classroom at least six hours per week (nine percent disagree and four percent are unsure).
- Just over eight out of ten (81%) respondents agree that tuition dollars should be used to teach students, not to subsidize academic research (14% disagree and five percent are unsure).
- Eighty-eight percent (88%) of respondents agree Texas public universities should be required to conduct performance audits like most other state agencies and commissions do (eight percent disagree and four percent are unsure).

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TEXAS VOTER SURVEY DEMOGRAPHICS

The following are demographic distributions from the November 7-9, 2010 Texas voter survey.

- One-fourth (25%) of respondents are 18-44 years old, 22% are 45-54 years old, 24% are 55-64 years old, 27% are over the age of 65, and 2% declined to provide their age. Forty-seven percent (47%) of respondents are male, 53% are female.
- Four percent (4%) of respondents have less than a high school education, 18% are high school graduates, 27% attended college but did not graduate, 30% are college graduates, and 22% percent have post graduate degrees.
- Forty-one percent (41%) of respondents vote straight or mostly Republican, 32% vote straight or mostly Democrat, while 27% are classified as broad Independents. Of the 27% who are broad Independents, nine percent lean Republican and five percent lean Democrat. This equates to a sample in which 50% are straight, mostly, or lean Republican and 37% who are straight, mostly, or lean Democrat.
- Sixty-one percent (61%) of respondents are Anglo/White, 22% Hispanic, 12% African-American/Black, and five percent cited another race or declined to answer.
- Twenty-three percent (23%) of respondents have annual household incomes under \$40,000, 31% have incomes of \$40,000-\$79,999, 23% have incomes of \$80,000-\$149,999, 10% have incomes of \$150,000 or more, while 13% were unsure or declined to answer.
- Twenty percent (20%) of all respondents said they have a child who currently attends a Texas public university or college.
- Twenty-one percent (21%) of all interviews were conducted among respondents who say they have unlisted telephone numbers.