

SUBJECT: Downward expansion of the University of Texas at Brownsville

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — favorable as amended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Rangel, Solis, Bailey, Cuellar, Dunnam, Kamel, Rabuck, E. Reyna
0 nays
1 absent — Rodriguez

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 7 — 30-0

WITNESSES: For — None
Against — None
On — Don W. Brown, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board;
William H. Cunningham

BACKGROUND : The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) was established as an upper division school, offering only junior-, senior-, and graduate-level courses. Since 1991, the university has leased its facilities from Texas Southmost College (TSC), with whom it shares faculty and contracts for the provision of lower-division courses. The two institutions have different governing boards but have the same president.

DIGEST: SB 274 would allow UT-Brownsville to offer lower-division courses to support bachelor of arts and bachelor of science degree programs. UTB could offer lower-division courses as long as the Southmost Union Junior College District continued to provide regular operational support for Texas Southmost College.

The bill would require that the University of Texas System Board of Regents and the Southmost Union Junior College District agree upon the number of freshmen who could enroll in UTB each year. The number of entering lower-division students enrolled in the school could not exceed 900 until the 2005-2006 academic year.

UTB would continue to receive upper-division formula funding until the fiscal year ending August 31, 2006, and would receive lower-division funding for its new lower-division courses.

SB 274 would take immediate effect if finally approved by a record two-thirds vote of the membership in each house.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 274 would establish a commitment on the part of the state and the University of Texas System to develop a four-year university in Brownsville. The Brownsville community is ripe for a four-year university. The city has about 300,000 residents, including 40,000 students in the Brownsville Independent School District, many of whom will soon be entering the state's higher education system. TSC and UTB are currently experiencing a growth spurt that is expected to continue, resulting in hundreds of additional students enrolled in the next few years.

The additional capacity SB 247 would provide would enable both these institutions to meet the growing need for higher education in Brownsville, and ensure equal access to higher education for all South Texas students. The area served by UTB has not kept pace with the rest of the state in the development of higher education systems, and the establishment of UTB as a four-year university would be an important step in remedying this situation.

The Brownsville community is committed to preserving the relationship between UTB and Texas Southmost College and has encouraged both institutions to continue to complement each other in their excellent service to the area. Designed with this relationship in mind, SB 274 would stipulate that the junior college district providing TSC with local tax revenue would have to continue to do so for UTB to offer lower-division courses, ensuring continued support of both schools. Furthermore, the two schools would work together to establish enrollment caps for UTB that would phase in its lower-division courses, preventing an abrupt drop in the size of the TSC student body.

SB 274 would continue an important trend in the delivery of higher education in Texas: the downward expansion of upper-level institutions. The Legislature has approved such action last session for the University of

Texas-Permian Basin and this session for the University of Texas at Tyler. SB 274 would simply extend these same benefits to the University of Texas at Brownsville, and provide long overdue higher education access to the citizens of South Texas.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

The downward expansion of UTB would inevitably harm nearby higher education institutions, most notably Texas Southmost College, which could lose as many as half its students should UTB become a four-year institution.

Despite the lack of immediate fiscal impact to the state, the continued support of UTB as a four-year institution would likely require state appropriations in future years. Authorizing the school's expansion would be effectively committing the state to an undisclosed level of future financial support, a questionable move at a time when all of higher education is currently under-funded and state contributions have long been on the decline.