

SUBJECT: Requiring undergraduate course information to be online

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 8 ayes — Branch, Castro, Alonzo, Berman, Cohen, D. Howard, Patrick, Rose
0 nays
1 absent — McCall

WITNESSES: For — Tony McDonald, Young Conservatives of Texas; Barbara Moeller; Peggy Venable, Americans for Prosperity; (*Registered, but did not testify*: James Armstrong, Americans for Prosperity; Brent Connett, Texas Conservative Coalition; John Drogin)
Against — None

DIGEST: CSHB 2504 would require each higher education institution, beginning with the 2010 fall semester, to make available to the public on its website a course syllabus, a curriculum vitae of each regular instructor, and a departmental budget report, if available, for each undergraduate class offered. The budget report would be from the most recent semester or other academic term that the course was offered.

The syllabus would have to provide a brief description of each major course requirement, including major assignments and exams as well as the required or recommended reading lists, and a general description of the subject matter of lectures or discussions.

The information would have to be accessible from the institution's website by use of not more than three links and be searchable by keywords and phrases. It would have to be accessible to the public without requiring registration or the use of a user identification.

The information would be available on the institution's website not later than the seventh day after the first day of classes and remain on the website for at least four years. Updates would be made as soon as practicable. The governing board of each institution would be required to

designate an administrator, who would be responsible for ensuring implementation of these provisions.

Higher education institutions would submit a compliance report no later than January 1 of each odd-numbered year to the governor, the lieutenant governor, the speaker of the House of Representatives, and the presiding officer of each higher education legislative committee.

The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board would be authorized to adopt necessary rules to implement the provisions of the bill.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2009.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

Requiring universities to post course information online would ensure the continuous availability of vital course information. It would provide transparency and give taxpayers and those responsible for paying college tuition as much information as possible. It would give current and potential students convenient access to course syllabi so that they could evaluate courses they were considering before they enrolled, leading to more informed choices. This would be particularly important when deciding to pay for classes that may have been misrepresented in other course materials.

While some instructors do post a course syllabus online, at very little cost to institutions, it is not a requirement. Usually only students who are already enrolled in a specific class can access the information, using a secure password protected website. This limits access by prohibiting potential students from obtaining important course information.

Requiring course information to be available online would make it much more accessible. Today, most students, potential students, and their families use the Internet for many transactions, including to register for school. Having this information, along with the departmental budget report, would enable students and other interested parties who were concerned with tuition costs to see exactly how much money they would be spending and what level and the kind of course content they would be receiving.

Students often sign up for classes without a clear understanding of the class content because it simply is not available. Those students may end up taking classes they were not anticipating, wasting time and money. On average, students at public Texas universities pay around \$6,000 per academic year. The average loan debt is around \$20,000. Students and parents want to get the most for their money, and CSHB 2504 would enable them to make more informed decisions about course selection.

OPPONENTS
SAY:

The accountability system already in place includes extensive requirements for institutions to report enrollment and course information on a regular basis. The requirements of CSHB 2504 would create a significant burden on many faculty, web designers, and department administrators, as well as a substantial unfunded mandate.

The provision requiring a departmental budget report is unclear. Currently, each institution is required to post its operating budget online, and it is available to the public. To publish anything more detailed could be problematic. It is not clear what parents or students would gain by knowing what an institution spends on a department.

It is doubtful that any other state requires all state institutions of higher education to publicly post the details of course content and required reading for every class. Much of the same information already is available to students and members of the public who are willing to request it. Students who need more detailed information about classes usually can find it on campus from departmental notices, on-line course catalogs, and academic advisors, who are available to meet with students every semester to discuss their upcoming course selections. A student always can e-mail a teacher and ask for more information if necessary. Many faculty already post their syllabi, course requirements, and vitae on their departmental websites.

The bill's technical requirements would be particularly onerous. It would be difficult to administer without hiring additional staff. The provisions would require significant changes to institutions' websites to accommodate having to have the information accessible by use of no more than three links and to archive past and current versions of course descriptions.

OTHER
OPPONENTS
SAY:

Providing more accessible information for students and their families would be beneficial, but several provisions of the bill would be problematic to implement and should be clarified. Specifically, the bill would require information on each undergraduate classroom course offered. This would exclude distance education and on-line courses. Some classroom courses are independent studies, directed readings, or internships that may be offered to fewer than five students. The bill would require a syllabus that provided a general description of discussions, which are inherently unknowable until they occur. The direction of a class discussion or lecture might not end up being close to what the instructor originally planned. The bill should clarify that the information institutions were required to post online would be limited to traditional courses.

Not all classroom courses offered for credit by institutions are taught by faculty. For example, dual-credit courses are offered at many high schools in special arrangements with area community colleges and universities. It is unclear whether the institutions would be responsible for reporting this information.

The bill would require information on required or recommended reading, but some instructors may require many short essay readings from multiple sources for a single class period, or an English instructor might include hundreds of short poems over the course of a semester. This would be difficult to keep updated and current. Instead, the bill should require only major required readings and anthology titles.

NOTES:

The committee substitute differs from the bill as filed by applying the requirements to undergraduate courses only; requiring institutions to report compliance to certain elected officials; and removing the requirement of the THECB to impose administrative penalties for violations of the bill.