

May 6, 2010

Professors in Texas Protest Law That Requires Them to Post Teaching Details Online

By Katherine Mangan

Austin, Tex.

Faculty members and administrators in Texas are speaking out about a recent state law that requires them to post specific, detailed information about their classroom assignments, curricula vitae, department budgets, and the results of student evaluations.

A conservative group whose administrators have close ties to Gov. Rick Perry lobbied for the law, saying it offers important "consumer protection." Opponents counter that it has created an expensive and time-consuming burden and offers little benefit to the public.

Beginning this fall, universities will have to post online a syllabus for every undergraduate course, including major assignments and examinations, reading lists, and course descriptions.

Curricula vitae must include a faculty member's teaching experience and contributions to professional publications. All of the information must be no more than three clicks away from the college's home page.

Colleges are required to assign compliance duties to a campus administrator and, every other year, send a written report to the governor and legislative leaders.

David M. Hillis, a professor of integrative biology at the University of Texas at Austin, calls the law "the worst example of government meddling at a huge cost to the public and for zero public good that I have ever seen."

He says lawmakers did not consult with faculty governance groups when formulating the legislation.

Students can already find most of the required information in other forms on the Web. "It takes an enormous amount of time and effort on the part of every faculty member to assemble and post this information in the particular form that the Legislature demands," Mr. Hillis says.

Conservative Backing

The legislation, [HB 2504](#), was signed into law in June 2009. It received enthusiastic backing from groups including the Young Conservatives of Texas and the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative-leaning think tank whose president, Brooke L. Rollins, is Governor Perry's former policy director.

Elizabeth Young, a policy analyst with the foundation, said the bill would enable students to make more informed decisions about which professors' courses to sign up for. "By forcing universities to list a professor's postsecondary education and teaching experience, students will have a more accurate representation of a professor's classroom abilities than they would have otherwise," she wrote in testimony to lawmakers debating the bill.

The law has caught the attention of conservative policy groups outside of Texas. George Leef, director of research at the John William Pope Center for Higher Education Policy in Raleigh, N.C., said he would like to see other states adopt the Texas approach.

Opponents say the law will invite political interference, and one of its requirements—posting online students' evaluations of professors—could encourage grade inflation and prompt some students to choose professors and classes that look easy.

Students as Customers

Cary D. Wintz, a professor of history at Texas Southern University, objects to the model of students as customers. "We're not Kmart. We aren't having a blue-light special on history this week," says Mr. Wintz, who serves on the board of the Texas Faculty Association.

Theresa J.C. Norman, an instructor of philosophy at South Texas College, calls the reporting requirements "a waste of time."

Ms. Norman, who is also president of the South Texas Faculty Association, also resents what she sees as the law's underlying assumptions. "You get the feeling that the government sees us as slackers," she says. By requiring professors to list every assignment, she says the law interferes with her ability to respond to students' interests and current events and shift to different topics during the semester.

Texas Tech University has spent \$85,000 upgrading its server and hiring an administrator to train faculty members how to create digitally-searchable CV's and syllabi that will meet the law's requirements, according to Valerie O. Paton, vice president for planning and assessment.

The bill's sponsor, Rep. Lois W. Kolkhorst, wanted to protect students and tuition-paying parents at a time of rising college costs, according to her chief of staff, Chris Steinbach. "Enrolling in a course and finding that it's not what you needed can be an expensive mistake," he says.

