

Texas Association of College Teachers
2017 Legislative Session in Review

“There’s the budget, and then there is everything else.”

Whew! Or, as one newspaper account began, “Relief.”

Adequate funding was the number one issue for the Texas Association of College Teachers (TACT).

The initial legislative appropriations bill introduced in January was harsh toward universities, with cuts ranging from six to ten percent. Higher education appropriations had fared well in 2015, but the Texas Comptroller’s revenue estimate for fiscal years 2018 and 2019 did not promise any extra gravy to spread around. In late May, the contrast between competing House and Senate versions exceeded a billion dollars.

In the end, a combination of using the Rainy Day Fund (House proposal) and delaying certain scheduled payments (Senate proposal) provided some relief. Overall, higher ed spending will increase slightly – 2.34 percent, not including community colleges. Some universities still saw reductions, but The University of Texas will see a three percent increase while Texas A&M rises 1.6 percent.

Similarly, TEXAS Grant, the primary state student financial aid program, dodged a bullet: a ten percent increase (\$71 million) will enable it to assist 92 percent of eligible students, up from an estimate of 57 percent of students in an earlier version. Bills which would have frozen tuition, limited tuition increases by Boards of Regents, and eliminated the set-asides of certain university income for scholarships did not survive the legislative process.

“Special Items” were not so lucky. These programs, such as the UT McDonald Observatory, historically have been funded outside the normal formula process. They were cut 27 percent. The broader question of funding special items will receive scrutiny by a House-Senate Committee during the interim.

The Hazlewood Act is an increasingly expensive unfunded mandate to universities requiring them to provide educational benefits to veterans and their dependents. TACT's position is that legislative programs should be paid for in the Appropriations Act or the requirements should be eliminated. Last session, the Senate pushed Hazlewood reform while the House was uninterested; this year the roles reversed, but the result was the same: the unfunded mandate remains unchanged and increasingly costly. Veterans organizations are very good lobbyists, even as the UT Chancellor says the cost to his System alone is \$40-\$50 million and growing.

And finally on the appropriations front, TACT was disappointed that more progress wasn't made on public school finance reform. Texas college faculty believe they could direct a much higher quality education if the freshmen they inherit were better prepared for university-level work. Last year, the Texas Supreme Court ruled just short of unconstitutional the current plan, which let the Legislature off the hook to act. The House added \$1.5 billion for K-12 but the Senate demanded as its price the use of public money for private education, usually known as variations of vouchers. Neither side budged.

Everything else

TACT did not have a position on SB4, the sanctuary cities issue, which applies to campus police forces. A previous TACT policy regarding non-citizen students advocated that more education for anyone within our nation is beneficial to everyone.

Guns on campus took a breather this time, as is customary during the session following many emotional issues. Now it is time for community colleges to prepare their local policies within the new law. The House debated banning "large knives" legislation on campus, but the bill did not pass.

Several sexual assault on campus bills were passed, including electronic reporting, educational initiatives and requiring regents to approve a policy for their campuses.

The slow growth of permitting community colleges to award bachelor's degrees continued, with the Coordinating Board authorized to review and approve such requests.

What's next?

With a special session planned for July 18, higher education advocates will be watching for, but not expecting, significant issues affecting their operations. House Speaker Joe Straus says his members are still interested in reforming public school finance, but it has not been added to the list of debatable issues by the Governor.