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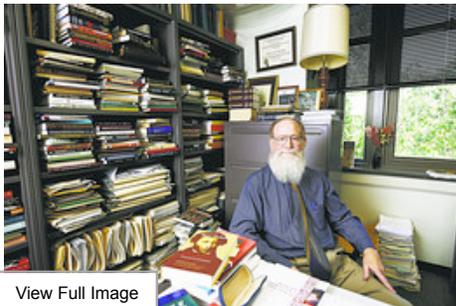
Putting a Price on Professors

A battle in Texas over whether academic value can be measured in dollars and cents.

By [STEPHANIE SIMON](#) And [STEPHANIE BANCHERO](#)

Carol Johnson took the podium of a lecture hall one recent morning to walk 79 students enrolled in an introductory biology course through diffusion, osmosis and the phospholipid bilayer of cell membranes.

A senior lecturer, Ms. Johnson has taught this class for years. Only recently, though, have administrators sought to quantify whether she is giving the taxpayers of Texas their money's worth.



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Matt Wright-Steel for The Wall Street Journal

Chester Dunning, a history professor, has won several teaching awards. According to a report by the chancellor, he also loses money for the university, though his department is in the black overall.

A 265-page spreadsheet, released last month by the chancellor of the Texas A&M University system, amounted to a profit-and-loss statement for each faculty member, weighing annual salary against students taught, tuition generated, and research grants obtained.

Ms. Johnson came out very much in the black; in the period analyzed—fiscal year 2009—she netted the public university \$279,617. Some of her colleagues weren't nearly so profitable. Newly hired assistant professor Charles Criscione, for instance, spent much of the year setting up a lab to research parasite genetics and ended up \$45,305 in the red.

The balance sheet sparked an immediate uproar from faculty, who called it misleading, simplistic and crass—not to mention, riddled with errors. But the move here comes amid a national drive, backed by some on both the left and the right, to assess more rigorously what, exactly, public universities are doing with their students—and their tax dollars.

Controversial Numbers: Cash Flow at Texas A&M

	Chemistry	History	English
Funds generated	\$17,451,040	\$8,681,072	\$9,258,566
Faculty salaries and benefits	-\$12,262,038	-\$4,042,470	-\$7,580,395
Gains	\$5,189,002	\$4,638,602	\$1,678,171
	Oceanography	Physics and Astronomy	Aerospace Engineering
Funds generated	\$3,431,130	\$10,039,564	\$4,208,388
Faculty salaries and benefits	-\$4,260,442	-\$11,299,763	-\$5,608,774
Losses	-\$829,312	-\$1,260,199	-\$1,400,386

As budget pressures mount, legislators and governors are increasingly demanding data proving that money given to colleges is well spent. States spend about 11% of their general-fund

budgets subsidizing higher education. That totaled more than \$78 billion in fiscal year 2008, according to the National Association of State Budget Officers.

The movement is driven as well by dismal educational statistics. Just over half of all freshmen entering four-year public colleges will earn a degree from that institution within six years, according to the U.S. Department of Education.

And among those with diplomas, just 31% could pass the most recent national prose literacy test, given in 2003; that's down from 40% a decade earlier, the department says.

"For years and years, universities got away with, 'Trust us—it'll be worth it,'" said F. King Alexander, president of California State University at Long Beach.

But no more: "Every conversation we have with these institutions now revolves around productivity," says Jason Bearce, associate commissioner for higher education in Indiana. He tells administrators it's not enough to find efficiencies in their operations; they must seek "academic efficiency" as well, graduating more students more quickly and with more demonstrable skills. The National Governors Association echoes that mantra; it just formed a commission focused on improving productivity in higher education.



[View Full Image](#)

Carol Johnson lectures at Texas A&M; she netted the university \$279,617, according to the chancellor's report.

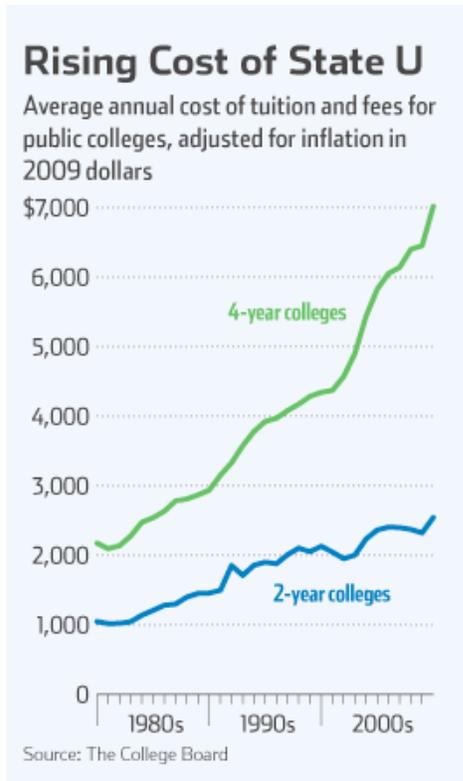
This new emphasis has raised hackles in academia. Some professors express deep concern that the focus on serving student "customers" and delivering value to taxpayers will turn public colleges into factories. They worry that it will upend the essential nature of a university, where the Milton scholar who teaches a senior seminar to five English majors is valued as much as the engineering professor who lands a million-dollar research grant.

And they fear too much tinkering will destroy an educational system that, despite its acknowledged flaws, remains the envy of much of the world. "It's a reflection of a much more corporate model of running a university, and it's getting away from the idea of the university as public good," says John Curtis, research

director for the American Association of University Professors.

Efforts to remake higher education generally fall into two categories. In some states, including Ohio and Indiana, public officials have ordered a new approach to funding, based not on how many students enroll but on what they accomplish.

Details vary, but colleges typically earn points under such a system for pushing students to take science, engineering and math; for ensuring that they complete classes that they start; for improving on-time graduation rates; and for boosting more low-income students to degrees.



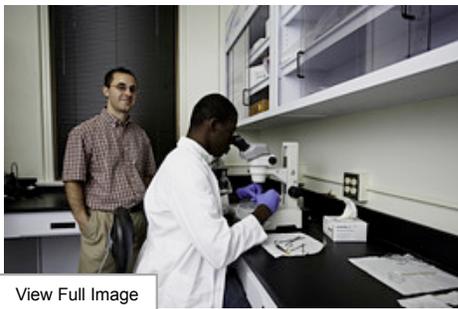
These performance metrics generally affect just a portion of an institution's public funding—but that can be significant. In Ohio, for example, state funding for one community college jumped 11% in each of the past two years because of the new formulas. Several four-year campuses, by contrast, lost about 5% a year. President Barack Obama has pushed for similar incentives on a national level but could not get a proposed \$2.5 billion fund for high-achieving colleges through Congress.

A second approach to reform is driven by college administrators seeking to build credibility with the public by disclosing their school's strengths and weaknesses.

Minnesota's state college system has created an online "accountability dashboard" for each campus. Bright, gas-gauge-style graphics indicate how many students complete their degrees; how run-down (or up-to-date) facilities are; and how many graduates pass professional licensing exams.

The California State University system, using data from outside sources, posts online the median starting and mid-career salaries for graduates of each campus, as well as their average student loan debt. "Taxpayers can make a pretty good estimate of their rate of return," says Mr. Alexander, president of CSU Long Beach.

A few schools have even taken to guaranteeing their education. Henry Ford Community College in Dearborn, Mich., pledges to retrain any of its graduates whose employers are dissatisfied with their skills or attitude.



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Matt Wright-Steel for the Wall Street Journal

Assistant professor Charles Criscione works one-on-one with an undergraduate; he ended up \$45,305 in the red.

Concern about America's higher-education system kicked into high gear in 2006 when Margaret Spellings, education secretary for President George W. Bush, issued a biting report. She chided universities for coasting on their reputations and urged them to start measuring how much students learn—and why a degree costs so much.

The same year, a survey conducted by a coalition of corporations found that nearly 30% of employers ranked new hires with four-year college diplomas as "deficient" in written communication skills.

The reports jolted academia. Scrambling to respond, scores of public colleges agreed to post data they had previously kept

private on a "College Portraits" website—including their scores on standardized tests that attempt to measure how much a school improves students' critical thinking skills between freshman and senior years. About 300 colleges now participate in the site, run by two consortiums of public colleges.

Public Higher Ed: From Jefferson to the Cold War

To critics, that isn't enough. They see a system in which some tenured professors teach just two or three classes a year, sometimes on obscure topics that mesh with their research but



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Getty Images

The University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

1795

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, which formally opened in January 1795 with a single professor, Rev. David Ker, was the country's first public university to admit students. One of the duties of the school's early professors was to perform morning and evening prayers and examine students on the "principles of morality and religion." By the end of June, 41 students had enrolled.



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The University of Virginia

1819

Thomas Jefferson, along with his friend James Madison, believed that public education was vital to maintaining a strong republic. In 1789, he wrote that "wherever the people are well informed they can be trusted with their own government." He founded the University of Virginia—the country's first nonsectarian university and the first to use an elective course system—in 1819.



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not necessarily with student needs. At the same time, more instruction is handled by part-time lecturers, who now make up at least 50% of the nation's higher-education faculty—up from 30% in 1975, according to the American Association of University Professors.

Meanwhile, tuition is soaring; undergraduate costs at public four-year universities climbed 139% between 1990 and 2010, according to the nonprofit College Board. Last school year, average tuition and fees were \$7,020 at a four-year public university and \$26,273 at a private institution, the College Board says.

Nowhere has the overhaul movement taken hold more firmly than in Texas. A law that took effect this fall—and which passed the legislature unanimously—requires public universities to post online the budget of each academic department, the curriculum vitae of each instructor, full descriptions and reading lists for each course and student evaluations of each faculty member. The law, the first of its kind in the nation, requires the information to be accessible within three clicks of the college's home page.

Supporters say the information will help students pick useful classes so that they can move more quickly toward degrees. Skeptics fear it will spark culture wars as left and right tussle over the merits of specific classes and teachers. Ideologues could "find something they don't like in a syllabus, take it out of context and paint the wrong picture," said Karan Watson, interim provost at Texas A&M.

Others are concerned that posting students' evaluations online will boost the status of professors who are entertaining—or an easy A—over those who require kids to wrestle with tough material. "I know from experience that everyone who taught statistics got a lower evaluation than those who taught courses that were a little less challenging," says John Antel, provost at the University of Houston.

Individual Texas colleges also are moving on their own reforms. Thomas Evenson, dean of the College of Public Affairs and Community Service at the University of North Texas, has ordered his faculty to spend at least four hours a day, four days a week, on campus or engaged in field research, in addition to the hours they spend teaching. The goal: to make "more of an effort" to ensure that faculty are "present, available and productive," he said. The University of Houston has doubled the pot of money set aside for teaching awards, to \$400,000 a year.

But perhaps the most far-reaching initiative is the cost-benefit balance sheet at Texas A&M, the oldest public university in the state. Each faculty member is assessed on criteria including the number of classes that they teach, the tuition that they bring in

1862

The Morrill Act, signed by Abraham Lincoln in 1862, laid the foundation for a nationwide system of public universities. It granted each state 30,000 acres of land for every member of its congressional delegation. The land was then sold off to fund public colleges, with a particular focus on schools that specialized in agriculture, engineering and science. The act ultimately funded 69 universities.

1915

The standards for tenure, or job protection for professors, were first laid out in 1915 by the American Association of University Professors over concerns about academic freedom. (There had been several incidents in which colleges punished or fired faculty—for teaching evolution, for example.) As of 2007, 21% of U.S. faculty members were full-time and tenured, down from 37% in 1975.



Getty Images

Scientist operating micromanipulator

1945

In the postwar years, a flood of federal research money transformed U.S. universities and boosted their reputations internationally. Vannevar Bush, director of the Office of Scientific Research and Development, wrote in an influential 1945 report that basic scientific research should take place in universities, relatively free from the pressures of "convention, prejudice or commercial necessity."



Getty Images

Dr. Clark Kerr

1958

and research grants that they generate.

One metric divides their salary by the number of students that they teach. The range is striking. Some nontenured lecturers earn less than \$100 for each student they instruct. Other professors are teaching such small classes that their compensation works out to more than \$10,000—in a few cases, more than \$20,000—per student.

Mr. Criscione, the assistant professor studying parasites, came out at \$23,563 per student. He says that is because he was setting up his lab and applying for grants most of that year, as is standard for new hires in the biology department, so he supervised just two students.

Faculty on the huge flagship campus, which serves 39,000 undergraduates here in east-central Texas, say some of the data on the spreadsheet are inaccurate, including inflated salaries and missing grants. They also say it's unfair to judge their productivity by class size when they often can't pick what they teach but are assigned by their department heads.

And they point out that the data do not take into account the many hours spent preparing lectures, advising students, serving on curriculum review committees or making other contributions to the college community. "A 50-minute lecture takes me two days to prepare," says Mr. Criscione. "There are 24 lectures in a semester, so you do the math."

In response to complaints, administrators recently pulled the report from a public website to review the data. University President R. Bowen Loftin sent a letter to faculty promising the data wouldn't be used to "assess the overall productivity" of individuals.

Administrators in the chancellor's office, which produced the document, declined to be interviewed. The Board of Regents also declined.

The concept of a productivity spreadsheet came from the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank that Gov. Rick Perry invited to a state university summit in May 2008. The group suggested several reforms with a common theme: Let taxpayers see what's going on at every public institution—and let them decide what's worth subsidizing.

Bill Peacock, a vice president at the foundation, acknowledges that this approach could mean a radical reshaping of academia, with far more emphasis on filling students with practical information and less on intellectual pursuits, especially in the liberal arts.

That's OK by him. "Taxpayers of the state of Texas," Mr. Peacock says, should decide whether "they should be spending two years

From 1958 to 1967, Clark Kerr served as president of the University of California system, expanding its reach and inspiring other state officials to follow his model. He created a system with multiple campuses state-wide to serve a range of students, from community colleges to elite research universities. He also proposed that every student should be able to go to college, regardless of ability to pay.

paying the salary of an English professor so he can write a book of poetry simply to add to the prestige of the university or the body of literature out there."

When the choice is put that bluntly, Chester Dunning, a history professor at Texas A&M, wonders if he'd pass muster. Mr. Dunning teaches two classes a semester and has won several teaching awards. His salary of about \$90,000 a year also covers the time he spends researching Russian literature and history.

His most recent book argues that Alexander Pushkin's drama "Boris Godunov" was a comedy, not a tragedy.

Mr. Dunning says his scholarly work animates his teaching and inspires his students. "But if you want me to explain why a grocery clerk in Texas should pay taxes for me to write those books, I can't give you an answer," he says.

His eyes sweep his cramped office, lined with books. Then Mr. Dunning finds his answer. "We've only got 5,000 years of recorded human history," he says, "and I think we need every precious bit of it."

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