

Texas A&M U.: Texas Legislature meets to discuss future of top-10 plan

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By Shawn C. Millender, The Battalion (Texas A&M U.)

COLLEGE STATION, Texas -- The Texas Legislature met Thursday to hold a hearing on Texas' top 10 percent plan.

The policy grants any Texas high school senior who graduates in the top 10 percent of his class automatic admission to the public university of his choice.

Representatives from Texas A&M University, The University of Texas and interest groups around the state gave their opinions on the matter in a meeting with the Senate subcommittee on higher education.

Troy Johnson testified as the previous president of the Texas Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions officers. He said the rule is valuable because it provides hope for students no matter where they're from.

"One of the main problems is that we only have two flagship universities to send these top 10 kids to," Johnson said. "California has eight. Two just isn't enough for everybody to feel like they're going to a first-rate school."

A&M Assistant Provost for enrollment Frank Ashley told the committee that the law has had little impact on the demographics here at A&M.

"The bottom line is that before the rule, 99 percent of those kids were admitted anyway," Ashley said.

"The official stance of the University is that we're not looking to do away with the law," Ashley said. "We think it could be an effective tool, but I don't know if we have utilized it effectively."

Ashley said the rule is flawed because high schools do not have a unified curriculum or ranking system.

"If everyone had to have the exact same courses it could really put some teeth into (the rule)," Ashley said. "We've had schools with graduating classes of 150 students report 20 top-10 kids."

Ashley said the rule needs to be amended before it can reach its full potential.

"One thing that kept coming up in committees was to have only a certain percentage of the class come in through the rule, about 50 percent," Ashley said.

Johnson disagrees. "With a cap, that's like telling students 'we'll admit you for sure -- maybe.' A promise of 'maybe' is not a promise,"

he said.

Marta Tienda, professor of sociology and public affairs at Princeton University, is the principal investigator for the Texas Top 10 Percent project.

The Texas Top 10 Percent project is a study that tracks students through high school and college in Texas. Tienda says the students admitted through the plan are doing quite well.

She said the rule has proven to be effective by broadening geographical access, but is far from perfect.

"Before, enrollment was dominated by a handful of feeder schools," Tienda said. "This stands as a testament to the rest of the nation as to what can be accomplished if we're serious about broadening access."

Tienda says the provision that allows top 10 percent students to choose where they want to go can be counterproductive to the goal of a diverse class.

"Admissions officers allow 'wobble room' for diversifying the class --

by making sure there are enough art majors or getting the football team they want, all the aspects that go into selecting a balanced and healthy class are stymied," Tienda said.

A unified system would be difficult to implement due to differences in curriculum and grading scale, Tienda said.

"It should be up to the schools to decide who they want to send," Tienda said.

Johnson says there may not be a way to make everybody happy.

"No matter what rule is constructed by a legislature or institution, there will always be people dissatisfied because they couldn't get in. That's the nature of competitive admissions."