



**Texas AFT**

*A Union of Professionals*

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## **Testimony to the Senate Higher Education Committee Regarding Interim Charges #2 & #3**

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The more than 64,000 public and higher education employee members of Texas AFT recognize this time of challenge in our state and nation as one in which we must invest in education, because education is the key to a prosperous future for our state and its citizens. Increased funding for public community colleges is a vital part of such investment.

Public community college enrollment is large and growing rapidly. 670,000 community college students now account for half of all higher education enrollment in Texas and 55 percent of enrollment at public general higher education institutions in the state. The ten largest community colleges alone educate more than 30 percent of all college students in Texas.

In fall 2009, Texas community colleges saw enrollment increase by 12 percent—73,000 students—over 2008. That accounted for 70 percent of all higher education enrollment growth in Texas, and 74 percent of growth at public general higher education institutions in the state. While this year's dramatic increase is almost certainly due in large part to the economic downturn, both enrollment and enrollment growth at community college have increased steadily over the last several years. Further, over the four-year period from 2004 to 2008, community colleges accounted for two-thirds of all higher education enrollment growth in Texas.

The importance of public higher education and, particularly, the key role played by community colleges in the education of individual Texans and the economic development of Texas are well established. Further, community colleges deliver education at relatively low cost with content that meets the needs of individual students, employers, and the communities to which the colleges are directly connected. Accordingly, Texas AFT supports state funding for community colleges at a level that recognizes the value of this critical resource.

Community colleges have access to revenue through local property taxes. In the initial design of our evolving community college system, that resource was reserved for colleges' physical infrastructure capacity. As evidenced by many legislative attempts to lower property taxes, that is a resource with practical limits. It is also one over which there are many competing claims. Therefore, Texas AFT supports full state funding of community college operational costs, less tuition and fees that enable affordable access. Fully funding operational costs is the very minimum state effort necessary to enable community colleges to meet the important tasks they face.

Included among the operational costs that should be funded by the state is the full amount of health-care premiums for all community college employees. In preparing its budget for the current biennium, the legislature appropriately dismissed the contrivance of applying “proportionality” to employee benefit funding when state funding for community colleges generally is far from adequate.

Once the goal of full state funding for operational costs, including employee benefits, is met, it will be appropriate to consider proposals to tie additional funding to carefully targeted performance measures (such as course and degree completion)--so long as the aim of such funding is to complement the current work of community colleges and so long as the method and measures account for the mission of community colleges, which disproportionately serve students of modest means who have to work and accordingly may have a hard time staying on track academically.

To improve student preparation for post-secondary success—whether in college or the workforce—Texas AFT also supports increased resources for primary and secondary education. Focusing solely on high school is not sufficient; helping Texas students to attain college and career readiness requires attention to pre-K through 12th grade.

Texas AFT supports as well programs—such as dual credit classes—that bring together secondary schools and colleges. We also support improved articulation between community colleges and four-year colleges. Progress in these areas is likely to improve both high school and college graduation rates.