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Commissioner tells universities to step up

Texas needs to increase its higher education enrollments after they suffered a small decline recently, said Raymund Paredes, the commissioner of higher education at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, in his opening remarks to the UH System's Board of Regents meeting Wednesday.

"We've witnessed a decline in enrollments in higher education facilities in Texas," Paredes said. "But, the declines in Texas are much less dramatic than the rest of the United States."

According to Fall 2013 enrollments at UH, the University saw a 3 percent decrease in enrollment, but most schools that are seeing great declines are community colleges.

The struggle to raise enrollments isn't the only thing the state is facing, Paredes said. In efforts to "close the gaps" between Texans with and without college degrees, the board set a goal of attaining 210,000 completed degrees — meaning bachelor's, doctorates and master's — they would like to see Texas students complete from 2000 to 2015. Already Texas has surpassed its goal, with 236,682 in 2012.

"If I could pick one goal for closing the gaps that is most important, it would be completions," Paredes said.

Another closing-the-gaps goal is to get 630,000 new enrollments by 2015. In 2013, enrollments stood at more than 585,000.

"We are falling a little bit behind our goals in enrollments," Paredes said. "We are going to have to enroll 44,000 more students by 2015 in order to hit our goal."

Moving forward, Paredes announced some other initiatives he wants to focus on from Complete College America's "The Game Changers" document. He said he'd like higher education facilities to be proactive about these problem areas, like preparing for outcomes-based funding.

He encouraged the UH System to increase co-requisite remediation options for students not yet on a college level.

"If students are below the level of college readiness, instead of putting them in non-credit-bearing courses, we put them in credit-bearing entry-level courses and give them a lot of instruction, tutoring and other kinds of help," Paredes said.

Paredes recommended universities in Texas to make 15-hour semesters the qualifications for full-time status or 30 hours a year.

"Complete College America's data show that as soon as a student goes from being full-time to part-time, that his or her chances of graduating declines by 50 percent."

Paredes said he knows this is not possible for a lot of students, but he wants universities to encourage all of their students who are able to attend full-time.

When it comes to nontraditional students, scheduling becomes difficult the farther along in one's degree plan. Paredes praised provost Paula Short, who is taking action to make structured schedules for students so they can more easily coordinate their work, home life and school schedules.

"One of the things we've started to tell faculty is that the classes they only offer once a year are going to have to be offered more," Short said during her Pizza with the Provost event on Feb. 14. "I'm actually analyzing how many classes there are, when they are taught and how many students are enrolled in it to get a sense of how we are using six days a week, five days a week and 24 hours to make things accessible to students."

Another challenge Texas universities face is preparing students for the work force. In a Chronicle of Higher Education article based on a Gallup poll in partnership with the Lumina Foundation, more than 90 percent of the polled faculty said they were preparing students for the workforce. However, only about 10 percent of polled employers agreed, Paredes said.

"That's a huge disconnect," Paredes said. "We've been meeting around the state with business and higher education leaders, seeing what we can do to close that gap."

Finally, Paredes noted the growing deficit of science, technology, engineering and mathematics students. He said he thinks universities should incentivize professors to increase interaction with high school students the way they incentivize researchers.



Raymund Paredes, the Commissioner for Higher Education for the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, spoke at Wednesday's Board of Regents meeting about issues that Texas universities should focus on. | Justin Tijerina/The Daily Cougar

“Faculty will do what they are rewarded for,” Paredes said.

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