

SUBJECT: UTPA partnership agreement for extension campus in Rio Grande City

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 7 ayes — Rangel, F. Brown, Farabee, J. Jones, Morrison, Uher, West

0 nays

2 absent — Goolsby, E. Reyna

WITNESSES: None

BACKGROUND: In 1989, the 71st Legislature added Chapter 77 to the Education Code to establish The University of Texas – Pan American (UTPA), a coeducational institution of higher education located in Edinburg with an upper-level center in Brownsville. UTPA is a component institution of The University of Texas System under the governance, management, and control of the Board of Regents of The University of Texas System.

DIGEST: CSHB 1753 would amend Education Code, sec. 77.12 to allow UTPA to enter into a partnership agreement with South Texas Community College District (STCC) that would allow students admitted to a baccalaureate degree program at UTPA to take lower-division courses at STCC. Students who enrolled in the degree program and successfully completed lower-division courses at STCC would automatically transfer to UTPA.

CSHB 1753 also would allow UTPA to establish an extension campus at Rio Grande City in Starr County, which could offer upper-division courses required for students enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program at UTPA.

CSHB 1753 would require the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to prepare and deliver by May 31, 2002, an impact statement examining the initial implementation of the bill to the board of regents of the UT System, the board of trustees of STCC, and to the chair of the standing committee of each house of the legislature with primary jurisdiction over higher education.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2001.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

CSHB 1753 would provide an ideal method for UTPA and STCC to meet the growing demand for higher education in South Texas. According to statistics from THECB, South Texas is expected to have the second largest increase in higher education enrollment in the state by 2015. Community and technical colleges in the area already have shown rapid growth, with a large part of that attributed to STCC, which opened in 1993 and by 1998 enrolled 9,453 students. THECB predicts that between 1996 and 2010, there will be a 33.4 percent increase in headcount enrollment at UTPA and a 155.5 percent increase in headcount enrollment at STCC. CSHB 1753 would provide much needed higher education infrastructure in the region at a relatively low cost to the state.

CSHB 1753 would formalize and expand the existing collaborative effort between STCC and UTPA. Currently, UTPA offers several courses in Starr County and makes use of the school district's facilities. CSHB 1753 would allow UTPA eventually to offer all the upper-division courses in certain fields to students in Starr County. The Starr County Upper Level Center would utilize both onsite as well as distance-learning instruction delivery techniques. CSHB 1753 would capitalize on the strengths of both institutions and create a synergistic environment between STCC and UTPA.

Access to higher education is a critical part of bootstrapping the success of Starr County, one of the most economically and educationally-disadvantaged counties in the United States. CSHB 1753 would provide an efficient means of doing so. Currently, students who successfully complete their lower-division courses at STCC must travel at least 60 miles to UTPA to continue their studies at a four-year institution. In light of the number of non-traditional students in the area, as well as the significant financial need faced by the overall student population, many students must work part- or even full-time jobs in Starr County while pursuing their studies and meeting their family commitments. Forcing them to travel a minimum of 60 miles to attend UTPA effectively puts an end to many students' higher education goals. CSHB 1753 would address this issue by providing students in Starr County with the flexibility they need to be able to continue their studies.

CSHB 1753 would address two of the goals outlined in THECB's "Closing the Gaps" plan, as well as the recommendations made by the Governor's Special Commission on 21st Century Colleges and Universities. Specifically, this bill would increase the affordability and accessibility of higher education as well as providing for a seamless transfer between STCC and UTPA.

CSHB 1753 not only would contribute to the region's economic development but also would address the critical teacher shortage in the region. Currently, the UTPA and STCC partnership involves collaboration on teacher education programs. CSHB 1753 would formalize this relationship, as well as provide for the establishment of the upper-division teaching center in Starr County to allow students to complete their baccalaureate degree in their home county. By doing so, CSHB 1753 would enable Starr County to overcome its current difficulties in recruiting and retaining teachers by providing the necessary infrastructure for Starr County to train its own residents who can then remain in the area and teach.

Finally, CSHB 1753 would serve as a model for other institutions in the border region and/or rural areas of Texas who wish to address accessibility issues in higher education or who wish to provide the necessary training infrastructure for critical shortage fields such as teaching, nursing, or science and technology.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

CSHB 1753 would go too far by applying to all baccalaureate degrees, rather than just teacher education programs, where there is an established track record of collaboration and seamless transfer between STCC and UTPA. Also, CSHB 1753 would overreach by authorizing the establishment of a UTPA upper-division extension campus in Rio Grande City. There may not be sufficient demand among the students in Starr County to merit the potentially significant expense involved in establishing the UTPA Starr County Upper Level Center.

CSHB 1753 also would be unnecessary since UTPA is located only 60 miles from Starr County and a collaborative program already exists between the two institutions. There is no reason UTPA could not continue collaborating with STCC and teaching courses at its facilities. UTPA could offer flexible course offerings or distance learning programs to accommodate student

needs. Finally, students could commute to UTPA for upper-division courses.

NOTES:

The committee substitute modified the original bill by deleting references that would have limited its provisions to students enrolled in a teacher preparation program at UTPA. It would include students admitted to a baccalaureate program and allow their automatic transfer to UTPA upon successful completion of the lower-division courses at the community college. Finally, the committee substitute modified the original bill by allowing UTPA to establish an upper-division extension campus at Rio Grande City for students enrolled in a baccalaureate degree program at the university.

In its fiscal 2002-2003 appropriations request, UTPA has requested \$6.5 million in tuition revenue bonds for the construction of a classroom facility in Starr County, as well as a \$500,000 exceptional item request for faculty and staff salaries, operating, and capital expenses related to the establishment of the Starr County Upper Level Center.