

SUBJECT: Feasibility study for medical school at Prairie View A&M University

COMMITTEE: Higher Education — committee substitute recommended

VOTE: 5 ayes — Rangel, F. Brown, Farabee, J. Jones, West

0 nays

4 absent — Goolsby, Morrison, E. Reyna, Uher

WITNESSES: For — None

Against — None

On — Dr. Don Brown, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board; Mike Easley, Center for Rural Health; Dr. Charles Hines, Prairie View A&M University

DIGEST: CSHB 42 would amend Education Code, ch. 87 by adding sec. 87.107 to establish guidelines for a feasibility study regarding the creation of a medical school at Prairie View A&M University (PVAMU).

CSHB 42 would authorize the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), with the assistance of the board of regents of the Texas A&M University System, to conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility of an affiliation or coordinating agreement between the board of regents and any institution of higher education to provide the necessary clinical education to support a doctor of medicine degree program at PVAMU. The deadline for completion of a feasibility study would be December 31, 2002. Sec. 87.107 would expire September 1, 2003.

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 42 would help the state address current and projected shortages of physicians, especially primary care physicians, in rural areas. Statistics demonstrate that a larger proportion of the rural population is elderly relative to the urban population, and the need for medical services in rural communities is increasing. Also, since the average age of physicians in rural communities is 55 or older, it is anticipated that the rural physician shortage will become even more acute if the state does not take affirmative steps to target physician recruitment and retention in rural areas.

The feasibility study authorized by CSHB 42 would be a positive first step toward the potential development of a medical school in an underserved rural area of the state. Attracting qualified medical students to a training program in a rural area would encourage them to develop ties to the region and remain in the area upon graduation from medical school.

The feasibility study would be consistent with THECB's goals to "Close the Gaps" by 2015, and with goals outlined in the Priority Plan for Strengthening Education at PVAMU and Texas Southern University (TSU). This plan was developed by the Governor's Office, THECB, higher education and community leaders, the two affected institutions, and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) of the U.S. Department of Education in response to findings by OCR that disparities traceable to *de jure* segregation still existed at PVAMU and TSU, Texas' two historically African-American public universities. These disparities existed in the areas of the mission of the universities, the land grant status of PVAMU when compared to Texas A&M University, program duplication, facilities, funding, and the racial identifiability of the institutions.

CSHB 42 also would be consistent with the general purpose of PVAMU as outlined in Education Code, sec. 87.104 and would build upon existing infrastructure at PVAMU. In addition to its designation as a statewide general purpose institution of higher education and a land-grant institution, PVAMU also is designated as a statewide special purpose institution of higher education dedicated to teaching, research, and public service.

PVAMU's community outreach already is well-established, and the institution has existing capabilities in place sufficient to merit a feasibility study into the formation of a medical school at PVAMU. Through the

Owens-Franklin Health Center, PVAMU already practices rural medicine in Waller County and the surrounding areas. The closest hospital in the area is 25 miles away, and as such, the only x-ray laboratory in all of Waller County is provided through PVAMU. In addition, PVAMU has a well-established history of graduating qualified students who go on to attend and graduate from medical schools in Texas and throughout the country. Furthermore, PVAMU has the infrastructure in place to support the formation of a medical school. In this regard, PVAMU has a new state-of-the-art science building, the most credentialed nursing faculty in the state, and the support of the Health Science system in the Texas A&M University System. Finally, although medical schools and hospitals already exist within at least a 40-mile radius of PVAMU, none adequately addresses the needs of Waller County residents nor the residents of other rural counties in the state.

The feasibility study would not have a significant fiscal implication on the state, and PVAMU would pledge resources to assist THECB in its efforts to conduct a thorough feasibility study. CSHB 42 would have a limited scope and only would authorize a feasibility study and not the creation of a medical school.

OPPONENTS  
SAY:

CSHB 42 would not provide the most-effective or efficient means of addressing the present or projected shortages of rural physicians in Texas. The shortage of physicians in rural areas in Texas is not due to the lack of medical schools in rural areas, but rather is due to quality-of-life issues as well as the disparity in pay offered to physicians in rural versus urban areas. Medical school graduates, even those originally from rural areas, when given a choice, typically prefer to live and practice medicine in urban rather than rural settings. Many times, those who do choose to live in rural areas eventually move to urban areas, thus resulting in high turnover among rural physicians.

A more promising approach to addressing physician shortages in rural areas would be for the state to study the effectiveness of providing financial incentives to medical school graduates to move to rural areas and encourage them to remain in these areas. These financial incentives could come in the form of loan-forgiveness programs proportionally tied to years of medical service provided in rural areas. In addition, the state could work with existing medical schools to develop partnerships with universities and high schools to

target qualified students from rural areas as early as high school and encourage them to pursue a degree in medicine. These efforts would more directly target the root cause of physician recruitment and retention problems in rural areas.

Although PVAMU has taken on worthwhile initiatives in the community, it does not have the appropriate infrastructure to establish a medical school. PVAMU has limited degree programs in the field of allied health and in the sciences (not including PVAMU's engineering programs), no degree programs in pharmacy, no dental school, and a nursing program, that although noteworthy, is located in Houston and not Waller County. Although PVAMU does have a new science building, there would most likely be additional infrastructure costs related to the establishment of a medical school.

Finally, establishing a medical school at PVAMU is unnecessary since there are at least four existing medical schools within geographic proximity to PVAMU (i.e., two in Houston, one in Galveston, one in College Station).

OTHER  
OPPONENTS  
SAY:

Although CSHB 42 would serve a worthy goal, it would result in additional expense to THECB to conduct the feasibility study. Such a study would cost the THECB approximately \$58,750 in general revenue funds in fiscal 2002. This estimate is based upon a feasibility study that would begin on January 1, 2002, and take approximately six months to complete.

In order to ensure objectivity, THECB would need to hire out-of-state consultants in medical evaluation to evaluate the capabilities of PVAMU to provide the first two years of medical school and the capabilities of at least one but no more than three other institutions to provide the final two years of medical school.

NOTES:

The committee substitute modified the filed version of the bill by requiring the coordinating board to conduct the feasibility study with the assistance of the board of regents of the Texas A&M System, rather than authorizing the board to conduct the study on its own. In addition, the committee substitute added the December 31, 2002, deadline for completion of the feasibility study.

Two other bills filed this session, HB 2521 by Wilson and HB 3469 by McClendon, would authorize the establishment of a medical school at PVAMU.