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HIGHER EDUCATION

Perry touts proposals for higher education reform

Voucher-style funding, bonus pay for teachers among recommendations.

By [Ralph K.M. Haurwitz](#)
AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF
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Gov. Rick Perry urged regents of the state's major public university systems Wednesday to pursue a series of higher-education reforms outlined at a conference in Austin that was organized by his office and a conservative think tank. The proposals included new requirements for tenure, bonus pay for teachers and a funding model that would essentially amount to vouchers for students.

"I'm not saying these are a dictate to you. One size does not fit all." But "the time is right for these types of reforms to go forward," said Perry, who appointed all the regents to their positions.

Officials described the Governor's Higher Education Summit at the Inter-Continental Stephen F. Austin Hotel as a first-of-its-kind joint meeting of the governing boards of the University of Texas System, the Texas A&M University System, the Texas Tech University System and other university systems. The nonprofit Texas Public Policy Foundation, which favors limited government and free markets, helped organize it.

Regents generally offered muted reactions to the proposals, and the president of a statewide faculty group questioned the business-oriented flavor.

"There's a lot of food for thought," said John White, a Texas A&M regent. "I don't think we're looking for revolutionary change."

H. Scott Caven Jr., chairman of the UT regents, said further discussion is warranted. "I haven't formed any firm opinions about any of the recommendations," he said.

The proposed initiatives, billed as "breakthrough solutions," included requiring evidence of teaching skill before granting tenure to some professors, awarding bonuses to faculty members and teaching assistants who get the best evaluations from students and separating budgets for research and teaching to focus on excellence in each category.

Many of the proposals would be controversial, and some would need legislative approval.

The proposal for voucher-style funding is a case in point. Lawmakers currently allocate tax dollars to public colleges and universities to subsidize undergraduate and graduate education based on formulas that take into account the number of students and other factors.

The proposal calls for placing much of that money directly into students' hands, thereby emphasizing their role as the customers of higher education. All students qualifying for in-state tuition would receive the same amount of money, regardless of family income. Need-based financial aid would be on top of that.

Perry has suggested a similar approach in the past, to no avail. In January 2001, shortly after becoming governor, Perry touted an advisory panel's recommendation to wean institutions of higher learning from most of their direct appropriations.

Another proposal — to create a national accrediting agency that would focus on graduation rates and other results — couldn't be implemented by the regents. But they were asked to add their voices to calls for such an agency.

The proposals were outlined for the regents by Jeff Sandefer, co-founder of the Acton School of Business, a satellite campus in Austin of Hardin-Simmons University, a private school in Abilene. Acton has put in place a number of the proposals, such as linking faculty pay to student evaluations.

Retired House Majority Leader Dick Arme y, R-Dallas, also addressed the group. He criticized faculty senates as "an imbecile institution" and urged regents to sharply reduce the role of faculty members in university governance.

"Our universities are not fulfilling their essential mission in our culture, which is to teach our children," Arme y said.

Some people attending the conference questioned the proposals. Charles Miller, a former chairman of the UT regents who led a panel on higher

education for U.S. Education Secretary Margaret Spellings, said that heavy-handed treatment of top researchers could cause them to flee.

Lynn Tatum, president of the Texas conference of the American Association of University Professors, who did not attend, said he was troubled by the tone of the recommendations.

"Many of these initiatives appear to derive from a business model rather than an educational model," said Tatum, a senior lecturer in the honors college at Baylor University, a Baptist institution in Waco. "In fact, students are the product. It is society that has employed faculty to provide thinking, well-rounded, educated adults."

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'Breakthrough solutions'

Seven proposals, billed as 'breakthrough solutions,' were floated at the conference:

Post student satisfaction ratings and other information to publicly recognize the best teachers.

Award bonuses to professors, teaching assistants and other instructors based on students' ratings of how well a course delivered on its promises.

Split research and teaching budgets, paying teachers for the number of students they teach and paying researchers according to research dollars they receive.

Require evidence of teaching skills before awarding tenure to faculty members.

Provide each student with a personalized 'learning contract' before he or she enrolls that discloses the graduation rate and starting salary for the average student in that major with equivalent SAT scores.


Provide each in-state student with a voucher of sorts — a scholarship funded by legislative appropriations that currently go directly to public colleges and universities.

Support efforts to create a new national accrediting agency that would focus on results, such as knowledge gained between the freshman and senior years.

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