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After Rick O'Donnell, What Now for Texas Higher Ed?

by [Reeve Hamilton](#) | 18 hours ago | [2 Comments](#)

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KEYWORDS: [Texas Public Policy Foundation \(TPPF\)](#), [Francisco Cigarroa](#), [Texas Governor Rick Perry](#), [William "Bill" Powers, Jr.](#), [University of Texas System](#), [University of Texas-Austin](#)



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One week ago, Rick O'Donnell's employment at the [University of Texas System](#) came to an abrupt end after 50 days marked by tension and confusion in the higher education community — especially at the University of Texas at Austin.

O'Donnell's position initially raised questions because of its \$200,000-per-year salary and its similarities to the job description of UT System Chancellor [Francisco Cigarroa](#) — and the fact that he was to report directly to Gene Powell, the chairman of the UT System Board

of Regents. Powell failed in his initial attempts to quell the controversy by having O'Donnell report to administrators under Cigarroa and ending O'Donnell's employment at the end of August. An email O'Donnell wrote to a sympathetic regent last week criticizing the actions of system and university leaders since his hiring appears to have been the last straw, and O'Donnell was dismissed.

Still, the controversy hasn't ended with O'Donnell's departure, largely because the rationale for his appointment in the first place — what is the true purpose of state-supported higher education and who should decide that? — remains and will continue to be debated. O'Donnell's detractors saw him as the vehicle through which Gov. [Rick Perry](#) and his allies at the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) — including [Jeff Sandefer](#), a generous donor to Perry and a TPPF board member and funder — would be able to implement their controversial set of reforms for Texas higher education. O'Donnell's supporters point to the vociferous pushback by prominent supporters of UT as evidence that the system is in need of significant change to make it more accountable to taxpayers and students.

In 2008, Sandefer, TPPF and Gov. Rick Perry held a summit on higher education for regents from every university system to introduce and encourage what they called "seven breakthrough solutions" for higher education. (Here's a copy of [Perry's invitation](#) that was faxed to [Texas A&M University System](#) regent Morris Foster, apparently from Sandefer's office; follow links throughout the story for relevant PDFs.) O'Donnell's writings for the TPPF supported these initiatives, the most discussed of which would separate research and teaching budgets. TPPF representatives argue that this would promote excellence in both, but others worry that the intent is really more to divide and conquer — perhaps because a TPPF recommendation for the current legislative session is to "refrain from giving universities any more tax dollars intended to subsidize research."

"I think the position of the foundation, to the extent it has been presented at all, has been mischaracterized throughout," says TPPF spokesman David Guenther. "People have taken convenient excerpts and extrapolated them out to attacks on the type of scientific research that a lot of the universities are doing. The point of the whole conversation has been that students are being forgotten and that universities were created to teach students."

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So what happens to them now that O'Donnell is gone? Let's review:

Does anyone believe the controversy is over?

Richard Leshin, president of the Texas Exes, the powerful 93,000-member organization of UT alumni that rapidly organized to oppose O'Donnell's appointment, says, "I don't think it's anywhere near being over at all."

"Absolutely it's going to continue," Guenther agrees.

There are two central reasons why this is the case. First, O'Donnell left with an impactful parting shot. Second, it was never really about him.

O'Donnell was hired to support two newly created task forces, one on blended and online learning and another on university excellence and productivity. While these issues may seem to be mostly about the banal wrangling of a large bureaucracy, they are in fact at the heart of the debate over the mission of public higher education.

Just before he departed, O'Donnell [sent a letter](#) to recently appointed regent Wallace Hall speculating as to the reasons for the outcry surrounding his employment. He said that, in his work on behalf of the task forces, he began asking for public data "that would inform the task force members on how student tuition dollars and taxpayer money were being spent" and that the release of that data "was resisted at the highest levels" of UT and the UT System.

"I am concerned," he wrote, "that data I have reviewed which has not been released to the public shows a growing number of student tuition and taxpayer dollars are being paid to professors and administrators who seem to be doing very little teaching." He added, "And, let us not forget in a public opinion research study last year, 87 percent of Texans said that the universities' top priority should be educating students with only 6 percent stating that conducting research should be a top priority." That study was conducted by the TPPF.

A joint statement released by the administrations of the UT System and the flagship university said that "data on how tuition dollars and taxpayer money are being spent at UT System academic institutions is, indeed, being gathered." However, they claimed that the data is in a draft format and must be reviewed by multiple officials before it is released to the full board of regents.

The Texas Tribune has requested the data, and other outside groups are putting pressure on the regents to release it. Justin Keener, a former TPPF spokesman who is currently the spokesman with Texas Business for Higher Education, a coalition of business leaders, sent an email to the organization's members urging them to write Powell "to continue asking tough questions and finding ways to make a quality education more affordable and accessible, while fostering even greater teaching and research."

The TPPF is hosting a conference on higher education on Friday that Guenther hopes will "begin to crystallize the discussion on transparency and accountability in higher education." He adds, "There's a lot of information that regents have been seeking, if it were out in the open, it would be helpful in informing discussion."

Issues of affordability, accessibility and tension between teaching and research preceded O'Donnell, as did the "breakthrough solutions," and will undoubtedly continue despite his absence.

In July 2008, two months after the introduction of the TPPF's "breakthrough solutions," Wayne Roberts, the senior adviser for higher education in the office of the governor, made it clear in [an email to regents](#) that "the Governor's intent is that this be a regent driven project." Senior system and institutional staff, as well as staffers for the governor and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, were not to influence the regents' policy decisions.

The work of the task forces continues. In lieu of O'Donnell, they are receiving support from Sandra Woodley, the system's vice chancellor for strategic initiatives. Woodley actually earns \$240,000 — more than O'Donnell's position — but hers is not a new post created at a time of shrinking budgets.

According to [emails obtained by the Tribune](#), some UT System staff — particularly executive vice chancellor for academic affairs David Prior — have conveyed skepticism of some of the policy recommendations over the years. In February 2009, Prior wrote to then-regents chairman Scott Caven that some reform-related discussion "verges on being insulting."

The emails also show that Sandefer, who, despite authoring the "breakthrough solutions," previously told the Tribune that he no longer has a "dog in that fight" in the ongoing discussions, has been in [frequent communication](#) with Alex Cranberg, a recently appointed

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regent with ties to the reformer camp, mostly passing along articles regarding higher education that he believes are of note (including blog posts critical of the Tribune's coverage of the controversy).

And the person steering the ship — Powell, who unilaterally hired O'Donnell without consulting his vice chairman or the chancellor — remains the chairman of the board of regents.

"I don't think the regents have changed their stance at all," Leshin says. Just this week, student leaders at UT [wrote to the regents](#) urging them to be "more transparent" and allow student involvement in discussions regarding basic research and online courses. And on Wednesday, UT President [Bill Powers](#) took a strong stance in support of research in an email to university supporters. The institution must address the "need to increase our productivity and effectiveness," Powers wrote. "But while we introduce change — as one of the world's great research universities — we must be steadfast in our commitment to teaching and research."

How much harm has the controversy caused?

There is little disagreement that the state's premier public university is in a potentially precarious position. But why — and who's to blame — is a point of contention.

In an email to the Tribune last week, Cranberg wrote, "It is HARMFUL to the University of Texas for a bunch of false hysteria to be whipped up about what the board may or may not do. These irresponsible and false speculations about the Board, the Task Forces and not-yet-formed policies serve only to needlessly undermine confidence in donors and prospective star faculty."

This echoes the sentiments of O'Donnell, who, in what turned out to be his parting letter, wrote, "If there has been any damage to the reputation of the University of Texas, it has not come from the Regents' task forces or my work for them. Any damage that has occurred must be laid at the feet of those who have diverted attention to secondary issues and then encouraged the uproar."

"We don't see it that way," responds prominent alumnus Gordon Appleman, who, in [a widely circulated letter](#), warned of potential "degradation" at UT if the regents went ahead with the TPPF-backed recommendations. He says his efforts and those of similar letter-writers have been focused on preserving UT as a "university of the first class."

Peter Hugill, a Texas A&M geology professor and the president of the local chapter of the [American Association of University Professors](#), when asked about the effects of the implementation of TPPF-proposed reforms, said that budget cuts make it difficult to say for sure but that "if it was a normal market, I'd say it would definitely have a depressing effect on recruitment."

Meanwhile, House Higher Education Chairman [Dan Branch](#), R-Dallas, says that the debate being waged in the media has held up his reform agenda, particularly [House Bill 9](#), which allow the state to tie a portion of funding for public universities to outcomes such as graduation rates, a move supported by Perry and the TPPF.

"I'm concerned that thoughtful reforms will be hurt by some of this," Branch says. "It sort of sets back the whole reform movement."

Are the jobs of top UT administrators at risk?

On April 12, Branch, Senate Higher Education Chairwoman [Judith Zaffirini](#), D-Laredo, and the chancellors and regents chairman of UT and A&M went to dinner to discuss the controversy and the issues behind it. The legislators, according to several sources, told their guests that any attempt to oust Cigarroa or Powers would not be well received within the halls of the Capitol.

One week later, in his final letter, O'Donnell continued to sow the seeds of suspicion when he claimed to be the victim of a "well-orchestrated public relations campaign" and wrote, "Whether university norms were violated with regard to spreading false rumors or if there was the improper use of political influence by university employees, as some have pointed out to me may be the case, I leave other to inquire.

High-level critics of the reformers' agenda, such as Zaffirini, have said that they fear that once the Legislature is no longer in session and media attention has diminished, an attempt may be made to force out the administrators who are pushing back against proposal changes.

"I've heard rumors to that effect, but they've all been denied," says Zaffirini, who has filed extensive open records requests with higher education institutions throughout the state to determine the roles of the governor, Sandefer and the TPPF in pushing reforms.

When asked if the board of regents is considering a resolution to dismiss UT higher ups for insubordination, Powell said, "There is no such resolution, and I am not aware that any resolution of this type has been discussed."

When asked the same question, Cranberg said, “Who would assert such a thing? As for me, I’m just trying to learn as much as possible as a new regent and working to contribute to help the university address its challenges and opportunities. I am privileged to have met many fine faculty and leaders of the University System in this effort.”

Still, in the days following O’Donnell’s departure, the Texas Exes felt compelled to pass a resolution in support of Powers. Earlier in the month, the Chancellor’s Council Executive Committee issued a similar statement of support for Cigarroa, who was not Perry’s choice for the position (he preferred former state Sen. John Montford).

Asked if the governor believed Powers and Cigarroa could provide the support necessary to help Austin become a technology capitol as the governor has recently been advocating, Perry spokesman Mark Miner said, “The governor is going to continue working with the higher education community to continue moving forward.”

Is this just a UT issue?

The back-and-forth in the last several months has largely been driven by the interaction between UT and the UT System. In fact, the Texas A&M University System has been the most active in implementing the “breakthrough solutions.” When system administrators created a spreadsheet that analyzed revenue generated for the university by individual professors and conveyed money-losers in red and moneymakers in black, it [drew the ire](#) of the Association of American Universities, a prestigious organization of research universities of which A&M and UT are members. AAU president Robert Berdahl, a former UT president, warned against following the TPPF-prescribed path.

Members of the UT community are also not the only ones to express concerns about separating teaching and research budgets. In July 2008, months after the initial summit, [each institution submitted reports](#) to the governor’s office and the other systems on the status and feasibility of implementing the initiatives.

Administrators at the University of Houston, according to memos obtained by the Tribune, reported, “Separating research from teaching would deprive our students of learning from scholars.”

The findings were similar at the University of North Texas. “The best and most efficient universities,” its report said, “have focused on blending these two parts of academic work life that functions as a synchronistic whole, particularly within a research university.”

Among the most dismissive was the conclusion of the UT System: “The concept of excellence in all UTS academic institutions fundamentally involves the linking of inquiry, discovery and new knowledge as the basis of teaching and learning — this is called research education.”

Guenther says, “I think anytime you talk about changes to the status quo, the people who are invested in the status quo get nervous. Really, we need to have an honest and open discussion about how we accomplish both objectives in conducting research and educating students.”

So, are the “breakthrough solutions” mandatory?

According to [notes taken by UT vice chancellor for governmental relations Barry McBee](#) — Perry’s former chief of staff — Perry closed the 2008 summit by noting that the reforms are “very intriguing” to him, but they do not represent a dictate or one size fits all solution. McBee noted, however, that Perry “did emphasize his belief that regents will be judged by what happens after this event.”

Perry spokesman Mark Miner dismisses the suspicion that Perry is mandating these reforms, saying, “It’s simply not true.”

“There are bits and pieces of all of them that the governor has talked about in the past, but to say that they are packaged and these are the seven points the governor is pushing is not accurate,” Miner says, noting that this has been “grossly mischaracterized” by the media and the higher education community.

In fact, Miner says that Perry now believes one of the reforms, which calls for a change in the accreditation system and would require a fix at the state rather than the system level, is now unnecessary. “The current model seems to be working,” Miner says.

Though, as recently as Sept. 1, 2010, McBee wrote to his colleagues that the governor’s staff had “confirmed that the ‘seven reforms’ are still at the top of their list for consideration.” In January 2009, the governor’s office sent to university systems a document titled “Higher Education Reforms” that called for specific actions with specific timelines.

In response, David Prior, the UT System’s executive vice chancellor for academic affairs, scoffed to his colleagues in an email obtained by the Tribune, “And some believe that these ‘reforms’ are textastribune.org/.../after-rick-odonnell...

not mandatory.....!!!”

While they do not line up exactly with the “seven breakthrough solutions,” the “Higher Education Reforms” are similar, calling for the publicizing of faculty evaluations and course syllabi, the use of student evaluations in tenure decisions (which many schools note all ready occurs), and the distribution of financial rewards to top teachers based solely on student evaluations.

Not all Texas A&M faculty support such awards, known as Student Led Awards for Teaching Excellence, which have already been put into effect there. Hugill, who says he understands the desire to refocus on teaching, says of one of the award recipients in his department, “I think he’s one of the worst teachers we’ve got. It’s not like we don’t take teaching seriously. What we don’t take seriously are these SLATE awards.”

Over the last three years, UT System officials have maintained that their method of rewarding teachers, which includes student evaluations but does not rely on them exclusively, is “superior” to those recommended by the governor’s office.

How long is this likely to go on?

Zaffirini, the Legislature’s most vocal critic of the attempts to change the UT System, says, “This is a four- to six-year issue.”

Four years, she says, because that’s how much longer Perry will be in office.

Six, because that’s the length of the terms of the newest batch of Perry-appointed regents: Wallace Hall and Alex Cranberg, both of whom attended the May 21, 2008, summit (nearly three years before they joined the board of regents), and TPPF board member Brenda Pejovich.

Anyway, in slightly less than two years, on Feb. 1, 2013, the terms of three more regents (James Dannenbaum, Printice Gary and Paul Foster) will end, giving Perry three more appointees to the nine-member board — and a potential supermajority to transform the University of Texas System.

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