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UT president touts importance of campus research

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By **PAUL J. WEBER**
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Updated: 6:03 p.m. Monday, May 9, 2011
Published: 2:36 a.m. Monday, May 9, 2011

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AUSTIN, TEXAS — Once again defending academic research against proposals that question taxpayer funds not being spent on classroom teaching, University of Texas President William Powers said Monday that the state's flagship campus is receptive to change but not at the expense of research.

"The result of an unfettered, curiosity-driven research model is that it expands knowledge for society," Powers said. "If we try too hard to direct research from the top, we'll diminish our overall returns."

Powers spoke to about 200 invited university officials, UT alumni and faculty, many of whom are concerned with ideas to revamp higher education that Gov. Rick Pery has endorsed. Among them is scrutinizing the role of research at Texas colleges and universities, which critics argue doesn't always give the state enough bang for its buck.

Powers did not directly mention the controversy or name the most recent outspoken critics of academic research during his speech on the UT campus, the timing of which school officials called rare. The UT System Board of Regents is scheduled to meet later this week.

But Powers did mention the word "research" at least 47 times — or about once every minute.

In one example, Powers introduced the audience to a UT undergraduate who assisted a professor with projects aimed at improving drug effectiveness. Katie Maass, a chemical engineering senior, later received a \$250,000 research grant to continue her work.

"The kind of faculty mentoring and interaction that Katie received cannot be captured in a faculty profit-and-loss statement," Powers said.

That comment was in reference to the Texas A&M University System, which absorbed a rebuke from leading higher education observers after compiling a spreadsheet of faculty professors that showed who generated revenue and who didn't. A special adviser to the UT System also stirred controversy by seeking to compile data about how much time professors spent teaching, before he was let go last month.

That adviser, Rick O'Donnell, is a former senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based think tank. The group has advanced what's been called "seven breakthrough solutions" for higher education, which includes re-examining the role of research and improving ways to measure teacher efficiency. Perry has supported the seven measures.

David Guenther, spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said he was glad to see Powers acknowledge that changes on the campus are needed. Yet while he agreed that students like Maass are benefiting from the kind of quality research needed on Texas campuses, he cautioned against relying on anecdotes.

"You can talk about the double helix on one end of the spectrum, but on the other end of the spectrum you have the professor who does the study on Texas barbecue," Guenther said.

Guenther said the main concern is that teaching has been getting the short shrift at universities that emphasize research. He pointed to undergraduates who complain of spending their first two years

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being taught by teaching assistants and part-time professors, all the while paying soaring tuition costs.

The debate has escalated enough to garner more attention at the Capitol. Last week, Republican House Speaker Joe Straus and Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst announced they had formed a joint oversight committee aimed at ensuring transparency and best practices at Texas colleges and universities.

May 09, 2011 07:03 PM EDT

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I read the barbecue article. It was quite good.

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Another Perry idra is another Perry mad idea!!!!!!

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There are rumors swirling that Powers will be resigning during his speech. .Any one know anything more about this possibility?

UT Austin needs Powers to stand strong & not allow another Perry mad idea!



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