

New Texas group opposes conservatives' efforts in higher education

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A group of prominent education leaders, donors and business executives announced Thursday its intent to improve state universities — and to oppose efforts they say would harm higher education in Texas.

The Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education lists more than 200 founding members, including some former presidents of the [University of Texas](#) and Texas A&M; several ex-regents and chancellors of the UT and A&M systems; major donors to the state's flagship universities; and business leaders, including the CEO of [ConocoPhillips](#) and a former [Exxon Mobil](#) vice president.

"It's a very good group of people who care very deeply about higher education in Texas and excellence in higher education," said Kenneth Jastrow, former CEO of [Temple-Inland Inc.](#) in [Austin](#) and one of the coalition's organizers.

The group is one of several to form amid debate over the mission of public higher education in Texas, particularly at the flagship [UT-Austin](#) and A&M campuses. Gov. [Rick Perry](#), members of the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation and some UT and A&M regents have pushed campuses to spend taxpayer and tuition dollars more wisely, and to give the public more information about how colleges spend money. Those goals have broad support, but the debate centers on how best to reach those goals.

Among the controversial ideas pushed by Perry, policy foundation officials and some regents: giving professors cash bonuses based on student evaluations; drastically boosting student enrollment while slashing tuition costs; and requiring professors to teach more and do less research.

David Guenther, spokesman for the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said his group welcomes another set of voices to the debate.

"With as much expertise as they have on higher education, they are surely aware of the out-of-control tuition that is pricing the middle class out of Texas public universities, and the record levels of student loan debt that are shackling an entire generation of college graduates," Guenther said.

"They have surely heard the accounts from students of their foundational courses being taught overwhelmingly by part-time faculty and graduate students, while having limited access to the marquee professors in their major fields."

[Wall Street Journal](#)