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Third-Party Groups Take Up Challenge of How Best to Improve Public Universities



Caleb Bryant Miller for The Texas Tribune

Natalie Butler works with groups focused on how best to address education.

By REEVE HAMILTON
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For years, Gov. Rick Perry's efforts to increase efficiency and productivity at public universities — largely by pressuring university system officials to carry out specific changes proposed by the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), a conservative research group — were mostly conducted out of the public eye.

Now, after months of controversy, with several third-party organizations across the state cropping up to focus on the issue, along with a new oversight committee created by the Legislature, the various constituents are preparing for a protracted public discussion about how to best address problems like rising tuition and ballooning student debt.

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"I think the more people who are looking at the discussion and bringing their ideas to the table, that's a good thing," said David Guenther, a spokesman for the policy foundation.

Caleb Bryant Miller for The Texas Tribune
Christopher Covo, the director of America's Next Impact.

Christopher Covo, a recent graduate and former student body president of Texas State University, is the director of one such outside group, [America's Next Impact](#), a project of the Texas division of Americans for Prosperity, a

national conservative advocacy group. The group's higher-education efforts are branded under the banner "Rock the Ivory Tower."

Mr. Covo, strapped with \$30,000 in [student loan](#) debt, said making universities more efficient is an idea that resounds among the young professional crowd he is trying to rally.

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Meanwhile, the newly formed [Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education](#) has called for a tack different from the one pushed by the governor, one that gives more weight to ideas from faculty members and administrators. With Natalie Butler, the current student body president of The University of Texas at Austin, as the youngest executive committee member, the coalition includes a bipartisan who's who list of influential, deep-pocketed players in higher education. Karen Hughes, a former counselor to President George W. Bush, is handling communications.

"There are some reforms floating out there that we do not think are in the best interest of our institutions, particularly our flagships," said Pamela Willeford, a former United States ambassador and chairwoman of the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, who also sits on the executive committee. "I think we're being mischaracterized as just for the status quo and against change."

Michael Quinn Sullivan, an influential ally of Mr. Perry with a loud online megaphone, now blogs frequently on the issue.

"We're talking about public policy at the intersection of politics — of course there is hyperbole," Mr. Sullivan said, shortly before referring to Ms. Willeford's group as "the folks building the brick wall around the ivory tower."

A recent post questioned a promotion at U.T.'s recreation center offering two free upgrades with the purchase of a table massage. "Apparently life in the tax-funded ivory tower comes with some interesting benefits," Mr. Sullivan wrote.

As interest in the issue increases, so does the scrutiny of U.T., which has largely served as the focal point of the debate. Last month, an organization in Washington used unverified data to make the case nationally — despite detractors contending that the analysis was "simplistic" — that the university is run inefficiently.

In response, Don Hale, a U.T. spokesman, said the university is "committed to managing its resources wisely and efficiently."

Such assurances, however, may not be enough to cool the back-and-forth. Daniel Greer, a blogger and associate of Mr. Sullivan, said: "Ultimately, what's going to have to happen is you're going to have to have a shakeup or some sort of paradigm shift. It's a stalemate until one side takes another."

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