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UT dean criticizes proposals by governor, regent, policy group



Ricardo B. Brazzielli/AMERICAN-STATESMAN

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Mark D. Hayward, director of the Population Research Center at UT, studies health disparities. His research could help increase life expectancies and reduce racial, ethnic and gender disparities in health and mortality rates.



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Chris Beevers, associate professor of psychology at the University of Texas, studies how people are genetically predisposed to depression. A new report from UT Liberal Arts Dean Randy Diehl expresses concern that a business-style approach to managing the university could marginalize research efforts like this and drive students and faculty away from the school.

Marsha Miller

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Randy Diehl Dean wrote report, will lead panel.

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By **Ralph K.M. Haurwitz**
 AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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The University of Texas took a two-pronged approach Wednesday in its latest effort to resist higher education policies advocated by an Austin-based think tank, Gov. Rick Perry and the chairman of UT's governing board.

First, the university released a 17-page report by one of its most prominent deans warning that the policies would undermine research, teaching and efforts to increase graduation rates. Second, it acknowledged that graduation rates must be increased and said a panel would recommend policies intended to achieve that goal.

The report, "Maintaining Excellence and Efficiency at The University of Texas at Austin: A response to the seven 'breakthrough solutions' and other proposals," was written by Liberal Arts Dean Randy Diehl and his top aides. Diehl also has been named by UT President William Powers Jr. to lead the panel on graduation rates.

The report takes issue with seven "breakthrough solutions" promoted by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, an Austin-based think tank with close ties to Perry. The foundation's recommendations include awarding bonuses to teachers based solely on student evaluations, separating research and teaching budgets, and giving state higher education funding directly to students in what would amount to a voucher system.

Diehl's report also expresses skepticism that current levels of excellence and efficiency could be maintained if the university implemented the governor's call for bachelor's degree programs costing students no more than \$10,000 for four years of tuition, fees and books.

And it says graduation rates could decline if tuition were cut about 50 percent across the UT System's campuses and undergraduate enrollment increased 10 percent a year for four years at the Austin flagship, as Board of Regents Chairman Gene Powell has suggested.

The business-style, market-oriented approach of the various recommendations would drive top students and faculty members away from UT and reduce its standing among major universities, the report says. Moreover, it says, the recommendations overemphasize the student's role as "customer" as opposed to the more important role of "learner."

"The higher education experience is not akin to shopping on iTunes or visiting Banana Republic," the report says, adding that "the campus is not a marketplace."

Mark Miner, a spokesman for Perry, said the governor would continue to advocate for higher education reforms.

"The status quo that some Texas universities try to protect — with rapidly increasing tuition and four-year graduation averaging just 28.6 percent — is not keeping pace with our state's needs," Miner said. "University faculty and their allies should join the reform efforts and recommend ways to innovate, improve graduation rates and enhance accountability and efficiency at Texas colleges and universities. Resisting reform and accountability is an unsustainable recipe for mediocrity and stagnation."

Heather Williams, a policy analyst for the Public Policy Foundation, said rising tuition and the unavailability of critical classes are major reasons students sometimes need a fifth or sixth year to finish their

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degrees. "Our seven breakthrough solutions are explicit aspirations for higher education reform that are shared by many people and parties," she said.

Powell said the UT System is focused on improving excellence, access, affordability, accountability and transparency, and it has not endorsed the breakthrough solutions.

The Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education, a group of civic, business and education leaders, endorsed the UT dean's report. "This analysis should settle this issue once and for all, ending any flirtation with implementing these misguided suggestions," the coalition said.

Diehl said in an interview that he hopes the report is not perceived as disrespectful to the governor, the Texas Public Policy Foundation or regents.

"I'm not somebody who by nature seeks conflict or controversy," but the recommendations involve serious matters and warrant critical analysis, he said.

On paper, the report reflects the views of Diehl and six top aides. In fact, there is little doubt that it also reflects the views of top university officials. The College of Liberal Arts is UT's largest academic unit, and Diehl is among Powers' trusted lieutenants.

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