

## Perry and the Profs

### He picked the right fight.

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If you want a glimpse of the way Rick Perry operates as an executive and a politician, consider the issue of higher education reform in Texas, which no one in Texas knew was an issue until Perry decided to make it one.

In his 30-year public career, Perry—how to put this delicately?—has shown no sign of being tortured by a gnawing intellectual curiosity. “He’s not the sort of person you’ll find reading *The Wealth of Nations* for the seventh time,” said Brooke Rollins, formerly Perry’s policy director and now president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a free-market research group closely allied with Perry. At Texas A&M he majored in animal science and escaped with a grade point average a bit over 2.0. (Perry’s A&M transcript was leaked last month to the left-wing blog Huffington Post by “a source in Texas,” presumably not his mom. How his GPA compares with Barack Obama’s is unknown, since no one in higher education has thought to leak Obama’s transcript to a right-wing blog.)

Perry expends his considerable intelligence instead on using political power and, what amounts to the same thing, picking fights with his political adversaries. When Rollins came to Perry in 2007 with a radical and comprehensive proposal to overhaul higher education in the state, Rollins says the governor quickly understood the potential of the issue, not only politically but on its merits. The state operates more than 100 colleges, universities, technical schools, and two-year community colleges, organized into six separate systems. As in other states, public higher education in Texas is scattered, expensive, poorly monitored, and top heavy with administrators, even as it subjects students to often large annual tuition increases without a compensatory increase in educational quality.

Perry’s first poke at this sclerotic establishment came early in his first term. He suggested converting the money that the state gives to public colleges and universities into individual grants handed straight to students. Money is power, and Perry’s idea was to place the power in the hands of “consumers,” as he put it, rather than the administrators, to increase competition among schools and thereby lower costs and increase quality. “Young fertile minds [should be] empowered,” he said at the time, “to pursue their dreams regardless of family income, the color of their skin, or the sound of their last name.”

The higher ed establishment, led by regents of the University of Texas system, rebelled, and the legislature, well-wired with the system’s allies, agreed, and the proposal died. But Perry continued to poke. College graduation rates in Texas are unusually low, and the gaps among whites, blacks, and Hispanics are unusually high. Nationwide 38 percent of American adults (age 25-64) have a post-secondary degree; in Texas the figure is 31 percent. So Perry proposed “Outcomes-based Funding,” tying the amount of aid a school receives to the number of students it graduates. To keep a school from lowering its standards to increase its graduation rates, he suggested giving an exit exam to all students receiving a B.A. Students wouldn’t have to pass the exam to get their degree, but the information yielded by such a test—how much learning is going on around here?—would be useful, mostly to reformers. The proposal was seen, correctly, as a threat to the status quo, which has so far successfully fought it off.

The proposals Rollins brought to Perry in 2007 turned on the same themes of—apologizing in advance for the buzzwords—accountability and transparency: collecting information about how much students learn and how well schools function, and holding the schools responsible for the results. “His priority has been putting students back into the driver’s seat,” Rollins said. Perry said he hoped to apply the cost-benefit logic of business to public higher education. He incorporated Rollins’s ideas into a package of reforms and called a “higher education summit” to build support.

The reforms attacked the establishment from multiple angles. They would require schools to expand their

websites to make vast amounts of new information available to students. For the first time, professors would be required to post course syllabi online. To suss out slackers among the faculty, schools would post every teacher's salary and benefits along with the average number of students and course hours they taught every year. A summary of student evaluations would be posted too, and the average number of As and Bs professors handed out, to guard against grade inflation. Before choosing a particular school or enrolling in a major, students would be given a list of the specific skills or knowledge that they could expect to learn, as well as the average starting salaries of students who had graduated from a similar course of study.

Perry also suggested separating teaching budgets from research budgets, as a way of encouraging teachers to teach and researchers to do research. Tenure would be granted only to teachers who spent a large majority of their time teaching; a defined percentage of tenure jobs would go to researchers, who would concentrate on pure research. A system of cash awards and other incentives would compensate professors who successfully taught a large number of students.

Any businessman in a profit-seeking enterprise would see ideas like "pay for performance" as unremarkable, but they overwhelm the delicate sensibilities of people who have spent their professional lives on campus, where the word "nonprofit" is meant to act as a firewall against the unpleasantness of commercial life. "Texas Governor Treats Colleges Like Businesses," headlined the *Chronicle of Higher Education*—a sentence sure to induce aneurysms in faculty lounges from El Paso to Galveston. The outrage was deafening, especially when university regents began acting on the recommendations. The Texas A&M system, for example, which includes a dozen schools, posted a spreadsheet on its website evaluating teacher performance on a cost-benefit basis.

"Very simplistic and potentially very dangerous," an official of the American Association of University Professors said. "This is . . . simplistic," said the dean of faculties at A&M. "Simplistic," said the *Houston Chronicle*. A group of former regents and wealthy school boosters organized a pressure group to oppose Perry's reforms. The group hired Karen Hughes, a close aide to the second President Bush, as press spokesman. The rage at Perry from within the establishment has taken many forms: You think it's easy stealing someone's college transcript?

The protests might have been more effective except that Perry, for the last decade, has been seeding Texas higher education with like-minded reformers (cronies too). By 2009 he had appointed every regent in the state. The chancellor of A&M who issued the cost-benefit report, for example, was a former chief of staff of the governor. At least three campus presidents have been pressured to resign in recent years, to make way for Perry appointees—all Republican businessmen. A particularly popular (and vocal) vice president of student affairs at the University of Texas was removed and replaced by . . . a retired Marine Corps general.

The appointees weren't as pliant as Perry might have wished. The implementation of the reforms has been difficult and at times dilatory. Perry barrels on. In his state of the state address this spring, he urged administrators to develop a four-year bachelor's degree that would cost less than \$10,000 "including textbooks." The discount degree, he said, would be a "bold, Texas-style solution" to the problem of rapidly rising tuition. (The average in-state cost of a four-year degree in Texas, including books, is roughly \$30,000.) After the goal was declared impossible by Perry's critics, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board published a plan to lower costs dramatically: greater use of online classes and "open-source" course materials, accelerated or staggered student schedules, fuller integration of four- and two-year colleges, and more.

Perry's admirers praise his sure-footedness—his ability to sense cultural trends before others do and turn them to his political advantage. He was the first national politician to ally himself to the Tea Party movement in 2009, a move that's just now paying off. He caught the mounting anxiety among middle-income parents about college costs early on. Most American parents now say that a college degree will be essential for their children's future success; at the same time, according to a new Pew Foundation poll, only 22 percent of Americans believe that most people can afford to send their kids to college. And 57 percent describe the quality of American higher education as "only fair" or "poor." To address this anxiety Perry's opponents offer more government subsidies, which in turn provide an incentive for schools to raise their prices—an attempt to douse the fire with gasoline. Perry's ideas are cheaper, more comprehensive, more imaginative, and more likely to work.

And they have a good chance of being put into action. In late August, Perry scored another significant, if partial, victory. The University of Texas regents approved an "action plan" proposed by the system's chancellor, who isn't a Perry appointee. The plan is a compromise, but it incorporates many of Perry's ideas, including some of the most radical, such as "pay for performance" and "learning contracts" between schools and their students. Amazingly, the plan has won support from both the right (Brooke Rollins's Texas Public Policy Foundation) and left (Karen Hughes's group).

Reforms like these would have been unthinkable 10 years ago, before Perry picked up his stick and started poking the system until it had to respond. It's been a remarkable display of political entrepreneurship: Create an issue, define it on your terms, cultivate public support, and your opponents, who never saw it coming, will have to go along, even if only partway—at first.

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