

EDUCATION

TPPF Higher Ed Guru: 7 Solutions a "Good Start"

By [Reeve Hamilton, Texas Tribune \(/people/reeve-hamilton-texas-tribune\)](#)



http://mediad.publicbroadcasting.net/p/kut/files/201110/TPPF_Lindsay.jpg_800x1000_q100.jpg

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Thomas Lindsay, the man recently selected to head the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-special-interest-groups/texas-public-policy-foundation/>), its Center for Higher Education, is no stranger to controversy. That may be considered an asset in the position, given the foundation's role in igniting much of the debate that has gripped Texas higher ed this year.

From January 2009 to April 2010, Lindsay served a 15-month stint as president of Chicago's Shimer College, a tiny private institution that follows a "Great Books" curriculum heavily focused on the works of such seminal figures as Isaac Newton, John Locke and William Shakespeare. Lindsay was criticized for controversial personnel changes and for revising the school's mission statement to include what unhappy faculty members complained were political buzzwords. Ultimately, the school's trustees removed him from the post.

It's not something he's eager to revisit. Shortly after signing on with the TPPF, he issued a lengthy [statement](#) (http://www.texaspolicy.com/commentaries_single.php?report_id=4105) to which he refers all questions on his time at Shimer. In it, he says the experience taught him a few lessons: higher education institutions are "peerless at institutional self-defense," reform requires the full engagement of all stakeholders, "reform is essential."

This year, "[reforms](#)" pushed by the TPPF (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/whos-behind-proposed-reforms-to-texas-higher-ed/>), a conservative think tank based in Austin, became the focal point in a sustained and occasionally contentious debate about the future of higher education in Texas. Known as the "seven breakthrough solutions," the proposals were attacked by critics — many from within the higher ed community — as overly simplistic and, in particular, antagonistic toward academic research.

In an interview, Lindsay told the Tribune that the seven proposals "constituted a good start."

The debate they sparked does seem to have altered the higher education landscape in certain ways. A new legislative oversight committee dedicated to related issues and a number of third party groups, both in favor of and in opposition to TPPF's approach, were established or reignited their interest in higher ed. A few tense months ultimately culminated in [University of Texas System](#) (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/university-of-texas-system/>)

Chancellor [Francisco Cigarroa](http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/francisco-cigarroa/) (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/francisco-cigarroa/>) jaying out an [ambitious framework](http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/ut-regents-bless-cigarroa-plan/) (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/ut-regents-bless-cigarroa-plan/>) for the system's future that was unanimously blessed by the UT Regents and has been lauded by stakeholders on all sides.

While some see the "breakthrough solutions" as an overly politicized distraction, Lindsay attributes the state's growing awareness of higher education and positive momentum manifested in Cigarroa's framework to the discussion begun by the TPPF.

"Like any draft, there are going to be reactions, changes and modifications, which is all to the good," Lindsay said. "That's what it's all about, and I look forward to being a part of that process."

He acknowledged, however, that some of the messaging coming out of the TPPF might be tweaked. One line repeated by its spokespeople and representatives throughout the debate, including by senior fellow Ronald Trowbridge in a [quest column](http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/guest-column-the-case-for-higher-ed-accountability/) (<http://www.texastribune.org/texas-education/higher-education/guest-column-the-case-for-higher-ed-accountability/>) for the Tribune, went like this: "A recent study issued by the American Enterprise Institute reveals, for example, that from 1980 to 2006, 21,674 scholarly articles were published on Shakespeare. Do we need the 21,675th?"

Not only did Lindsay preside over a Great Books college, but most of his publications as an academic — a career that has taken him to the University of Northern Iowa, University of Dallas and Seton Hall University — have been on the likes of Plato and Aristotle. "I'm certainly one who knows and values research," he said, adding that research in the humanities "helps guide us in the most important questions about how we should live."

"Going forward, I would never be part of any project that sought to diminish it," he said. "More important, I didn't see that in the seven solutions."

In the opportunity to join the TPPF leadership, he said he saw and was attracted to an effort to address the need to increase accessibility while maintaining and even increasing quality. He said that no matter which side of the higher ed debate people may have come down on recently, they share those same goals, as well as a desire to increase transparency and accountability.

"As someone who was a faculty member for a long time, I think that they know as well as anybody what the challenges are," he said. "They know as well as anybody the demoralizing effect it has on students to not be able to graduate on time or to make it through college at all. So I think they want solutions as much as anybody else."

After just a week on the job, Lindsay said he's optimistic about the possibility of different groups working together. "It's going to be a give and take, as all dialogues are," he said, "but I think the process will yield a better result."

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