

## Three plans aim to improve higher education

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Published 31 Oct 2011 at 1:42 AM  
By Liz Farmer

Each party in the Texas higher education debate presents their plan as the correct answer. But are the plans really that different?

The Daily Texan compares the three plans meant to enhance the efficiency of higher education.

The final report from the [Commission of 125](#), one of the plans discussed, is a UT Austin document created in 2004 which established goals “for the purposes of reinvigorating UT’s aspirations for the next 25 years.”

The Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, published [Seven Breakthrough Solutions](#) for Higher Education to “strengthen higher education for Texas’ future.” Texas Sen. Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo, chair of the Senate Higher Education Committee, said the Seven Solutions played a part in invigorating a public debate last Spring about the role of research at state institutions.

UT System Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa presented his Framework for Excellence Action Plan in August in partial response to the significant cut in state funding. The framework is an effort to increase efficiencies at each of the UT institutions. Zaffirini said many of the initiatives in the framework touted as innovative by the UT System were presented in the Commission of 125’s report.

“These are not new ideas in the action plan,” Zaffirini said.

Thomas Lindsay, new director for the Center for Higher Education at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, said the think tank fully agrees with the efforts in the framework.

President of the Senate of College Councils, Carisa Nietsche, said Senate does not move forward with anything contrary to the Commission of 125, which points to quality of education as the end goal.

“I think that’s why there is some flexibility — to allow for task forces to follow up on those recommendations,” Nietsche said.

She said the framework has broader objectives than the Commission of 125.

“I think there is some flexibility in the framework so that the recommendations can be applied different at the system schools,” Nietsche said.

Both the “Commission of 125” and the framework emphasize the improvement of four-year graduation rates. The Commission of 125’s report states low four-year graduation rates can partially be blamed on the fact that UT students “take, on average, just 13.1 semester hours, which is unacceptable.”

“In the framework they talk about the pathways for students whereas, the commission puts a lot of the blame the students,” Nietsche said. “It asks students to step up.”

One of the main commission points is that “the quality of the educational experience must be the primary factor in determining the size of the student body.”

“I don’t think the framework is particularly explicit there,” Nietsche said. “It doesn’t talk about the quality.”

One point shared by the framework and the 7 Solutions is the establishment of quantitative measurements to evaluate faculty performance and to compensate professors based on their performance. According to the 7 Solutions, professor bonuses should be based on the results of student evaluations.

“The overall goal there is very much in line, but the framework doesn’t say which criteria it will use to determine who’s a good teacher,” Nietzsche said.

Number two of the 7 Solutions is to “publicly recognize and reward extraordinary teachers.” The UT System Board of Regents started an awards system for teaching excellence which is outlined in the framework. UT System Board of Regents Chairman Gene Powell described the initiative at a meeting a few weeks ago.

“None of us in higher education have taken care of great teachers,” Powell said. “We’ve taken care of our researcher but not our great teachers.”

Nietzsche said there are similarities across the three documents.

“A lot of people are describing the same problems, but approaching them in different ways,” Nietzsche said.

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