

UT Regents Commended for Standing Up to Powers

Contributed by Will Lutz
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May 2, 2012 is a historic day for the University of Texas. For decades, University of Texas regents blindly followed the University of Texas at Austin president, no matter where he led, viewing their role largely as either honorary or as fundraisers.

For the first time in at least two decades, the regents said no, publicly rejecting a 2.5 percent tuition increase proposed by President William Powers, Jr. In so doing, the regents said yes to Rick Perry — the elected governor of Texas — and yes to the idea that regents should manage state universities in the interest of the taxpayers, parents, and voters of Texas

Let's be clear, there is no need for a tuition increase, and when the economy is in a deep recession is the wrong time to talk about raising taxes and fees. Perry correctly advised regents not to raise fees but instead to make better use of the monies universities already have.

And those resources are substantial. Since 2003, Texas provided more money to universities and university research when other states cut back. Let's compare what's going on at Texas to a university to which UT-Austin aspires, the University of California — Berkeley.

A rare bout of common sense afflicted Sacramento last year, and California lawmakers cut \$70 million from the University of California — Berkeley's budget. According to a speech by Berkeley's chancellor, the total state support received by Berkeley in 2011-12 amounts to \$230 million. According to the University of California Office of the President, Berkeley's estimated enrollment that year is 35,466, yielding a per-student support level of \$6,485.

By contrast, Texas lawmakers appropriated \$247,397,392 in state general revenue to the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, according to the Legislative Budget Board's Fiscal Size-Up, \$258.9 million is set aside from the Available University Fund (proceeds from an endowment created by oil and gas royalties on state lands) for university excellence.

Two-thirds of that is allocated to the University of Texas at Austin, for an annual total of \$86.3 million, yielding a total state support for UT-Austin of \$333.7 million in Fiscal Year 2012. According to the Higher Education Coordinating Board, UT — Austin has enrolled 51,112 in the fall of 2011. That means UT-Austin's per-student support is \$6529.

This means UT-Austin is getting \$6529 from the State of Texas, while Berkeley is getting \$6485. There's plenty of money there to fund the core teaching mission of the university, particularly if college faculty had to teach more than two classes per semester.

When confronted with statistics like this, UT has a litany of excuses. Some of UT's general revenue budget was dedicated to research by a 2003 bill that the UT administration supported and campaigned for. Berkeley does charge higher tuition. (Is it bad that our universities are more affordable?) Of course, UT administrators won't mention in this litany that Austin's cost of living is substantially lower than the San Francisco Bay Area. Bottom line — Texas legislators have been generous, perhaps too generous, with higher education in the past decade.

The UT Regents' display of fiscal prudence was even more remarkable in light of the intimidation campaign conducted by some liberal legislators, a PR firm, and various UT-Austin boosters. In particular, Sen. Judith Zaffirini (D-Laredo) abused the Joint Select Committee on Higher Education Governance, Excellence, and Transparency as a forum to attack Governor Perry, his appointees, and his conservative policies. Regents were threatened in public hearings with subpoenas, and the governor's philosophies and the regents themselves became the subject of regular and repeated cheap-shots.

But the regents stood up to the intimidation campaign and honored the conservative values of Texas voters and the governor who appointed them. In the short run, the regents turned down a two-year tuition increase. But in so doing, they made giant strides toward restoring fiscal accountability and responsibility at universities nationwide.

Read more: <http://americansforprosperity.org/050912-ut-regents-commended-standing-powers#ixzz1ua6lUI5B>