

Cut costs by halting subsidies for higher education?

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AUSTIN — Want to lower the cost of college? End all federal subsidies for higher education.

That was the provocative solution proffered at a panel discussion Friday put on by the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#), a conservative Austin think tank whose “Seven Breakthrough Solutions” for higher education have created a firestorm of controversy within the Texas A&M University and University of Texas Systems.

Neal McCluskey, a free-market advocate with the [Cato Institute](#), said federal student aid such as Pell grants and research grants drive up costs, stifle competition and make students and universities less price-sensitive.

“If you are using your own money, you demand a good product,” McCluskey said. “You professors need to be teaching me something, not doing research or sitting in your office not doing office hours.”

McCluskey said government aid could be phased out over a 12-year period.

Bill Powers, president of the [University of Texas at Austin](#) and a panelist at the forum, disagreed.

Public funding signals that Americans consider higher education an investment in the nation’s collective well-being, like highways, Powers said.

“I think higher education is a tremendous public good, and it makes sense to have support for it,” he said.

Universities are not impervious to change, and UT is working hard to get leaner and better at producing graduates, Powers said. But privatizing the system would not serve the public interest, he said.

Robert Jensen, a UT journalism professor, said the obsession with efficiency and making higher education more like private business hinted at doom for traditional universities.

“It seems what might be going on here is the final destruction of higher education,” Jensen said.

McCluskey denied that.

“I am not advocating the destruction of anything,” he said. “I don’t want schools to go away.”

Ending subsidies is likely a political long shot, especially at the federal level.

The TPPF’s seven solutions, written by wealthy entrepreneur [Jeff Sandefer](#), have caught the ear of Gov. [Rick Perry](#), who has leaned hard on university regents to implement them.

Perry’s recent appointees to the [UT System Board of Regents](#) are more philosophically aligned with those ideas, and one is on TPPF’s board of directors.

Rick O’Donnell, a former special adviser to the UT System and member of the conservative reform camp, wrote a paper for the TPPF that deemed most academic research a waste of money. He also accused UT officials of withholding data that would have tracked how much tuition and taxpayer money was spent on administrators and professors who do little teaching.

The paper whipped up a storm of protest from UT alumni, donors and students. O’Donnell was fired earlier this month.

“He was essentially run out of town,” McCluskey said, by faculty senates who “don’t want anyone messing around with the deal (they’ve) got.”

Robert Strawser, a panelist and speaker of the faculty senate at Texas A&M University, denied that.

Powers said he did not orchestrate the actions of alumni who wrote letters against O’Donnell, but he agreed with their position and actions.

Despite vigorous disagreement over how to improve higher education, the panelists agreed an open-air debate is a good thing.

“It does us no good to write white papers,” said Strawser. “We need to get together and agree on the goals (of higher education).”

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