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Editorial: Texas universities need a boost for Tier 1 status

It's not hard to tell which current legislative bill is the best to help universities like the University of Texas at Arlington, the University of Texas at Dallas and the University of North Texas grow into nationally recognized research institutions.

By a country mile, it's SB 9, offered by Sen. Judith Zaffirini of Laredo, who chairs the Senate Higher Education Committee.

For a while, it looked like Sen. Robert Duncan of Lubbock had some useful suggestions. The Senate even passed Duncan's resolution calling for a constitutional amendment to set aside "a dedicated, independent source of funding to enable emerging research universities in this state to achieve national prominence as major research universities."

Finding money to help these universities grow has been the problem all along.

But what Duncan said on the Senate floor was different. His goal with the constitutional amendment, he said several times, is to provide money to schools only when they've reached national prominence.

"We've got to give them the tools to get there," he said. "When you get there, then you qualify for this fund."

That puts schools like UTA, UTD and UNT back at square one. That's the square where Dallas-Fort Worth, whose 6.5 million residents make it the state's largest metropolitan area, has no nationally recognized research university. The only schools of that caliber in Texas are the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M University and private Rice University in Houston.

There's nothing wrong with Duncan's resolution as passed by the Senate last Monday. He also has introduced legislation (SB 1560) that he says is aimed at providing the "tools" to help schools grow. But that legislation actually describes sending money to schools that already fit the nationally recognized mold.

He wouldn't give any money to schools until they have built their endowment to at least \$500 million. That's far more strict than even the requirements set by the Association of American Universities, whose invitation-only membership list mirrors the list of Tier 1 universities in the U.S. In fact, the AAU membership criteria don't look at endowments at all.

Duncan's bill just doesn't meet the state's need. Seven Texas institutions are classified as "emerging research universities."

Besides the three in Dallas-Fort Worth, the list includes Texas Tech, the University of Houston and UT System schools in San Antonio and El Paso.

Dallas-Fort Worth should have Tier 1 universities. Those schools attract top students, researchers and teaching talent. They also provide economic benefits, attracting investors to commercial ventures spun off from research activity.

Zaffirini's bill addresses that need statewide. It would enable emerging research universities and other schools in Texas to compete for more state funding based on such criteria as their number of graduates in certain critical fields, their growth in research funding from business and government sources, their numbers of graduates each year and their ability to search out private gifts.

The problem, of course, is that Zaffirini's bill has no funding. This feels a whole lot like square one again.

Still, there is reason for the Dallas-Fort Worth schools to be encouraged. At least the Legislature has recognized the state's higher education needs, is talking seriously about them and is seeking solutions.

Real results would be even better.