



Editorial

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Smart money

Texas needs more great universities. And we're likely to get them.

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Just when we're about to despair of Texas, our legislators confuse us by doing something really, really smart — like making sure that our state has enough top-notch universities.

Texas now has three “Tier One” universities: Two public (The University of Texas–Austin, Texas A&M) and one private (Rice). We need more. Every year, as high school graduates decamp for Tier One schools in other states, our state suffers a net loss of 6,000 of the best and brightest. Instead of attracting the smartest, most ambitious kids, we're losing them.

But that could be changing. On the next-to-last day of this otherwise dismal legislative session, the House and Senate made it possible for seven of the state's public universities, including the University of Houston, to muscle their way into the ranks of the nation's best schools. (Send your thank-you notes to the House's Dan Branch, R-Dallas, and the Senate's Judith Zaffirini, D-Laredo.)

Assuming that all goes well — that the governor signs off and Texas voters approve a constitutional amendment in November — Texas will create two big pots of money to encourage the seven “emerging research universities” to hurry up and finish emerging. Besides UH, that list includes Texas Tech, UT-San Antonio, UT-Dallas, UT-Arlington, UT-El Paso, and the University of North Texas.

The \$50 million Texas Research Incentive Program would match the gifts and scholarships that private donors bestow on each school. And the \$425 million National Research University Fund (money that would be moved from a dormant program) would reward the schools for reaching big goals, four of which have already been specified: awarding 200 doctoral degrees over a two-year period; maintaining an endowment of at least \$400 million; membership in the Association of Research Libraries or a campus chapter of Phi Beta Kappa; and annual expenditure of at least \$45 million in restricted research funding.

UH is likely to land a good-sized share of those dollars. Welcome Wilson, chair of the UH board of regents, told Chronicle reporter Jeannie Kever that of the goals named so far, UH has already scored three. All that's left is to do more research each year.

The Legislature's willingness to pony up is especially well-timed. In this lousy economy, as other states are cutting back their universities, our expansion shows that Texans are serious about higher ed. Instead of losing top students and researchers, we'll be a magnet for them.

“I'm tickled to death,” Wilson said. We are, too.

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