

## Florida May Be Next Battleground Over Faculty Productivity

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In Florida, college professors, presidents and lawmakers are preparing for a vigorous debate about faculty performance, pay, and productivity.

That's because Gov. Rick Scott, a Republican, has made it clear that he's looking toward Texas for ideas on how to revamp higher education in his state. In Texas, a controversial plan—backed by Gov. Rick Perry, another Republican, and his allies—proposes to do more to measure faculty productivity, emphasizes teaching over research, and advocates paying faculty members based on their effectiveness.



Joe Raedle, Getty Images

The governor of Florida, Rick Scott (center), had made it clear that he is looking toward Texas for ideas on how to revamp higher education in his state.

Governor Scott, who has spoken publicly in recent weeks about his interest in the Texas proposal, hasn't yet talked specifics about which pieces of that plan he would push lawmakers to adopt. But he's actively soliciting feedback on Texas's "Seven Breakthrough Solutions," which was written by the Austin-based Texas Public Policy Foundation, a research institute. Just a few of the solutions have been adopted, most of them at Texas A&M University.

Governor Scott has shared the plan with enough people, including the chancellor of the state university system, the appointees he has made to college governing boards, and the presidents of Florida's 11 public colleges, to jump-start what is sure to be a lengthy conversation about what kinds of changes should be made.

The governor's spokesman, Lane Wright, said that there is no plan in place to make changes in higher education in Florida and that Governor Scott has simply been "talking about his ideas" as a way to generate discussion on the matter. The governor has had no formal talks at this point with legislators about ways to

overhaul the system, Mr. Wright said.

It isn't yet clear how much traction the governor's higher-education ideas will get in Florida, but people are taking the push to revamp higher education in the state seriously. The union that represents about 20,000 public university professors and professionals in Florida is gearing up to fight the changes in how they're expected to do their jobs, which, they say, would ultimately drive talented faculty away from Florida colleges. The Texas-style higher-education proposals are also expected to be discussed during the next legislative session, which begins in January.

### A Counterproposal

In a move to counter what he saw as major shortcomings of the Texas solutions, a Florida university president has created a detailed alternative, which he calls "Florida Can Do Better Than Texas."

Eric J. Barron, president of Florida State University, said he came up with the alternative plan after reading a copy of the Texas plan sent to him by Governor Scott. "My immediate thought was that we can do better," Mr. Barron said. "I took each of the proposed Texas solutions and did an analysis and then I thought about how they could be stronger."

The governor has asked for a copy of the plan, said Mr. Barron, who shared his ideas with his trustees last week.

Mr. Barron said his plan (which offers eight solutions, instead of seven) ensures that colleges are held responsible for their students' success, while allowing colleges in the state to "still be on the cutting edge."

For instance, the Texas solutions focus on measuring the productivity and effectiveness of faculty by how many students they teach, how highly they are rated on student evaluations, and how many A's and B's they award to students. Critics say the Texas model wants colleges to operate like businesses that offer degrees as their main product. But such metrics, Mr. Barron said, could have unintended consequences, among them larger classes that could limit learning and faculty's pandering to students to positively influence student evaluations.

A better way to measure efficiency, according to Mr. Barron's plan, is to look at freshman retention and graduation rates, survey students about their university experience after graduation, test them for how much they know about a subject before and after a course, and calculate cost per student per credit hour. Among other elements of Mr. Barron's plan are an emphasis on performance-based pay and less weight on student evaluations as a litmus test for awarding tenure.

Mr. Barron, who is scheduled to discuss his plan at the Faculty Senate meeting this month at Florida State, said he hopes his ideas "start a discussion about what we could do differently in Florida."

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"My belief is that this plan will get improved as it goes along," he said, "and hopefully what will emerge is an even stronger document that we can talk about."

No Room for Debate?

But some professors are concerned that the window to discuss the pros and cons of the Texas plan is a narrow one, if it exists at all. The governor's consistent promotion of the Texas ideas as a possible template doesn't bode well, they said.

"He's already finished the conversation all by himself," said Tom Auxter, president of the United Faculty of Florida and a professor of philosophy at the University of Florida. Mr. Auxter wrote a letter to union members last week that outlined several challenges the union expects to face when the legislative session begins anew, including the likely reintroduction of bills that would make it harder for public employees to keep their union going. Yet, Mr. Auxter wrote: "The most ominous threat to higher education comes from the governor."

"Faculty are talking about this across the state," Mr. Auxter said in an interview of the governor's push to consider the Texas ideas in Florida. They're not against a plan that tries to increase efficiency since it's clear that "we don't have enough money to go around," he said. But at the root of critics' worry, just as in Texas, is how that efficiency will be achieved.

"The ideas are often general ideas that people may or may not agree with," Mr. Auxter said of the Texas plan. "But when you look at the implementation, all the duplicity is in the details."

Mr. Auxter and others say that a key component of the Texas solution, its merit-pay plan, would push professors away from Florida colleges. Under the Texas plan, faculty who are top-notch teachers would be given a bonus, but that amount, Mr. Auxter says, would not be added to the base pay that professors get. So the salaries of high-performing faculty wouldn't increase over the long run.

Faculty will say, "I'm going to have this salary for the rest of my life," Mr. Auxter said. "You need people who are on the cutting edge in their research and can teach well. They're saying you don't have to invest in talent."

Mr. Auxter added that "I think we're going to have to fight this all year long."

Frank T. Brogan, chancellor of the State University System of Florida, has met with Governor Scott to discuss the changes the governor has in mind for higher education. Mr. Brogan was not available for comment, according to his spokeswoman. However, he told the News Service of Florida last month that he supports "accountability-based funding," and thinks that scrutinizing the quality of programs is key. He also acknowledged how fast-moving—and divisive—discussions about overhauling higher education were in Texas and he hopes talks about the issue will take a different tone in Florida, the news service reported.

The Board of Governors, which oversees public colleges in the state, meets Thursday, and Mr. Brogan is on the agenda. Kelly Layman, a spokeswoman, said Mr. Brogan will give a report, during which he will weigh in on the talk surrounding potential changes in Florida's higher education system, and will also lead a discussion on national trends in higher education.

"The Florida Board of Governors is excited that this dialogue is occurring in the context of work it has dedicated itself to the past 18 months on updating our strategic plan through 2025," Ms. Layman said in an e-mail. "We will build whatever additional performance metrics to our existing annual report the board feels are necessary."

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[For more background:](#)

"Texas A&M Regents Hear Faculty Concerns About a Push Toward a 'For-Profit Mentality' "

By Katherine Mangan, May 27, 2011, Chronicle

<http://chronicle.com/article/Texas-A-M-Board-of-Regents/127684/>

"Senators express doubts about Texas higher ed plan," St. Augustine Record, September 21, 2011

<http://staugustine.com/florida-news/2011-09-20/senators-express-doubts-about-texas-higher-ed-plan#.TnoHfOu0yh0.email>

From the Patriot Group project, the Texas Higher Ed "Seven Solutions"

<http://texashighered.com/7-solutions>