Texas Democrats must reverse the political takeover of universities



Texas A&M students holds signs supporting professors' ability to instruct freely at a rally in January. Texas needs lasting safeguards so politicians can't dictate what professors teach or what scholars study, Daniel Davies and Daniel Morales write.

Jason Fochtman/Houston Chronicle

The people of Texas enshrined universities in the Texas Constitution, supporting them with proceeds from public lands. They are a generational trust, driving opportunity and economic growth while cultivating the critical thinking that democracy requires.

But in the last few years politicians have betrayed that trust. A combination of bills, government pressure and a few politically appointed leaders have attempted to put GOP ideology at the center of university life.

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Public dollars have gone to promoting that ideology, even as universities went underfunded and Texas students racked up record levels of debt. Plato was banned, along with Oscar-winning films. Culture warrior leaders restricted what could be taught and even what could be researched. The

result: faculty self-censor, students lose out and Texans are shortchanged.

Now Democrats can keep Texas higher education in the headlines for the right reasons. There is a unique opportunity to make Texas universities a leading light for sensible governance, research and teaching.

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Gov.-elect Gina Hinojosa campaigned to end state takeovers of school districts, increase teacher pay and reinforce public education. Attorney General-elect Nathan Johnson knows voters are tired of culture war fights and has vowed not to defend "the legislature's passage of unconstitutional laws and laws that violate individual rights." Lt. Gov.-elect Vikki Goodwin has acknowledged the "chilling effect" created by Republican culture warriors, leaving our students worse off. Most importantly, she has promised a "return to sanity" for Texas higher education.

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That return to sanity will require a fight. Rescind Gov. Greg Abbott's xenophobic freeze on H-1B visas at public universities. Don't push away world-leading scholars from teaching our students. SB17 and SB37 — the laws that made Texas notorious for their attacks on university governance and added burdensome layers of bureaucracy to regular university business — must be repealed.

Like the Texas Education Agency, more educators must be on our state universities' Boards of Regents. Our universities should be led by people with higher education experience who resist partisan pressure and work to

keep research and teaching free from political control.

The return to sanity will also require vision for the future. The attacks on higher education over the last few years have revealed the need for stronger protections. Universities cannot be held to ransom again.

We must enshrine the freedom to teach and the freedom to research in law, aligning it with the state's proud traditions of leadership and independence. The progress of science cannot be hampered by politicians; Texas universities' world-leading status cannot be jeopardized by partisan interference.

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The university curriculum should be legally entrusted to the faculty who have dedicated their lives to scholarship — not to politically appointed regents who haven't set foot in a college classroom since their senior year.

The ideological takeover of public universities in Texas–and across the country — did not happen overnight.

After the 2008 financial crisis, states across the country withdrew robust public funding, leaving universities more dependent on tuition revenue and corporate donations. Simultaneously, university administrators and boards have steadily gained power at the expense of students and faculty who — like K-12 educators — are stewards of the educational mission.

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Restoring sanity will not happen overnight.

But free inquiry and learning are foundational to democracy. Universities are custodians of these values. The Texas GOP has taught us how fragile these institutions are. Let's act with the foresight of the founding generation of Texans and make sure corrupt actors never again desecrate these public gems.

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