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## State's colleges mum on climate; Higher ed leaders avoid signing letter to back Paris accord

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A nationwide group of college and university leaders coming out in support of the Paris climate accord on Monday was notable for what it lacked: any representation from Texas universities. The letter drew more than 180 signatures from public and private higher education leaders in the wake of President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw the U.S. from the international agreement last week. Signatories pledged to continue to support climate action. Presidents and chancellors from Bar Harbor, Maine, to San Diego said they would "remain actively engaged with the international community" to keep the U.S. in line with global climate goals, like moving to a clean energy economy. Most universities that responded were clustered on the U.S. coasts, and several states had no college or university president sign onto the letter. Still, the letter attracted high-profile institutions, including Columbia University in New York, Pennsylvania State University and Michigan State University. Mayor's name on letter Outside of academia, about 900 businesses and more than 130 city, state and county government leaders signed on - including Mayor Sylvester Turner in Houston. Two Texas community colleges near Dallas are signatories, but no Texas university president signed the open letter, titled "We Are Still In." Not Texas A&M University, whose atmospheric sciences faculty have warned that continued rising temperatures could present challenges for society and ecosystems. Not the University of Texas at Austin, whose Environmental Science Institute hosts interdisciplinary research on climate science. Not the University of Houston, whose professors study potential effects of climate change on everything from litigation to the atmosphere's composition. Not even private Rice University, whose president David Leebron has been vocal on social issues. Dependent on state revenue, public universities may be reluctant to take positions that contradict their state's political views, national consultants said. Sen. Ted Cruz urged Trump to withdraw from the agreement, and Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton thanked Trump for his decision on Paris last week. J.B. Bird, UT-Austin spokesman, said only the system's chancellor or Board of Regents chairman can weigh in on political or controversial matters, if it would appear that the statement represents the university or system's point of view. Foreign policy falls into that category, he said. UH spokesman Mike Rosen said the institution is "more likely to take positions on things that affect what we do directly," like Trump's travel ban that initially blocked citizens of seven majority-Muslim countries from entering the U.S. UH, he said, is "not in the business of taking positions on every single political issue." "There's no connection" between UH's research on climate science and campus sustainability initiatives and deciding whether to sign the letter, Rosen said in an email. Texas A&M did not respond to requests for comment, and Leebron was unavailable for comment, a Rice spokesman said. Considering ramifications Second Nature, a Massachusetts nonprofit, reached out directly to hundreds of universities nationwide, urging them to sign, said Timothy Carter, that group's president. It also opened an online portal for individual institutions to submit signatories without that outreach. "In the absence of leadership from Washington, states, cities, colleges and universities and businesses representing a sizeable percentage of the U.S. economy will pursue ambitious climate goals, working together to take forceful action and to ensure that the U.S. remains a global leader in reducing emissions," the letter reads. This letter is the first known multi-sector statement on climate, Carter said. "It's not just a sector coming out, or an individual institution, which you often see," he said. "There are complementary roles that each of those sectors play in the global system that we're a part of." Universities' commitments in support of the climate agreement, he said, are "critical" because they have huge operations, conduct climate research and teach future leaders. But these institutions, especially public universities, must consider external pressure before their leaders take a position on national issues, higher education consultants say. "I think it's rare that a president doesn't consider how the legislature might react to something they say or

do," said Teresa Valerio Parrot, a Colorado-based communications consultant who works with public and private universities. A president would also consider faculty, board member and student opinions, she said. Regents and right-wing groups sometimes criticize presidents' statements on social issues from campus leaders because their institutions are viewed as too left-leaning, said Simon Barker, a managing partner at Blue Moon Consulting Group, which specializes in higher education. "There is this broader concern that universities, particularly in this climate, are becoming overly politicized," he said. "This is really ramped up post-Trump." Reluctance 'not surprising' Those pressures didn't stop UT System Chancellor Bill McRaven from expressing his views on the U.S. withdrawal last week. Though McRaven did not sign the letter - a spokeswoman said he was not aware of it until Monday - he came out against Trump's decision at an event last week sponsored by the Texas Tribune. "I am absolutely in favor of the Paris climate accord, make no mistake about that," he said. "It gets back (to) a broader issue about leadership. Is this the way we want the nation to lead, by pulling out of the accord?" Climate scientists at Texas campuses said they understood why their universities didn't sign the letter. "It's not surprising that university presidents would be reluctant to take a political stand, no matter their point of view," said John Nielsen-Gammon, Texas' climatologist and a Texas A&M University professor. "The travel ban and restrictions on visas impacted (universities) very directly. . Pulling out of the Paris agreement doesn't affect universities' direction, except that it affects the environment, so it affects everyone. It's not specific to the university." Susan Hovorka, a senior research scientist at UT-Austin's Bureau of Economic Geology, said that she has signed similar letters, but she makes it clear that she is representing her own views, not the university's. UT-Austin President Gregory Fenves, she said, "gets to decide what fights he wants to fight . (He) probably has many things to struggle with, including the university's relationship to the state government." UT-Austin and other Texas universities are "doing the deed" of good climate research even if their university leaders don't outwardly take a position, said Hovorka, who studies how to reduce atmospheric greenhouse gas. "As a member of the staff," she said, "I respect that." [lindsay.ellis@chron.com](mailto:lindsay.ellis@chron.com)  
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