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News

## **Amid UT cuts, \$6M for Liberty Institute**

Megan Menchaca

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Lawmakers trimmed other university budgets

The conservative think tank, which is still in development, does not have an official name, mission or governance structure, but it will be modeled after the Hoover Institution at Stanford University and the philosophy, politics and economics department at Oxford University, according to UT's website. The proposed institute has seen backlash from student and faculty leaders who have criticized a lack of transparency about the proposal for the center and the cost. Members of the UT Faculty Council have questioned UT leadership for months in virtual public meetings on topics such as the development, potential curriculum and origins of the funding for the institute.

The Legislature this year approved \$6 million to establish a conservative think tank at the University of Texas known as the Liberty Institute, even as lawmakers trimmed the budgets of multiple departments, museums and other existing entities at the university.

University leaders didn't ask for the funding in their budget request, which was followed by another \$6 million from the UT System Board of Regents for the institute.

The center, which will be dedicated to free markets, economic development and personal liberty, was championed by Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and private donors as a way to bring "intellectual diversity" to the campus.

State leaders asked UT and other agencies to reduce budget requests to the state 5% last year as Texas faced economic uncertainty amid the pandemic. In May, the Legislature passed a budget during the regular session that removed or reduced \$5.2 million in funding at UT based on the university's budget request.

Without the funding, university employees said one museum on campus probably will be forced to close and other institutions will have to reduce the services they provide to the community.

During the third special session this year, lawmakers directed millions of dollars for building renovations at UT — and restored some of the funding cuts as part of a bill that allocated nearly \$16 billion in total federal coronavirus relief dollars to multiple agencies. However, the funds didn't cover everything that had been slashed earlier in the year.

The budget process

In October 2020, UT sent its budget request to the Legislature for the 2022 and 2023 fiscal years. Lawmakers directed UT to make \$5.2 million in cuts to "non-formula" funding from the state, or "direct appropriations to institutions for programs or projects," according to the document.

UT called for the state funding to be eliminated for the Texas Memorial Museum, the John Nance Garner Museum, the Bureau of Business Research and the Policy Dispute Resolution Center. The elimination of funding was "unfortunate," but ultimately, the four institutions were "not central to the core mission of education and research at the state's flagship," the document says.

The university also requested a reduction in funding to four "world-class research facilities," the McDonald Observatory, the Marine Science Institute, the **Bureau of Economic Geology** and the UT Institute for Geophysics, of \$1.4 million, or 4% each.

"These four research units receive smaller reductions because of the value they provide to Texas," the document said. "These units have also been incredibly successful in using funding from the Legislature to attract high-level research opportunities, and reducing their budgets further could impact that success and result in a loss of the work and investment that the State has made in them to this point."

The rest of the proposed cuts came from a \$1.8 million reduction to UT's "institutional enhancement" funds and OnRamps, a program offering dual-enrollment courses, and a \$1 million reduction to the DKR Alzheimer's Initiative and Texas OnCourse, a statewide initiative to improve college and career readiness.

#### Liberty Institute

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In May, leaders of UT's student governance organizations wrote a statement expressing their "strong opposition" to the institute and asked UT President Jay Hartzell to rescind his support for the project. Instead of the institute, students called for UT to back increased funding of "tangible support and resources," such as the campus mental health center and ethnic studies departments.

Gov. Greg Abbott signed Senate Bill 1, the final version of the state budget, in June. The bill included the \$5.2 million in cuts to various established campus institutions as well as \$6 million in funding for the Liberty Institute over two years.

"Legislative interest has driven funding commitments for other valuable academic centers at the university. ... The university continually works with lawmakers and other universities to serve students and improve higher education in Texas," UT spokesman J.B. Bird said.

#### Budget cuts

A few months after signing the budget, Abbott signed Senate Bill 8 after lawmakers passed it during the third special session. The bill allocating COVID-19 relief funds provided UT with \$3 million over two years to replace student housing at the Marine Science Institute as well as \$235,000 for the Briscoe Garner Museum.

But some campus institutions are still facing a loss in funding.

The Texas Memorial Museum, an on-campus natural history and science museum, won't receive more than \$162,000 over two years from the state. The Bureau of Business Research, which does research and economic analysis at UT, lost more than \$552,000. And the Policy Dispute Resolution Center saw \$336,000 in funding cut.

Bruce Kellison, director of the Bureau of Business Research, said the bureau provides research opportunities for undergraduate and graduate students and collaborates with other agencies for studies on topics such as COVID-19's impact on rural Texas and services for sexual assault survivors around the state.

Kellison said he's hoping the Legislature will restore the bureau's funding during the next session. Without the funding, he said the bureau might have to look for financial help elsewhere and cut back on its partnerships with other institutions, including the governor's office.

"If we were 100% self-funded with grant funding only, we just couldn't respond as quickly to legislative requests and industry requests for studies as we currently are," Kellison said. "We rely on that state funding to be nimble and to be able to respond to needs as they arise."

Texas Memorial Museum Director Ed Theriot said the museum works to bring science to the community, and he disagrees with the assessment that the museum is "not central to the core mission" of the university. The

museum also hosts exhibits such as the Hall of Geology and Paleontology, Hall of Texas Wildlife and Hall of Biodiversity, according to its website.

"We did a lot of great work with K-12 teachers, helping them understand how to treat evolution in a nonthreatening way," Theriot said. "We were adding value to faculty research grants, by providing outreach opportunities. ... Those are things I think we can do. Those are not things the university saw as a primary value."

In response to the elimination of its funding, the museum will have to lay off staff members starting at the end of the 2022-23 fiscal year and then effectively close, according to the director's museum budget projections, which were provided to the American-Statesman under the Texas Public Information Act.

"We want (the museum) to be healthy and thriving, and we will do everything we can," Theriot said. "But we can't do it without others saying, 'OK, we want to step in and really do something.'"

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