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More Tier 1 brain power for Texas

Posted Friday, Oct. 02, 2009

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Texans have to be getting tired of lists that show their state ranking way behind others, especially when it comes to education. In the Nov. 3 constitutional amendment election, they have a chance to start making things right, at least in one crucial way.

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Proposition 4, if approved by voters, will provide a way to help more Texas universities grow to become nationally recognized for their research, what's often called "Tier 1" among U.S. institutions of higher learning. That's important not only to provide more top educational opportunities for Texas students but because top-level universities can bring millions of dollars to the local economy through research grants, venture capital, spin-off companies and jobs.

This can happen *without a tax increase*. More on that in a moment, but Texans should jump at this opportunity.

Only three Texas institutions hold the Tier 1 rank: the University of Texas at Austin, Texas A&M and private Rice University. That's for a state with 24.3 million people.

California, with 36.8 million, has nine Tier 1 universities. New York, 19.5 million people, seven Tier 1 universities.

The Dallas-Fort Worth region, with 6.6 million people on its own, has not a single nationally recognized research university. That's a disgrace.

Universities across the state, including the Tier 1 schools, united this year to take the case for more funding to the Legislature. Texas lawmakers traditionally have big hearts but little dollars when it comes to improving higher education.

It likely would have been the same this year without an idea promoted by Sen. Robert Duncan of Lubbock. It's entirely possible that he got some help in coming up with the idea from leaders at Texas Tech University, his alma mater and a giant in the West Texas economy — and one of the universities that wants to grow to Tier 1 status. Nonetheless, Duncan gets the credit.

In essence, he found a pot of gold. Does that sound too good to be true? Remember that this is Texas, particularly the Texas Legislature, and just about anything is possible.

About \$500 million was sitting unused in the state treasury. Known as the Permanent Higher Education Fund, it was created by the Legislature in 1995 as the beginning of an endowment for state colleges and universities not already supported by the \$11.4 billion Permanent University Fund. The mineral-rich fund was started in 1923 to benefit institutions in the University of Texas and Texas A&M systems.

The Legislature's good intentions were to allocate money to the Permanent Higher Education Fund every year until it reached \$2 billion. Contributions waned and then disappeared, and the institutions intended to benefit from that endowment have been getting direct appropriations instead. They seem to

like it that way.

Proposition 4 would abolish the Permanent Higher Education Fund and transfer its assets to a newly created National Research University Fund. If voters approve, a portion of the earnings from investment of those assets would then be used to help fund growth at "emerging research universities."

There are seven such universities: UT-Arlington, UT-Dallas, Denton's University of North Texas, the University of Houston, Texas Tech, UT-El Paso and UT-San Antonio.

The Legislature set a high bar for receiving that aid, and none of those institutions would qualify right away. The criteria force the universities to work to obtain more federal and private research grants, grow their graduate programs, improve faculty and tighten admission standards.

The soonest any of them (led probably by the University of Houston and Texas Tech) could get the new state help would be Sept. 1, 2011, more likely two years after that.

Still, university leaders say, this is not a crap shoot. Set goals, and they will reach them. All of Texas will benefit.

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The money is available. Texans should use it.

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The Star-Telegram recommends voting for Proposition 4.

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