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FACULTY

# U. of Tulsa Faculty to Ask Oklahoma's Attorney General to Halt Controversial Restructuring Plan

By *Liam Knox* | AUGUST 22, 2019

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Marc Carlson (flickr/wikimedia)

McFarlin Library at the University of Tulsa

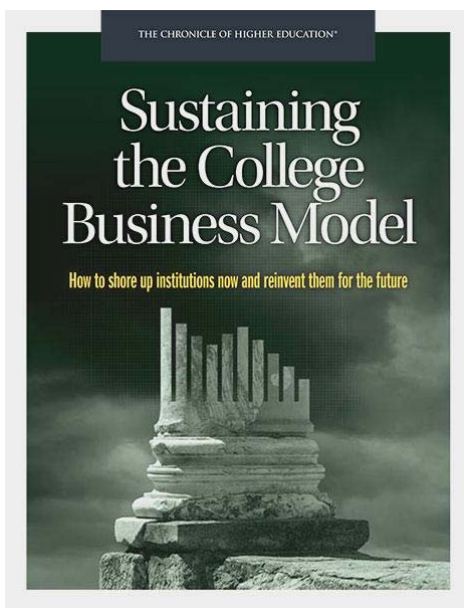
A group of concerned faculty members at the University of Tulsa is readying an appeal to Mike Hunter, the state's attorney general, asking for an injunction against the university administration's controversial restructuring plan.

The private institution announced its True Commitment strategic plan in April, almost immediately sparking outrage from faculty, students, and alumni who oppose its sweeping cuts, particularly in the liberal arts.

The plan would drastically slash the university's degree programs, the majority of which are in the arts and humanities, and would expand pre-professional training programs. Under the plan, all 15 departments in Tulsa's College of Arts

and Sciences would be consolidated into three “interdisciplinary” divisions, and the 68 degree programs now offered would be reduced to 36. In addition, the business, law, and health-sciences schools would be put into one “professional super college.” Majors, minors, and numerous graduate degrees would also be eliminated across departments.

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ADD TO CART

Over 100 professors, or about a third of the university's full-time faculty, have joined Concerned Faculty of TU, a group that opposes True Commitment and seeks to work with the university to develop an alternative plan. A draft of its letter to Hunter was posted on a Facebook page, and representatives of the group said it planned to submit the appeal to his office on August 30.

Other groups have objected to the plan, too. Almost 250 alumni have joined TU Alumni for Responsible Reform, pledging not to donate to their alma mater or encourage prospective students to attend, until the university commits to adopting a new plan in partnership with the faculty and students. And a petition started by a Tulsa undergraduate condemning the plan has collected over 7,500 signatures as of August 22.

Appealing to the attorney general is an unusual move for faculty members unhappy with university reorganization efforts. But Jacob Howland, a philosophy professor and a member of the Concerned Faculty group, told *The Chronicle* that the decision was made after months of "stonewalling" by university administrators.

"The only entity that can bring an injunction to stop the rollout of True Commitment is the attorney general's office," he said. "We really feel like our backs are against the wall."

The attorney general has jurisdiction because the University of Tulsa is a nonprofit, and, the appeal asserts, carrying out True Commitment would pose a threat to the public interest.

In an email to *The Chronicle*, Scott Holmstrom, a professor of physics and president of the Faculty Senate, said that while the True Commitment plan has "created substantial disruption on our campus," the appeal for an injunction was not voted on by the senate "and thus cannot be construed to represent the will of the faculty as a whole."

Julianne Romanello, a visiting professor in the philosophy department and another member of Concerned Faculty of TU, acknowledged that the appeal was coming only from the group, but added that representatives from the senate, “including leadership positions,” had been present at the group’s meetings and were aware of the appeal. She also said the group had invited Janet Levit, the university’s provost, to attend their meetings, but Levit declined.

Howland said he was concerned that the quality and reputation of the university were being sacrificed for consolidation. In 2012, Tulsa was ranked 75th on the *U.S. News & World Report’s* list of best colleges and universities. This year, it fell to 106th.

“We're sinking like a stone,” he said. “We're out of the top 100; we'll fall further. We have nothing against vocational training ... but they don't need to destroy a major research university.”

The appeal lays out a number of objections to the True Commitment rollout: that the university didn’t conduct adequate market research and feasibility studies before approving the plan; that the academic restructuring and cuts in departments would cause great damage to the university and the town of Tulsa; and, most significantly, that administrators “disregarded the explicit policies and procedures of shared governance” by neglecting to consult with enough faculty members before approving the plan.

Gerard Clancy, president of the university, rejected the faculty members’ statement that no significant consultation was undertaken.

“University leadership has been extraordinarily responsive to concerns from students, faculty, alumni and other stakeholders who have posed thoughtful questions or received misinformation,” he wrote in an email to *The Chronicle*. “What we haven't done is respond to inflammatory rumors.”

But Howland said the violations of faculty governance were so blatant that professors formed a chapter of the American Association of University Professors, which a spokeswoman for the group confirmed, and are consulting with the national office on the matter.

### **Consolidation, or Corporate Takeover?**

The University of Tulsa has an endowment of over \$1 billion, and serves just 4,000 students. Consolidation efforts on the scale of True Commitment are usually undertaken in times of dire economic straits. So why is Tulsa pushing it now?

Howland said that much of the skepticism of the university's public justifications for restructuring stems from the plan's focus on pre-professional programs, and the involvement of one man in particular: the billionaire George Kaiser.

Kaiser, a Tulsa native, is the owner of the Bank of Oklahoma and the founder of the city's largest charitable foundation, the Tulsa Community Fund. Kaiser doesn't sit on the university's board of trustees, but last year Frederic Dorwart, president of the George Kaiser Family Foundation, was appointed chair of the board.

Howland published an overview of Kaiser's involvement in the university's restructuring, and in Tulsa's local economy, in *The Nation* in June.

In appealing to the attorney general, Tulsa's concerned faculty are hoping the state will take an interest in the organization of a private university, which doesn't commonly occur. But Howland said it may be their best chance to stop the rollout of what faculty members say would be a disastrous alteration of the university's core purpose.

"It's a very long shot," Howland said. "But if we succeed in getting the attorney general interested, I believe that the board of trustees will fold."

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