

How UT-Austin's Bold Plan for Reinvention Went Belly Up

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Gregory L. Fenves had heard the calls for change, and he pledged to act. Standing before a quiet auditorium in the fall of 2016, the University of Texas at Austin's president detailed a path forward: Project 2021.

In five years, he said, the university wanted most of Austin's students to be able to enroll in revamped degree programs. Project 2021, officials would later say, would incorporate state-of-the-art online classes. Redesigned curricula. An academic calendar that included short courses outside of traditional semesters. And researchers would dig into data to examine every aspect of the undergraduate academic experience — to measure what worked and adjust accordingly.

“Even the best,” Fenves said in his address, “can do better.”

Not two years later, Project 2021 was dead.

The story of the program's rise and fall, based on more than 20 interviews and a review of emails, reports, and other documents, shows how universities too often pursue the elusive act of transformation: promising too much while investing too little. Campus leaders in Austin had used sweeping words to describe the potential of Project 2021: Futuristic. Next-generation. Bold. Higher education is “in the throes of a revolution,” one progress report read, and Project 2021 would meet those challenges.

The Austin president hadn't been alone in promising to do things differently. Research universities across the country have announced their own projects with comparable pomp, pushed by politicians and parents to produce cheaper degrees that teach practical skills and use technology to reach students who balk at the traditional residential experience. Tight budgets have heightened the stakes.

Project 2021 was full of grand ambitions but had too little support to succeed.

In retrospect, even as Fenves gave his address, warning signs blinked red.