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U.S.

# Dean at University of Texas Resigns in Part Over Handgun Law

By LIAM STACK FEB. 27, 2016

A highly regarded dean at the flagship campus of the University of Texas announced this week that he was leaving the school in part because of his concerns over a new state law allowing people to carry concealed firearms in classrooms and other buildings on public college campuses.

Frederick Steiner, the dean of the School of Architecture at the University of Texas at Austin, said on Thursday that he would leave on July 1 to take a job as the dean of the University of Pennsylvania School of Design. He has led the architecture school in Austin for 15 years.

His decision to leave a program he helped steer to national prominence underscored concerns expressed by Gregory L. Fenves, the president of University of Texas at Austin, that the law would harm the school's ability to attract and retain top students and faculty.

"I have significant concerns about how the law will affect our ability to recruit and retain faculty members and students," Dr. Fenves wrote in a letter to the chancellor of the University of Texas System, William H. McRaven, on Feb. 17.

Dr. Fenves called the departure of Dr. Steiner “a big loss for the university” in an email to the campus community on Thursday. A spokesman, Gary Susswein, said the administration did not know that the new law played a role in Dr. Steiner’s decision when the statement was issued, and he declined to comment on the matter on Friday.

Many factors contributed to the decision to leave, Dr. Steiner said on Friday, but two in particular tipped the scales: a steady decrease over the years in funding for public universities, and the campus carry law, which will go into effect on Aug. 1.

“I don’t think it’s a very good law just by its very nature,” Dr. Steiner said. He said he grew up hunting in a family that included police officers, F.B.I. agents and Marines, “so I am not a complete stranger to firearms.”

“The way I was brought up, there is a place for them, an appropriate place, and that was for hunting,” he said. “There are all kinds of very stressful situations at a university, and I can’t conceive of how someone would think that introducing a firearm into that context would be constructive in any way.”

The law, Senate Bill 11, was signed in June by Gov. Greg Abbott, a Republican. It allows licensed gun owners to carry a concealed weapon at the state’s public universities but grants administrators some leeway to regulate them.

Private universities remain free to ban concealed weapons, and many of the largest and most prestigious have done so, including Baylor, Rice and Southern Methodist.

In his letter to the chancellor, Dr. Fenves wrote that he would have banned concealed weapons, too, if the law had given him that option. He said he opposed campus carry, calling it a violation of the university’s ethos of “inquiry, free speech and debate.”

In addition to the support it has from Republican lawmakers, carrying concealed weapons on campus is an issue fervently supported by a national group called Students for Concealed Carry, which cheered the law’s passage and sharply criticized the university for its efforts to impose some limits.

In particular, the group has condemned a campus policy allowing university employees to ban guns from their offices and another requiring semiautomatic handguns to be carried without ammunition in the firing chamber. The group said last week it would challenge the policy in court.

People with a license for a concealed weapon have been able to carry firearms on campus, but not inside buildings, for 20 years, Dr. Fenves said in a statement posted online, and the law does not allow open carry on campus. He said the university estimated that less than 1 percent of students have a concealed weapons license.

Nevertheless, he said the parents of many current and prospective students had contacted him to express concern that concealed weapons would soon be allowed in classrooms and other buildings.

Faculty members have expressed alarm over the law as well. At a recent meeting at the School of Architecture, the professors voted unanimously to express their opposition to concealed weapons on campus, Dr. Steiner said.

“Students have stopped me in the hallways and asked what we are going to do to oppose the law,” he said. “And I tell them, ‘We can’t do anything, it’s the law.’ ”

Perhaps the most vexing part of the law, Dr. Steiner said, was that it created an environment where administrators like himself felt responsible for enforcing a law they see as detrimental to students and colleagues.