

Free speech and higher education

By THOMAS G. PALAIMA

Austin is the only community in America where Henry Kissinger has appeared in the news recently more often than Darva Conger and Rick Rockwell. Some may view this as good reason to raise Frank Erwin's Vietnam-War-protester walls along Guadalupe Street to greater heights — only this time to keep the rowdy elements in. I think that the Kissinger debate on campus and among the general public is proof that the university is doing something right. With serious collective thought we can do even better.



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Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas and chairman of the Texas Senate Subcommittee on Higher Education, and Rep. Rob Junell, D-San Angelo and chairman of the Texas House Appropriations Committee, met recently with college and university professors of the Texas Association of College Teachers and Texas Council of Faculty Senates to discuss the challenges facing Texas higher education. West stressed the need for higher education to reflect the changing demographics of our state. In 20 years, Texas will be a majority minority state. Greater numbers of Hispanic and African American students must attend our colleges and universities.

Stronger collaboration among colleges, universities and secondary and primary schools is one solution. Students must know from kindergarten onward what is expected of them at higher levels and that, if they work hard, there is a place for them at the top. This will only work if we stop the flight of public school teachers, which is producing more than 50,000 vacancies per year. The Teach for Texas grant program supports students to become primary and secondary school teachers. But we must retain the well-trained teachers we have by improving the conditions in which they teach and by paying them better for their dedicated efforts.

Junell emphasized the importance of undergraduate education and took part in a lively debate over the role of research in teaching. Many professors at non-research-oriented colleges and universities spoke eloquently about how their continuing research in fields as diverse as English and economics kept their teaching up-to-date and exciting for their students.

Here enters Kissinger. West, Junell and the rest of us were speaking freely, often passionately, with one another about issues affecting society at large. How do our representatives improve a system of higher education that was

budgeted \$8.5 billion in the 76th legislative session? West and Junell offered many perspectives that we found challenging. In turn, they wanted to hear our reports from the field, where programs and policies are put into practice. They admitted that legislators can be out of touch.

Provosts and presidents come seasonally to Austin. Their job is to exclaim, like biennial Chicken Littles, that the sky is falling on higher education. Junell wanted to hear from us littler chickens about the pieces of sky that are hitting faculty and students daily. Ironically such free exchange of ideas between faculty and legislators is discouraged at many institutions, where administrators fear that it will scuttle carefully orchestrated pitches to the Legislature. If the profs won't go to the Legislature, the legislators...

In the aftermath of the Kissinger cancellation, we have heard many explanations of what happened. One extreme alleged that the Secret Service had gathered information that the "protesters" were threatening to use WTO-style violent tactics. We shall never know now what the "protesters" intended. But many lament the lost opportunity to hear one of the brightest minds in U.S. foreign policy of the 20th century. The other extreme views the "protesters" as champions of conscience wrongly prevented from asking questions of someone they

consider a "war criminal" for policies supporting repressive regimes and human rights violations in Southeast Asia and South America. Two letters to the editor have even taken to task as age-prejudiced those who would blame Lady Bird and

her contemporaries for planning to attend and thereby creating a security risk.

Students, get used to the real world. As our society and our world rapidly change, there will be more and more flash-point issues to debate. If you don't believe me, pay attention to the partisan muck-slugging in the presidential primaries. We would do well on our campuses to avoid polarization and to welcome diversity of opinion. Controversial speakers should find a place to present their views at universities and colleges in our state. But they should be made to understand that a precondition of their stepping to the podium in Texas is to answer questions from those with different viewpoints. We must create the proper climate for the intelligent exchange of opposing views. After all, our national political leaders are setting bad examples, and we are educating future Texas state legislators and their future electorate.

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