

A modest proposal

Austin American Statesman Sunday October 1, 2000 p. J3

There has been great interest recently in how to improve the quality of undergraduate education at the University of Texas at Austin. The Daily Texan and Austin American Statesman have carried articles and editorials about flexible tuition, or the "slacker-tax," and about proposals to institute TAAS-style examinations in order to guarantee that those who are leaving the Forty Acres after an average of five years really "know their stuff."

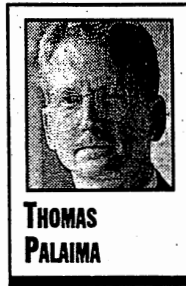
This caught me by surprise. As a MacArthur fellow and an active member of committees of the UT Faculty Council and Texas Association of College Teachers, I considered myself tuned into the "buzz" about higher education. I have never heard a single complaint about our human "products." In fact, I have heard how good our graduates are from unimpeachable sources in Oxford, England; Berkeley, Calif.; Cambridge, Mass., and

right here in post-slacker Austin. Nonetheless, let us accept that the goal of these proposals is good. We have to improve.

How do we do it?

I suspect that our anxiety about the performance of our undergraduates is similar to our reaction to UT football rankings. The Sept. 11 issue of U.S. News and World Report rated UT-Austin's undergraduate programs 49th out of 228 national universities. This should be a cause for praise considering that, of the top 50 schools in the ranking, we are

ninth-lowest (75th overall) in faculty resources (the amount spent to acquire, retain and support good faculty), dead last — an abysmal 147th of the 228 schools — in financial resources directed at educating, advising and serving students, and fourth-last in freshmen who finished in the top 10 percent of their high school classes. Among the top 50 schools, we are second-last in student/faculty ratio.



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Are flexible tuition and TAAS-style exams the answer to improvement? Only if we blame the students and ignore several facts. We fail to provide our students and faculty with anywhere near top-50 support. Our students have different academic backgrounds and needs than those of our competitors. Our student/faculty ratios are so high that my honors seminars exceed the average class size at almost all universities ranked in the top 50. And in my history class, 35 out of 45 students "slack off" by working 20 hours to 40 hours per week to pay for their education.

So I propose a four-point improvement program modeled on Longhorn football. Pay the "coaches" more money, spend more on facilities and programs to enhance student performance and recruit better students, and use innovative "coaching" and "scheduling" strategies.

First, raise President Faulkner's compensation package to seven figures. Then he can have some of the lobbying clout Mack Brown has among the moneyed folks and legislators. One problem is that

he just turned down a modest pay increase in recognition of the staff salary problems, which he has worked hard to alleviate since arriving on campus. We also need to move the compensation for faculty-coaches into the top 50.

Second, improve faculty and student resources by renovating academic buildings to include luxury viewing boxes in lecture halls and contiguous practice halls for "lecture warm-ups." We might even put a few classrooms in the newer buildings. These measures would improve the quality of instruction. The viewing boxes could be rented to alumni "fans" who might then remember that exciting things are going on in many academic departments whose year-end rankings are usually much higher than the team that plays in Royal Memorial Stadium. Our former undergraduates are ranked 146th out of 228, third lowest in the top 50, in alumni giving.

Third, use two "starting professors" in every class and rotate them according to the performance ratings they receive

from students each quarter of the semester. What an enhancement of faculty and student resources to know that a fresh "co-starting instructor" waits in the wings in every class!

Finally, why get upset about our rankings against our legitimate undergraduate academic peers such as the Universities of Michigan, Virginia, Illinois and North Carolina? Just refuse to play against them. If the football Longhorns can drop Hawaii from their schedule, and even pay big cash to do it, why can't we just send money to magazines asking them to exclude our real competition from the rankings? We could then clean up against the academic equivalents of Louisiana-Lafayette.

Here my program might seem to have a weakness. Academically, Stanford is ranked sixth. But we could learn from Mack Brown's mistakes. We could duck Stanford, too!

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