

Keeping cool about higher ed

What New Year's resolutions did you make and already break? I resolved to practice what the Epicureans preached as ataraxia, or non-disturbance of the atoms of my soul. Al-



though my resolution has been tested, I won't break it "over my dead body," as our pretzel-munching, football-watching, syntax-mangling president would say.

So don't expect me to criticize the decision to hike the head football coach's salary at the University of Texas at Austin \$250,000 to \$1,709,000. If the athletic director and university president think such spending is prudent and signals the right institutional priorities and cultural values, I'm copacetic. Laying out another \$4 million to climatize the football practice field won't disturb an atom in my soul.

There are bigger mysteries in life to worry about. For example, why is it that when some of us were young, telephone numbers came with words at the beginning? Grade school friends called me at JACKSON 6-4525. Then numbers took over completely, and my high school buddies called me at 526-4525. Now words are staging a comeback, but in a sneak attack from the other direction: in numbers like 585-BODY. This has me wondering with complete equanimity when Longhorns Football, Inc. will adopt a number like 471-CASH or 1-800-AVARICE.

If I were susceptible to disharmony in my soul, it would be over what Nobel prize-winner Steven Weinberg would call serious adult matters. For example, you might have read about UT President Larry Faulkner's plan to raise student fees at UT-Austin. Particularly worrisome is why our president has to propose this during an economic downturn.

The answer is even more troubling. Throughout the 1990s when the economy was experiencing prolonged and dizzying growth, state support for UT-Austin grew at an annual rate of 1.9 percent or -0.8 percent relative to the Consumer Price Index. Compare these figures with 13.2 percent and +10.8 percent in the 1960s, 12.8 percent and +5.6 percent in the '70s and 5.3 percent and +0.6 percent in the '80s, and you'll see a depressing trend. As the '90s economy was driving a Lexus SUV north, albeit running on dot-com and Enron fumes, funding for higher education at the

state's flagship was driving a Ford Pinto south. Meanwhile total tuition and fees including income from the Available University Fund lagged well behind our chief public-university competitors.

In order to balance the budget in the boom years, the university deferred routine repair and renovation on existing buildings and facilities, many now 30 to 60 years old. The hundred-million-plus dollars spent upgrading first our stadium facilities and then Erwin Center basketball seating provide the fast-tracked exceptions that prove the rule.

For 10 years, the university has compensated faculty and staff at 3 percent per year, or 2 percent below the national average at peer institutions. This puts us some 20 percent cumulatively behind in competition for bright new faculty and resourceful staff, and thus in real danger of falling out of the theoretical Big 12 conference of leading state academic institutions.

The president also aborted his 10-year plan to add 30 full-time professors per year. These 300 faculty would have gone a long way toward correcting one of the biggest negatives in undergraduate education at UT-Austin. We have the worst faculty-student ratios within our public-institution "academic Big 12."

Still I recollect now in tranquility the honors course I taught two years ago to 30 gifted students in a classroom with a broken blackboard, broken chairs and panels fallen from the ceiling. The exposed air circulation ducts raised the noise level in the room so that I could barely hear student questions and discussion — a real contrast to the noise-controlled comfort I once had the pleasure of experiencing in a Royal-Memorial Stadium skybox.

My ataraxia endures even when I think about the 230 students who will be packing into my lecture class this spring. Their experience of higher education should be personally interactive. If I budgeted all my office hours for the semester exclusively to students in this one class, each student would get less than 12 minutes of my time, and they would get those minutes in an office that has developed mold on its walls from outside water seepage.

But none of this troubles the new me. I just remember the words sung by the late, great Texas bluesman Albert Collins, "Whatever happens, don't lose your cool."

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