

Catch-2002: UT's student fee dilemma

When Yossarian and other alienated fliers in "Catch-22" had their lives threatened by the self-interested logic of military bureaucrats, they posed three simple questions:

"Why is Hitler?" "Who is Spain?" and "When is right?" Listening to the Texas Legislature discuss the proposed \$150-per-semester increase for students at the University of Texas at Austin raises three



questions: "Why is Faulkner?" "Who is Texas?" and "When is right?"

Unlike Yossarian and his buddies, citizens of Texas have hope that our legislators might reach the right answers. House Appropriations and Senate Finance Committee veteran Sen. Chris Harris has realized "just how little we even remotely know about higher education." Harris' refreshingly candid remark indicates that he wants to learn. Rep. Jim McReynolds likewise has a need to know, "With universities saying they need more (money), it's up to the Legislature to ask, 'OK, for what?'"

Meanwhile, Don Brown, commissioner of higher education, is rightly concerned "about the impact the new fee could have for affordability." So let's look at our Catch-2002.

First, "Why is Faulkner?" UT President Larry Faulkner is no-nonsense, fiscally prudent and passionately committed to higher education. He is fighting for an unpopular new charge because he has

gathered all the facts and sees what the university needs to do.

But be skeptical. Don't take his word for it.

In December 2000, the UT System Board of Regents issued a careful demographic study titled "Service to Texas in the New Century" It laid out what steps we need to take immediately to keep our state educationally competitive. The study was written not by self-interested academics, but by gubernatorial appointees under the chairmanship of now U.S. Secretary of Commerce Donald Evans. Their conclusion? "Texas higher education faces significant current shortfalls in participation, success, academic excellence and research." Their solution? More money, used wisely.

"Who is Texas?" We are a population that is losing out in higher education. Texas lags behind the national state average for college enrollment by 24.5 percent. It produces 20,000 bachelor's degrees and 8,500 advanced degrees per year below the national average. It has only two institutions in the top 50 nationally: UT-Austin and Texas A&M. California has eight in the top 50 and five in the top 10.

Texas K-12 education prepares our college-eligible population. It is projected that by 2030 the only educational category that will grow in Texas is adults with less than a high school education.

Imagine a multinational knowledge-based economy and a state with too few college-educated workers and too many who have no high school education. Imagine the disastrous effects on that state's economy, tax revenues and social fabric. You are seeing the future of Texas unless something is done.

I was a working-class, first-generation

college student. I worked on garbage trucks and cleaned high school floors and toilets. My parents, God bless them, sacrificed for me. I share Commissioner Brown's concerns about the cost of education.

So I grilled Larry Burt, UT's director of Student Financial Services. The bottom-line provision of any new charge is that, through set-asides of the revenues generated, it will hold harmless the neediest. The latest typical student family income profile for undergraduates at UT-Austin is: 5 percent less than \$20,000 per year; 11 percent, \$20,000-\$40,000; 12 percent \$40,000-\$60,000; 13 percent \$60,000-\$80,000; 49 percent, more than \$80,000; 10 percent unknown. Forty percent of all students get some form of aid.

The on-campus cost per year at UT-Austin is now \$14,500. An in-state family of four with an income of \$55,000 and a single student at UT-Austin is expected to contribute \$6,000. The remaining \$8,500 comes in some combination of grants, scholarships, loans and work-study. Burt estimates that 24,000 students are receiving \$250 million in financial aid.

The proposed new charge will require that some of the least-needy students work 45 minutes more per week throughout the year. This seems a reasonable burden for the well-off few to bear so that all will have improved laboratories and classrooms, better student-teacher ratios, enhanced special programs, a nationally competitive faculty and a degree whose market-value will not decline in future years.

"When is right?" Fifteen months ago, and the clock is ticking.

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