

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Some things that take the cake

After watching the stock market slide downward with our hard-earned savings, we might step back 100 years for small consolation. In the 1890s, a dance called the Cakewalk was all the rage. African American slaves on southern plantations created the dance 50 years earlier, mimicking the mannerisms of their white masters.



Dignified walking and exaggerated bowing and hat-doffing made the slaves feel like masters. The masters in the "Big House" held Sunday socials, rewarding the best slave performers with cakes as prizes. At the turn of the 20th century, the Cakewalk became a national craze. Its popularity lasted about twice as long as our latest market boom.

Our economic cakewalk is now over. We normal folks have danced our delirious dance as pretend financiers and strutted and bowed to the music of financial projections and computerized portfolio schemes based on ... what? The false melodies of corporate accounting in a period when government really did let business compose their own Reaganomic music.

But many things still take the cake. Take the Ponzi scheme worked hereabouts by Dennis Winger. You may have read in the American-Statesman that David Koch of Round Rock was bilked out of \$240,000. How many of you worked hard for 20-30 years, and then put your retirement savings into the "safe investment vehicles" of reputable firms? Many such vehicles have cakewalked as far south as Koch's

losses. Because of corporate chicanery, no one could tell a Ponzi scheme from a legitimate investment plan. Doesn't that take the cake?

Then take the newly appointed chancellor of the University of Texas System, Mark Yudof. He wants to make UT "more premier." He is talented and savvy. His appointment was rightly greeted with messianic praise by those who know the challenges facing higher education in Texas. But "more premier" sounds like more cake-walking.

Yudof knows that the chief administrative officers of UT-Austin and its student and faculty leaders spent seven long months developing and explaining an infrastructure fee proposal. The plan has now been scuttled as if it were a ponzi scheme. But the real needs that gave rise to the plan remain.

Were UT's president, provost, budget officials, faculty council and student government all cake-walking? UT-Austin has a 2002-2003 operating budget of nearly \$670 million. Why would its leaders expend so much collective time and energy on a plan to raise \$12 million-\$14 million in 2002-2003, if they weren't facing dire needs?

UT-Austin has many truly premier graduate and undergraduate programs. I am happy to say that Classics is one. But overall, it has been running on empty fumes for a dozen years and three presidents.

Would you call "premier" an institution that every year for 10 years has been listed in the US News and World Report survey of 220-plus national universities as second-tier or just barely in the Top 50? If the Longhorns football team had such a record, the coaches would be fired — year in, year out.

What about an institution whose main research library was forced to cancel 1,926 scholarly serials (out of roughly 25,000 print and electronic subscriptions) in the past three years in order to save a mere \$371,000 total? Is UT-Austin premier when it currently ranks 24th in the reputation of its professors and programs, but 148th (dead last in the Top 50 schools) in the financial resources it spends on students? What about an institution whose average class sizes already were among the worst among the Top 100 national universities and has now added 2,000 more undergraduates?

On this page, my colleague Paul Woodruff recently decried the absence of ethics teaching on the Forty Acres. Ethics is a tricky subject that requires Socratic exchange between students and teachers. I designed an undergraduate myth course last semester expressly to examine how Greek myths illuminate the ethical questions facing us in our daily lives. The class had 228 students, one teaching assistant and no formal discussions. The majority of students passively cake-walked around ethics.

The UT-Austin infrastructure fee was for long-neglected educational facilities and to prevent further erosion of faculty resources at a borderline second-tier institution. It was not for icing on the cake.

In an earlier column, I gave the wrong date for the Martin Luther King Jr. "I have a Dream" speech. It was delivered on Aug. 28, 1963.

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