

Commentary

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What it will really take for UT to be excellent

Do you want to know what specific challenges the citizens of Texas face in helping the faculty, students, staff and administration of the University of Texas at Austin to meet our state's increasingly crucial needs in undergraduate and graduate education? Do you want to know how UT might finally become what it was supposed to be when it was first mandated by the Texas constitution in 1876?

I did. So I went to on the Internet and read through the recent recommendations and supporting documents of the UT Commission of 125 (www.utexas.edu). After all, what better way to figure out what my university should do than to read a report by 227 outsiders?

The commission worked for two years. Its members were drawn from business, the law, engineering, finance, politics, the arts and health care. Almost none of the commission's members have devoted themselves career-long to full-time research and teaching within UT Austin or institutions like it. The results show. I doubt whether many readers will have time to decipher this report, so I give here a Professor's Digest version of a few key points.

■ **Point 1.** The university must be excellent in literature, the arts and sciences. The state should fund this excellence. Problem: the state now provides barely 20 percent of the university's operating costs.

This is an unacknowledged nationwide scandal consistent with the "government-is-bad" mantra that was ushered in 10 years ago by the conservative Contract with America. If government is bad and is only going to fund one of every five dollars needed to educate our future citizen leaders — aka our own children — then tuition paid by individual students should be the clear good.

No, here government control is good because legislators gain voter support by keeping tuition perilously low, despite the fact that our major competitors charge up to double what UT charges in tuition and fees. Dilapidated facilities, outdated science labs, serious annual cuts in library orders and professional staffing, poor student-faculty ratios, not enough computer labs for students to use, none of these matter. Politics is good.

■ **Point 2.** We should lower the student-faculty ratio. UT has the second highest student-faculty ratio among 13 peer state universities.

Problem: To lower this ratio to even mid-range in this group would require hiring hundreds of new faculty and building offices and classrooms and library and laboratory facilities for them to use. Because of budgetary constraints, our president had to alter plans to hire a mere 30 new faculty per year over 10 years, and current authorized hirings in certain colleges are being limited to fewer than half of their academic units.

■ **Point 3.** We must promote diversity by hiring minority faculty.

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Problem: We can hire them, but we cannot keep them. Why? Poor year-to-year pay increases, poor retirement and family benefits and the absence of a real sabbatical system — a glaring impediment to faculty growth and development that the report does not even mention.

■ **Point 4.** We need a new undergraduate core curriculum in the arts, humanities, math, science and technology to make sure that students understand world cultures and can think and communicate confidently in all these areas.

Problem: Many of the courses that used to be part of the traditional core, such as foreign languages, have been revised nearly out of existence in the service of specialized degrees within individual colleges. This one will take major determination and even brute force by the president and provost.

■ **Point 5.** Department and program heads should be top-notch scholar-teachers and be given real authority and resources independent of deans. In many departments, the job rotates every four years. This is bad.

Problem: Many departments have or have had just such quality heads. And rotation is not a bad thing. It produces a core of experienced leaders with varying talents. The authoritarian CEO model does not.

What is mainly missing is enough well-paid and retainable staff to help run departments and enough funding at this level to do the things that excellent universities do. Good deans — and my college has one — are needed to provide and enforce a collective purpose in an increasingly fragmented university environment.

The bottom line: The basis of excellence at any university is an energetic and empowered faculty that has sufficient time and resources to teach and conduct graduate research of a high caliber and has a meaningful say in institutional policy and conduct.

Problem: UT faculty has so little say in running the university that it took six years to enact a minor revision to the faculty family leave plan and the faculty grievance committee recently suspended its operations. I have already noted the absence of a critical mass of veteran professors on the Committee of 125.

Conclusion: The headmistress of a highly successful private elementary and middle school in Austin was asked recently what "accounted" for her school's success. She answered: I hire good teachers, give them resources and get out of their way. There is the kind of accountability we should strive for at UT. But I do not expect to see it even if I am still around in 2026.

Palaima, a recipient of the MacArthur "genius" award, has been a departmental chair and research program director at UT Austin. Last year, he received the Texas Exes Jean Holloway Award for Excellence in Teaching.

