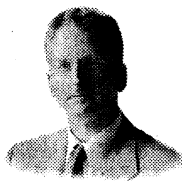


Commentary

Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

At UT, an education that leaves out essentials

Six years ago, then-University of Texas System Chancellor William Cunningham put forward a vision for UT-Austin in the 21st century. He had nothing to say about the humanities or liberal arts, and he relegated the fine arts to a single sentence.



Undergraduate education at UT increasingly matches Cunningham's vision. Here is its essence:

The university best serves students and society by serving the needs of corporations. It is a "career-credentialing station," where students learn practical employment skills in large and powerful professional schools like business, engineering and communications. What they bring to the jobs they later hold as continuing students of history, society, humanity, ethics — who they are as people and what they, as educated citizens in a democracy, know about their fellow human beings — are afterthoughts or not thought about at all.

Making the study of traditional disciplines such as history, literature, fine arts and foreign languages an afterthought undercuts how seriously students training for employment approach these courses — when their schedules or watered-down requirements permit them to. There are noteworthy exceptions, but the trend is conspicuous.

Young people at an institution such as UT, even those who, like myself, come from blue collar or immigrant backgrounds, have four years to learn as much as they can about the nature of being human, about the history and diversity of their own society, about

other cultures — especially those challenging or outstripping the United States for world leadership — about how individuals and societies are likely to react to crises such as 9/11, about the devices politicians have used throughout history as they grasp at power.

Students who leave the Forty Acres, as many do now, without knowing themselves, without testing what they can best do for themselves and for other people, without developing serious intellectual skepticism, without developing cultural passions, have not gotten the education they should have been given.

Even in practical terms, how do business school honors students who have taken the required two semesters of a foreign language compete in a global market with business graduates from the European Union who are fluent in two or more languages and have a deeper understanding of other cultures? The state of our economy and the quality of life for most American citizens might provide the answer.

That the School of Natural Sciences requires only one semester of a foreign language should be a scandal. Yet with little debate, the University Faculty Council approved this dumbing down of foreign language learning. And we wonder why our intelligence services had too few people to read and interpret terrorist-related communications before 9/11.

If the old system of education, which emphasized history, literature, philosophy, political science, foreign languages and Classics, was elitist, why do parents no longer want an elite education for their children? Mine did. And I am glad of it. And this "elitist" education nourished our great business, political and cultural leaders of the 1950s, 60s, 70s and 80s.

What is elitist is limiting real access

to the great ideas of UT's many top scholar-teachers and the great resources of its Humanities Research Center, its museums, its specialized area centers in Latin American, Slavic, South Asian, Middle Eastern and ancient Greek and Roman studies. How? By filling up the undergraduate curriculum for many students with job-certification degree requirements.

In April, UT was fortunate to play host to Christopher Ricks, the Oxford professor of English poetry. He spoke on Shakespeare, Samuel Beckett and Bob Dylan and electrified his audiences with his erudition and his deep sense of humanity.

The intellectually omnivorous Ricks once said this in a published interview: "We have literature and the arts so that we can gain sympathetic access to systems of belief that are not our own. Imagination had better include entering into worlds that are not your own, as well as the entertaining of beliefs that you don't yourself hold but that it will be good for you to feel the force of."

That is what the study of history, languages, art, literature and philosophy does. It develops sympathy and perspective. It takes us outside ourselves and our own narrow pursuits and desires and helps us understand others.

Many of the lower-division mythology students whom I encouraged to attend Ricks' lectures later thanked me later for "forcing them to go." They briefly felt how humanistically trained human beings respond to world problems and personal crises. They learned about truth and beauty, lies and ugliness. The essence of the sympathy they gained is more essential than ever, whatever they eventually choose to do for a living.

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