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Giving them freedom to find their own path

Man proceeds in a fog. But when he looks back to judge people of the past he sees no fog on their path. Looking back, he sees the path, he sees the people proceeding, he sees their mistakes, but not the fog.”

— Milan Kundera, “Testaments Betrayed”

The further advanced you are in the age group that back in the '60s was not to be trusted, the truer Milan Kundera's words about life seem.



Think back to when you were 18 years old. What did you know? What did you think you knew? How did you think the world worked? What did you think you wanted out of life, and what did you think others wanted from you?

Be honest with yourself. How did you get to where you are now? How did you deal with all the twists of fate, large and small, that have made up your days? What kinds of choices did you make? Did you see the fog back then? Or did you move along paths others told you to take? Did you have lots of choices, or were your options limited? Do you see the fog now?

Every year, 6,400 new undergraduate students show up at the University of Texas at Austin. They all have unique intellectual and cultural talents, skills and interests, developed and undeveloped. Some know exactly what they want. Most of them these days think that they should know what they want. How well does the university serve them over the next four to six years?

This is the question that the members of the university's task force on curricular reform, headed by Dean William Powers of the UT Law School, have been studying for about a year. Last week, they presented to UT faculty and President Larry Faulkner their recommendations for changes to the undergraduate educational experience. Faulkner charged UT's professors, advisers, students and administrators to think seriously about the task force's proposals and its dissenting alternative recommendations.

I tried to remember what it felt like when I first arrived on the Boston College campus in 1969. We had no iPods, cell phones, CD players or laptops. My parents had both worked hard and had squeezed each nickel until the buffalo screamed for mercy. I had been a scholarship boy at the local Jesuit high school. My grades brought a scholarship to BC, too. I was the first one in my extended family to

attend college.

I knew nothing about nothing. And I still think that the accidental absence of any parental or serious institutional pressures to do this or be that was the greatest of many strange gifts life has given me. I had friends as undergraduates who were close to ruined by the demands placed upon them to major in something their parents or other trusted authority figures considered the right thing for them.

University students need guidance and structures, but the guidance must be sensitive to individual aspirations, even subconscious ones, and the structures must be flexible. Even at a then-small college such as Boston College, course options seemed bewildering. I plunged in and experimented in mathematics, economics, history, French, Latin and eventually my lifelong passion, Greek.

What gave me confidence as I just turned 18 was a small freshman great books survey and the young Jesuit professor who taught it. His enthusiasm for the life of the mind was inspiring. I followed him into ancient history and eventually into European intellectual history. Reading those great books and discussing their meaning made me dimly aware that this thing called my life wasn't going to be easy.

Think now about UT's incoming students — about how overwhelming 3,000 professors and 40 acres and more of libraries, laboratories, museums, performance centers, lecture halls and faculty offices must seem to them. What courses will open their eyes? In freshman classes of 200 students and more, will they know a mentor when they see one?

Many beginning UT students try to push away the fog. They choose majors even before classes begin. They identify with particular departments, colleges, career objectives, lifestyles. They project a certainty that only people their age can believe in.

Our current educational system accommodates and even exploits their anxieties, just like the ROTC recruiting brochure I picked up recently on a university campus that proclaims in bold capital letters: MY DEEPEST FEAR IS THAT I'LL LOOK BACK ON MY LIFE AND WONDER WHAT I DID WITH IT. What the ROTC and UT's many programs never say is that you might look back in regret if you follow their paths through the fog for the wrong reasons.

For the sake of all present and future students, I hope we can get it right. I think we will, if we remember the 18-year-olds we all once were.

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