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COMMENTARY

Palaima: The road UT has taken

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D'où venons nous? Que sommes nous? Où allons nous? How many current undergraduates at the University of Texas at Austin will ever understand these crucial questions about life symbolized in the painting that Paul Gauguin thought surpassed all his other works?

With major colleges within our university requiring two semesters or less of a foreign language, chances are most graduates, if they ever hear of Gauguin, will Google the painter and find a translation on wikipedia.org: "Where Do We Come From? What Are We? Where Are We Going?"

UT-Austin has a new president, law professor Bill Powers. He prepared for taking over stewardship of UT by chairing a task force that studied undergraduate education. It is timely then to ask Gauguin's questions about our state's flagship university. Let's talk here about where we come from.

I have been thinking about this since reading an article (*New Criterion*, November 2005) by John Silber, former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at UT-Austin and later president of Boston University (1971-1996). Silber is most famous locally for opposing a plan by the UT Board of Regents, under Chancellor Frank Erwin, to dismember the College of Arts and Sciences. He was fired as dean and went off to Boston University, taking many distinguished faculty members with him. There Silber raised educational standards by hiring, and retaining, excellent new faculty and toughening academic requirements. And he lasted 25 years!

The Silber episode is part of where we come from at UT. The university has a relatively powerless faculty. Administrators make choices about serious academic matters - budgetary, admissions, curricular, cultural, teaching and research emphases - with one eye on what will play with the state Legislature and the board of regents and the other on how the archaic regulations and operating procedures of the board and UT System can be manipulated to make things work kind of how they should work. This does not bode well for raising overall UT undergraduate education into the top 20 percent (U.S. News and World Report rankings) of national universities any time soon.

Nor does the board itself give us much cause for hope. A look at the biographies of current regents - who are political appointees, like all regents in Texas - reveals that they are a bank chairman, a managing director of a private wealth management firm, the chairman of a diversified holding company, a medical doctor now on the boards of directors of Luby's Cafeterias and SYSCO Systems, the chairman and CEO of an investment banking firm, a vice president of a leading financial services company, and a former first lady of Texas.

The former first lady studied history and Spanish in college in the 1950s. Otherwise the regents' main personal experiences with and interests in UT-Austin are its professional schools (business, law, journalism) and the men's and women's intercollegiate sports programs. There is no conspicuous source of understanding about true scholarship and quality education in this pool.

Back to Silber. His article claims that no "institution has contributed so extensively to the diminishment of our humanity as university faculties." These are tough words, and they appeal to critics who think higher education is too liberal. But they are crazy words, especially coming from Silber. He surely understands the external forces controlling the funding for, and priorities of, the once proud system of fully state-funded public higher education across our country.

Those universities provided opportunities for GI's coming back from World War II and the Korean War, and later for their children. They laid the foundation for America's economic greatness in the last half century. They have now been sacrificed to the gods of government downsizing, tax cuts and the sports facility arms race. They have been drastically changed, in my opinion for the worse, by outside political and economic forces, not by their faculties.

Recently the association of national academies looked into why the United States is falling behind in the training of scientists and engineers. It rightly pointed to failures K-12 to provide children with mathematics and science instruction by devoted teachers who really know their stuff and communicate its importance. Association members spoke of the fear engendered in grade school children by teachers who themselves are uncertain and wary of basic mathematics. Something similar could be said about foreign languages and other subjects.

Here the problem is partly the kinds of teachers universities and colleges are now producing. Funding for programs that address this problem, like the UTeach program at UT, is hard to find. But our regents authorize \$150 million to improve sports facilities. And no one dares mention the effects of professional undergraduate schools such as business and communications siphoning off bright students who used to study the sciences and humanities - and more than one semester of a foreign language.

Next time, a view of what and who we are.

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