

## COMMENTARY

### **Palaima: At UT, love of learning must become a priority**

**Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR**

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Last time, I was discussing the road the University of Texas at Austin has taken, as well as who has been reading the map and charting our journey.

Where are we now, as law professor Bill Powers begins to preside over the largest state-flagship public university in the United States? Or rather, what and who are we?

Powers begins with a mandate from the well-publicized recommendations of the broad-based citizen Commission of 125 ([www.utexas.edu/com125/final.html](http://www.utexas.edu/com125/final.html)). We have to improve undergraduate education. It is no secret that in the most thorough annual survey of undergraduate education, UT is no longer even in the top 20 percent of national universities.

No secret, except perhaps to the UT Board of Regents. This group of business-minded political appointees recently approved allocating \$150 million to expand a 77,000-seat stadium used five or six times a year for sports entertainment. The fact that the revenues being used are sports-generated is irrelevant. They are revenues that could be used for academic purposes if the interests of men's and women's athletics were not prioritized over the needs of undergraduate education. All other units and programs at UT share any outside money they generate. Why should athletics be different?

The regents also raised head football Coach Mack Brown's salary twice in three months. The money donated for his annual raise could pay the annual salaries of eight or nine new assistant professors in certain fields. Why don't the university and its regents tell potential donors that the critical needs of students are more important than the needs of a multi-millionaire football coach?

The Athenian general Nicias encouraged soldiers during a military disaster by stressing how important they were individually. "Men make the city," he said, "not walls or ships without men."

I think this is true of most institutions. Our university has many rich cultural centers such as the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center; the Texas Memorial Museum; the new Blanton Museum of Art; graduate, undergraduate and specialized libraries; science labs; and the concert and recital halls of the Performing Arts Center. But these centers excel only because of the people inside them.

I recently accompanied fifth-graders through the aerospace engineering and astronomy department and got to see and understand 8-minute-old solar phenomena and how to build a real satellite. The satellite parts would have meant nothing to us without clear, patient explanations from professor Glenn Lightsey and senior physics/space science major Marcin Pilinski.

Take another example: the Harry Ransom Center. Under longterm Director Tom Staley, it has acquired mind-boggling intellectual treasures. But Staley has seen to more than acquisitions and architectural renovations. The center's institutional philosophy has changed. He knew that expanded public galleries, new seminar rooms and a new central reading room would mean little unless they were made inviting to faculty, students and the public.

The gallery space now houses the center's largest exhibition ever. "Technologies of Writing" was curated by professor Kurt Heinzelman and graduate student Elizabeth Garver and was realized by the hard work and talents of the center's superb technical staff and other staff, professors, students and programs.

Three-hundred well-explained items are on display - everything from clay-token precursors of writing over 5,000 years old to an interactive cyber novel. I am a specialist in the history of writing and writing systems. No other exhibition in my lifetime, even a big show at the Louvre, has had such breadth or has demonstrated the ingenuity and impact of writing so well.

Go look at Russell Lee's Depression-period photograph of young children in Louisiana writing the letter "A" on a blackboard. Your heart will break, especially for the poor girl who has dropped her chalk. Imagine sitting at Edgar Allen Poe's desk, writing a poem on a self-made scroll. Marvel at Charlotte Bronte's miniature script, or the worn-out platen from Normal Mailer's much-pounded typewriter. Discover what writing meant to those who heard the gospel message of Luke 10:20.

Look at sacred texts from different cultures and ponder the human need to believe in something more than ourselves and our own short lives. Feel pity for those who convert this noble instinct into a reason to hate and kill. All these items are lovingly explained by people who have devoted their lives to caring about them.

And as you attend this year's free open house, Explore UT, on Saturday, March 4, really think about the years of study and practice that the people of the university, all volunteers, bring yearly to the event.

"Love of Wisdom Is the Captain of Life's Ship" is the motto of the national honor society Phi Beta Kappa. And lifelong love of learning is what our new ship captain, Bill Powers, must help us engender in our many students.

Palaima is Dickson Centennial Professor of Classics at the University of Texas at Austin.