

Tom Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

Commentary

We have stopped investing in our future

This summer I was hoping that we Texans could reinvigorate our commitment to education. I took heart that Charles Miller, former chairman of the Board of Regents of the University of Texas System, was heading "A National Dialogue: The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education." I thought that our regents would respond to a call from one of their own.

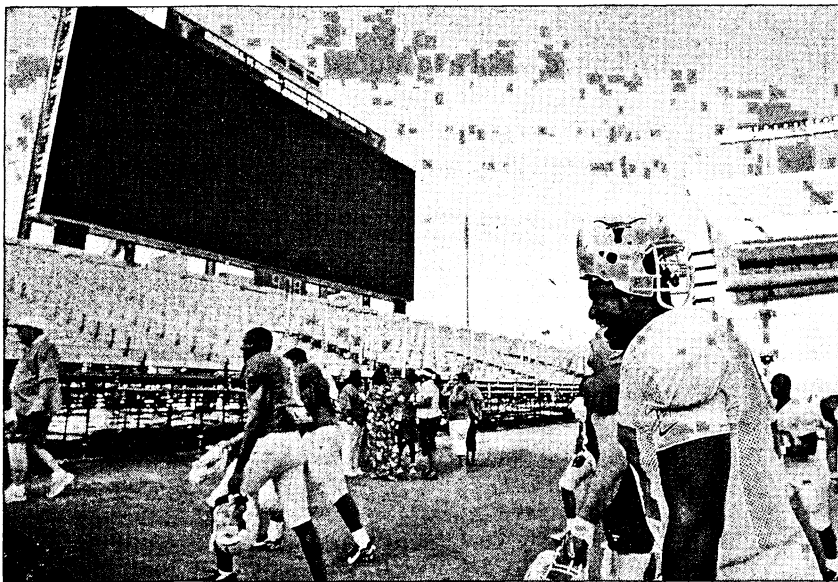


Because Miller was an investment manager, I thought we might get a pragmatic take on problems and possible solutions. Still, I hoped the commission would discuss how education can enable students, as they become adults, to realize the fundamental mandates in our self-conception as a nation: living good, free and humanly satisfying lives, i.e., "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

I have read the successive draft reports that were released in June, July and earlier this month. These reports and their related issue papers and other reports of interest are available at www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports.html. The commission worked hard to lay out the weaknesses in our current educational theories, practices and results. We owe them our own hard work as concerned citizens. If you read these documents carefully and are not frightened about the future of our country, reread them until you are. The problems and some of the proposed solutions are scary.

What made American education, especially public education, the envy of the world? Serious resolve and ample government funding. According to the commission, the Morrill Act of 1862 and the post-World War II GI Bill created land-grant public universities that qualified citizens could attend and then took more people to higher levels of education than any other nation. Now, funding of public universities by states is at a 25-year low (in most states annual support is below 20 percent of operating costs). Government loan programs have not kept pace with need. Issue paper 10 informs us that state shortfalls will continue despite economic gains. Long-term prospects for public higher education will not improve.

Simultaneous with this decline in government support, our relative performance among the 30 competing Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development nations has declined. We are ninth in higher education attainment, 16th in high school graduation rates and 24th in learning



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Foreign universities don't spend \$8 million for jumbotrons, such as this one at the University of Texas.

proficiency for 15-year-olds.

Twenty-five percent of students in public high schools do not graduate. Only 17 percent of high school seniors are considered proficient in mathematics and 36 percent in reading. Only 31 percent of college graduates are deemed proficient in prose literacy. And the percentage of high school graduates going directly on to higher education has leveled off at 60 percent.

The commission sees a clear link between family income level and student success in higher education: 21 percent of college-qualified low-income students complete bachelor's degrees; 62 percent of high-income students do.

The clear lesson in these statistics is that we have ruined a national treasure: public higher education open to qualified students who are then assisted through their four years by public funds raised through taxes and expended for the ultimate greater good of society. We simply have stopped investing in our future.

Three final points. The commission is rightly concerned about our performance vis-à-vis other OECD nations. But they concentrate solely on what they see as our mistakes. They think we need standardized tests to measure results and that our universities and colleges have too much administrative fat. They think public universities were wasting money even as states were slashing funds.

Miller should have consulted the Longhorn football coach whom our regents pay \$200,000 per game and the basketball coach whom they pay \$1.8 million per year, plus bonuses. They

would surely have advised him to scout out our competition, to find out how they are winning.

Our OECD competition uses three standard plays: (1) fully or highly funded public university systems; (2) restricting admissions to a much lower percentage of students who pass rigorous entrance exams; and (3) keeping campuses focused on education.

I asked the news editor of the London Times Higher Education Supplement how many "high-school graduates" in the United Kingdom go on to higher education. His answer: 30 percent, half our number.

Foreign universities are also serious places. No \$85 million sports entertainment budgets. No \$8 million jumbotrons. No \$150 million stadium expansions. Students who have taken challenging exams to get into universities concentrate on studies, not on achieving No. 1 party school status.

If I were a regent and had talked with my friend Miller about his commission's report, I would have refused to accept two donations totaling \$7.5 million dollars for a stadium expansion project that will include a museum of sports and what a UT administrator surrealistically describes as "gymnasiums in the basement for academic use." I would have explained to the donors that we need their money for urgent, nationally recognized educational priorities.

Bottom line: Other OECD countries are beating us at education because they want to win more than we do.

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