

COMMENTARY

UT's brand is losing value

The University of Texas explains what it is and wants to be in these words: 'What Starts Here Changes the World'.

When you visit www.utexas.edu/opa/utbrand, you will find a thoughtful explanation of the values and mission of the university. This "brand" — note the allusion to Texas' historical mythology of cowboys and cattle — is clever, but it is also dead serious.

UT is larger than most ancient Greek city-states. It has more students (48,000) than there were citizens in ancient Athens. UT students are inheritors of the intellectual disciplines perfected in Athens, transmitted to us through the Renaissance, and symbolized by the architectural motifs of the UT Tower.

What is magnificent about the university is how it has built upon our humanistic tradition by embracing — in its student body, its faculty, its museums, libraries and laboratories, and its academic programs — the culturally diverse world in which we live.

In fall of 1964, the university changed a big piece of the world, the state of Texas, by appointing Ervin S. Perry assistant professor of civil engineering. Perry was the first African American ever to hold this rank at the university. In 1965, UT students — whites and African Americans together — demonstrated for civil rights on campus. A photograph in UT's Center for American History captures one moment (www.cah.utexas.edu/exhibits/SixtiesExhibit/large/large7.html).

How radical and courageous were these steps? The 1969 Longhorns was the last all-white football team to win a national championship. It took the general public and the coaches longer to accept on UT's football field what academic leaders and students were trying to engineer inside and outside the classrooms.

UT declares that it is, not will be, "a national leader in developing highly educated citizens who are well qualified to address the urgent needs of society." It is a leader in scientific research and technological innovation. But its "national name recognition stems largely from its well-known football, basketball and baseball teams." The noise of sports entertainment drowns out the message of the university proper. It distracts the citizens of this state from the critical problems our university is facing.

It is not my self-serving perspective that our universities are in trouble. It is the conclusion of the national report of the U.S. Department of Education, "A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of Higher Education," made public in September 2006. It documents how the United States is being outstripped in every category of education by competitor countries: "A lot of other countries are now educating more



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of their citizens to more advanced levels than we are. Worse they are passing us by at a time when education is more important to our collective prosperity than ever."

American education is no longer the best in the world. Domestically, UT was ranked 26th nationally 20 years ago. It is now about 52nd. It ranks No. 1 in spending on athletes (\$210,000 apiece), but 102nd in spending on students.

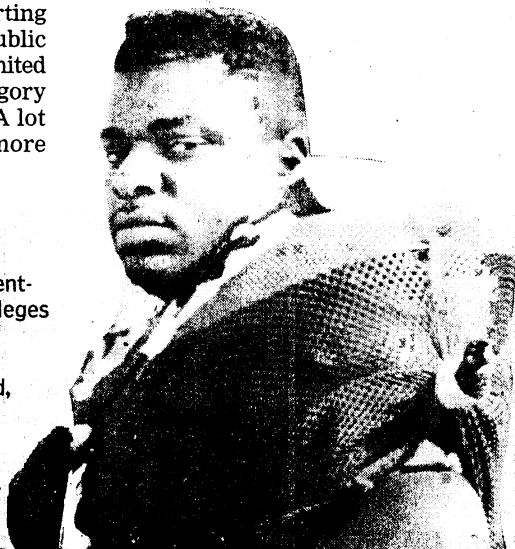
Yet our regents and university leaders have not tried to change these priorities. Instead, they encourage the citizens of this state to support the expansion of the Royal-Memorial Stadium. There, six times a year, wealthy should-be leaders look down from Roman-imperial skyboxes upon football gladiators, over sixty percent of whom will leave UT without a degree.

Worse still, UT is branded with The Longhorn Effect. What we have started here has changed other universities nationwide. We have driven all but two handfuls into fiscal peril. The chief financial officer of UT athletics has announced our brand: "We eat what we kill." It is an apt metaphor. Lions did that in Roman coliseums. Is reckless waste of money in pursuit of a sports championship what we want to stand for?

It is not too late to change our priorities, to bring the sports budget into the general university budget. It makes good sense to value UT's academic rankings more than football rankings, and to support a call for increased academic funding.

It will take moral judgment, political courage and strong powers of persuasion. UT fortunately has a president, William Powers Jr., with all those qualities. What he starts here can truly change the world.

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Scoring lessons for life

As a result of participating in sports, student-athletes at the University of Texas and colleges nationwide win every day. Why? Because athletics instills intangible qualities necessary to persevere on and off the field, writes former Longhorn Brian Jones, a college football analyst for CSTV.

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