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## COMMENTARY

Palaima: To get to the root of UT's problems, follow the money

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Love of money may be the root of all evils (1 Timothy 6). But it does not follow that lack of money is the root of everything good. The prevailing political philosophy to shrink government has put our public state university system at serious risk right when the Department of Education has warned us that the United States is losing the race against other nations to educate the next generation.

According to the federal agency, we must provide more student loans for American students from low- and middle-income families. But other national governments cover outright most of the costs of their young women and men attending universities.

They know it is in their best interests. It serves the common good. In getting government off our backs, we have forgotten that taxes and government programs once gave us tools to build better futures.

The University of Texas System Board of Regents just capped tuition increases at 4.95 percent for the next two years, much less than the increases of 7.8 percent and 6.9 percent proposed by UT's Student Government, Graduate Student Assembly and Senate of College Councils. Their proposals provided set-asides to cover the increased costs for low and middle-income students.

Ask yourselves why well-informed students would lobby to pay more for their degrees, unless it is absolutely necessary to guarantee first-rate educations. Why would state-appointed officials, like the regents, tell anyone that they cannot pay money to the State of Texas?

For 10 years, increases in annual state appropriations to UT-Austin have averaged 2 percent, far below the rising costs of higher education. The Legislature covers 17 percent of the university's yearly operating budget. The Available University Fund covers 7 percent. The university has to come up with three out of every four dollars from other sources. Tuition provides one of those dollars.

This might seem good, but it puts the university up for sale. And that has serious consequences. What do I mean?

Many decisions no longer follow any overall educational philosophy, but are based on what individual colleges, departments, programs and faculty members have the money to do.

For example, the university has long needed a center for research conferences and visiting scholars. What we are getting is called the Executive Education and Conference Center, set to open in August 2008. It caters to the high-end tastes of the "center's anchor client," the McCombs School of Business. Rooms are designed to suit the lifestyles of "mid-level executives in corporations, ages 27-35." Rooms are being leased to big sports boosters long-term for

football games. They will monopolize an academic conference facility six out of 15 weekends every fall semester.

The plan unveiled to the Faculty Council in mid-September called for the center to have an 18-hour 7-day-a-week sports café. Fine entertainment for mid-level executives and sports boosters, but an unnecessary distraction for students pursuing serious educations.

The university's modest Campus Club is slated for extinction. Its dining operation is being outsourced and reincarnated in the center as the Carillon. Dedicated long-term employees are being laid off while evening dining is being upscaled to the five-star level of luxury demanded in business class and sky boxes.

All this is being done in the name of financial exigency. But it is self-fulfilling. The university sells its facility to the highest bidder (aka anchor client). The client proposes an expensive design suited to its tastes. The high costs of construction and operation are then used as an excuse to run the facility the way I described. Its high price tag puts the university at risk because the center must generate revenues of \$22 million a year to meet costs.

Do you think such a way of doing things is in keeping with the values of a public institution of higher education? The University of Texas is public in name only - one-fourth public, to be precise.

The Brackenridge tract, with its 88-acre field laboratory and graduate housing, has been in the news. Can you think of a better way to justify selling it to developers than to squeeze the university budget by limiting new tuition revenues and by keeping yearly state appropriations increases below rapidly rising costs?

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