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COMMENTARY

Palaima: UT's big spenders show little regard for value of money

Thomas G. Palaima, REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

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The recent controversy about whether to close the Cactus Cafe in the student union at the University of Texas has highlighted something I call "high-altitude bomber syndrome" HABS for short. There is a point at which people in positions of power, even with working-class backgrounds like my own, live and work at such heights that they can no longer see how the decisions they make affect people on the ground.

The best leaders of public institutions like UT, it seems to me, always keep in mind that the money they manage was once hard-earned and that even money from private donors enters into the public trust once the university receives it.

Of course, it helps if donors remember that, too, both in what they want to be done with their money and in holding institutional leaders accountable. Great examples are Joe and Teresa Lozano Long, who have given generously to cover real educational needs - the Institute of Latin American Studies, for example . They both stay actively involved in making sure UT uses the money they donated for students and faculty.

Spendthrift uses of money at UT are a sure sign of HABS. This past year, I served on the special faculty council subcommittee on the Brackenridge tract. The consulting firm hired by the regents - Cooper, Robertson & Partners LLP - consistently ignored strong and clear faculty input about the educational and research value of the Brackenridge field laboratory.

Because the regents had set out no guidelines, Cooper claimed it was free to produce plans that would have made fortunes for real estate interests, banks and commercial developers. Some \$5.1 million was wasted on Cooper's unusable proposals. My colleague, David Hillis, had viable alternative plans drawn up, without cost, on campus within about three weeks.

The student committee of the UT student union voted to shut the Cactus Cafe because it serves mostly outsiders and not students. That throws into high relief the student-unfriendly skyboxes and club seats in the megamillion-dollar sports palaces known as Royal-Memorial Stadium, UFCU Disch-Falk Field and the Erwin Center, all clear symptoms of HABS.

The athletics program has been allowed to run up a debt of \$224 million just remodeling those extravagant facilities. Athletics now has an annual basic debt service of \$15 million. To meet it, our presidents have handed over almost full use of trademark and royalty revenues (more than \$10 million last year).

Athletics has stockpiled a \$26 million reserve with it, while colleges and departments have slashed millions of dollars in lecturers, staff, courses and programs already and are looking at cutting \$29 million more, by state mandate. We are told that athletics will give back to academics \$5 million of what is in reality institutional money to help meet the \$29 million in cuts, but it will hold onto \$21 million. Only sufferers of HABS could justify such priorities.

The latest symptom of HABS is the refurbishing of what will be called the Lee Jamail Academic Room in the main building. Upgrading this one room costs \$1 million (10 times the original estimate of \$100,000). It was paid, we are told, mainly from royalty and trademark revenues returned by athletics, as if this makes the expenditure OK.

The cost includes a gargantuan luxury carpet hand-made in China, requiring more than 30 workers to carry it in, and 23-carat gold-leaf paint. I am sad to say this sum dwarfs the \$400,000 used a few years ago to remodel the athletic director's office and the \$750,000 that spruced up the area in Memorial Stadium known as the Bevo Museum.

UT President William Powers Jr. told the faculty council that presidents can hold receptions in the Jamail Room in the evening, apparently for sybarites who would find it tacky to enter a room renovated for, say, a quarter-million dollars. The Faculty Council meets there nine times per year at most. If we had been consulted directly about refurbishing costs, I know I would not have been alone in suggesting that there were better ways, even back when our economy was strong, to use a million dollars of public money at a public institution of higher education.

Palaima teaches classics at the University of Texas. He may be reached at tpalaima@sbcglobal.net.