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COMMENTARY

Palaima: Obama's rah-rah speech ignored sobering reality

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On Aug. 9, in the Gregory Gymnasium at the University of Texas, President Barack Obama delivered what the White House called "Remarks by the President on Higher Education and the Economy." The president's 24-minute speech was a potpourri of remarks, sprinkled with vague factoids and crowd-pleasing asides about hanging out with Mack Brown, "rubbing the locker room's Longhorns," and re-creating a made-in-America export economy we haven't seen since baby boomers were in high school.

Obama's remarks generated a can-do, feel-good spirit about solving the problems that have long beset public higher education in our country. But there was no clear and systematic diagnosis, and his prescriptions were on the order of a doctor telling a patient with cancer to take aspirin.

In the atmosphere of a high school pep rally, Obama gave a rah-rah stump speech relying on his personal charisma and the general sympathies of his Austin audience. Obama's vision of producing 8 million more college graduates by 2020 met with cheers. But it is fantastically at odds with fiscal reality, according to experts surveyed this month by Sarah Cunanne in the *Times Higher Education*.

The assembled students, educators, political leaders and news media could have used some straight talk about national and local problems that have been long in the making. These were clearly laid out four years ago in the U.S. Department of Education report on the state of higher education.

The so-called Miller report was sobering. More sobering still are the data that the president's speech writers could easily get on the Internet from the annual reports of the American Association of University Professors, the State Higher Education Executive Officers, and the UT Office of Information Management and Analysis.

Gary M. Lavergne, UT's director of Admissions Research and Policy Analysis, quickly provided me with data relevant to how well UT is serving our state and country in critical areas highlighted by Obama: increasing access to public higher education by Americans of all income levels, races and ethnic identities while reducing their educational debt burdens.

I can only address two points. First, Obama singled out the University of North Carolina as one of two public institutions that are "finding ways to combat rising tuition without compromising on quality." Two clicks on UNC websites reveal this: UNC, a UT competitor and peer, had total resident tuition and fees in 2009-10 of \$5,450.16. On July 21, the UNC chancellor said that for

2010-11, the figure would be \$6,665. That is a whopping 22 percent increase in a single year. UNC is a strange poster child for combating rising tuition. But it is indicative of a clear national trend.

Like other states, North Carolina has a large budget shortfall (\$800 million). So the UNC system is absorbing cuts of \$142 million this year. But it already had taken cuts of \$575 over the past three years.

Many states have followed North Carolina in increasing student tuition and fees. For example, the University of California at Berkeley's tuition went up 5.85 percent. It also has resorted to increasing the numbers of out-of-state students, whose much higher rates increase revenues radically.

After 30 years of down-sizing government support, state colleges and universities now have a choice: Raise tuition or "compromise on quality." In most cases they do both.

Meanwhile, UT, faced with state cutbacks of about 15 percent, has had its tuition increase capped at 3.95 percent and its ability to increase the number of out-of-state students restricted. The compromises on quality already are under way.

As far as making public education available to all aspiring students, the numbers speak for themselves. The percentage of UT incoming freshmen who reported parental income of more than \$80,000 per year has risen from 50 percent in 2004 to 56 percent in 2009, while those declaring less than \$40,000 has fallen slightly, from 20 percent to 19 percent. Median household income in Texas in 2008 was \$50,049. About 70 percent of UT's freshmen are above this figure.

In a state that is 36.9 percent Hispanic and 12 percent black, the corresponding undergraduate student percentages at UT are 16.2 percent and 4.5 percent.

Here is a single point of light. In 2005, those numbers were 14.1 percent and 3.7 percent. Slow progress can be made, but in the prevailing economic and political climate, it will take more than feel-good speeches and lucky sports mascots. We could start with more cold, hard facts analyzed by a highly educated president for a highly educated and highly motivated audience.

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