

Palaima: Regents in Texas push ideas that do lasting damage to higher education

Tom Palaima, Regular Contributor

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Unless you have been living on another planet, you know that the University of Texas and Texas A&M University have been targets of criticism. The criticism ramped up in 2008 when Gov. Rick Perry orchestrated a closed-door "educational summit" involving the UT Board of Regents. There, the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a conservative think tank, and retired U.S. House Majority Leader Dick Armey aired their views on our state's two flagship research-oriented universities.

At A&M, according to Armey, "only 49 out of 3,000 faculty members brought in enough money to pay for their salaries and overhead over the past five years." Departments should tell students what their starting salaries will be if they major in their fields. Perry wants bachelor's degrees to cost \$10,000 or less.

No matter what motives or animus inspire such borderline crackpot ideas, they have to be taken seriously, because the governor is behind them and he appoints the regents. The regents, in turn, appoint university presidents. The presidents serve without fixed terms at the pleasure of the regents. They can, that is, be fired at any time.

Faculty senates at A&M and UT Austin are virtually powerless. According to regents' rules, faculty serve purely advisory roles.

That explains why regents in Texas have done such harm to higher education. We do not have trustees who are entrusted to safeguard what professional scholars, teachers, researchers and educational administrators create. We have political appointees who act like kings.

Between 1919 and 1943, Regent Luther Stark made UT, according to Ronnie Dugger, his "outstanding hobby." Stark devised in 1923 the regental rule "that no infidel, atheist, or agnostic be employed in any capacity in the University of Texas, and no person who does not believe in God as the Supreme Being and the Ruler of the Universe shall hereafter be employed."

Stark also opined that "the president of the University of Texas occupies the position to the board of regents as a general manager of a corporation does to its board of directors."

On May 9, William Powers Jr., the general manager of UT, said, "I am a president." He presented "A Report to the Commission of 125 and the University of Texas Community," available at tinyurl.com/3js34xy. Read it.

Powers explains the arduous labors of citizens and enlightened leaders of our state over 128 years to achieve the constitutional mandate that UT be a university of the first class. He shows that the faculty, staff, students and administrators of UT have never rested on their laurels, despite such deep cuts by the Legislature that state revenues may soon only cover 13 percent of the university's operating budget.

Powers' message conveys a sense of his commitment to excellence in undergraduate education, scholarship and research. It has the ring of Homer Rainey, who was fired by regents for refusing to fire faculty who had the temerity to teach New Deal economic policies.

Powers is too tactful and lawyerly to say what I will say. Who are these people who, without a serious understanding of higher education, would denigrate over 100 years of hard work of so many men and women devoted to the pursuit of knowledge at the highest level for the benefit of society? Why in a democracy should members of a self-created partisan think tank be given exclusive access to present their views to regents who are themselves political appointees of a like-minded governor? Who in their right mind would define the worth of a professor of the history of religion, of Arabic languages, of African American music, of the art of Latin America, based on the money they bring in?

The saddest moment of all preceded Powers' speech. In introducing student government president Natalie Butler, Kenny Jastrow, head of the Commission of 125 and former chair of Temple-Inland, invited the audience to applaud her courage for writing a letter to the Board of Regents about these issues.

What have we come to in our democracy if writing a letter of opinion to fellow citizens entrusted with a public duty is considered an act of courage?

Palaima (tpalaima@sbcglobal.net) is a UT professor.

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