

Palaima: Key points for UT's next president to consider

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Posted July 9, 2014 at 7:00 PM

Printed Thursday July 10, 2014

Austin American-Statesman

<http://www.mystatesman.com/news/news/opinion/palaima-key-points-for-uts-next-president-to-consi/ngbsF/#94082040.3469532.735423>

The controversy surrounding Bill Powers' future as president of the University of Texas at Austin has finally played out, with Powers submitting his resignation effective next spring. Even so, we have not seen drama like this since Powers dragged out the process of deciding whether head football coach Mack Brown would go or stay. Eventually Brown went, in mid-December, two years into a four-year contract extension and one year after getting Powers' full public support.

There is another irony about the timing of the press leak concerning Powers' position. The best parallel is how Powers timed his announcement of the \$2 million raise for Brown, mid-December 2009. Then fall semester had ended. The faculty council could not gather a quorum.

The regents used the same chicanery in scheduling public discussion of the report from planning firm Cooper Robertson on the fates of the Brackenridge tract, its biological field laboratory and Lion's Municipal Golf Course. They met on June 18, 2009, when members of the faculty committee advisory to Cooper Robertson and many golf aficionados were away.

We live in Texas, after all. That is why Ronnie Dugger's classic "Our Invaded Universities" and Ken Ashworth's "Horns of a Dilemma" will remain standard reading for the UT community (its faculty, staff, students, outside supporters, alumni and alumnae).

All members of the UT community should read the Regents' Rules and the Handbook of Operating Procedures that govern UT-Austin. We might then avoid repeating the mistake of thinking that the UT president is our leader and one of us. He is not.

The UT president is not elected or selected by the UT community. Whoever aspires to become president knows from the start that their experience, values and ways of working must first and foremost prove satisfactory to the Board of Regents and the chancellor the regents appoint.

Once appointed by the Board of Regents, the president also knows that she or he “serves without fixed term, subject to the pleasure of the appropriate Executive Vice Chancellor, to whom the president reports and is responsible, and approval by the Chancellor and the Board of Regents.”

In this sense, UT presidents do preside over the university community. They adopt and adapt policies and practices to suit the regents. Presidents can be fired at any time. This applies a conservative pressure that prevents anything too radical, from any perspective, from happening to education and research at the university.

We would do well to be calm and refrain from the demonizing that Thucydides described as characteristic of these kinds of public debates, even if a doctor and a lawyer are at the center of it. Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa is a philosophical public servant with a strong record of achievement. Powers can point to many accomplishments. Opinions will vary on the decisions he has made since 2006 and the directions in which the university is going.

Now, we should focus on how to improve the academic and cultural values of the university and strengthen, maintain or repair its vital educational, research and outreach services to our state, our country and our world — no matter who presides over us. Our next president might well consider some of the following key points:

We should, as a No. 1 goal, accomplish former President Larry Faulkner’s plan, announced in 2000, to add 300 tenured or tenure-track professors to the UT faculty and to bring what university leaders have known for 15 years are unacceptably high student-faculty ratios down to acceptable levels. Both these objectives were picked up as priorities in Powers’ first state of the university address in September 2006. Neither goal is close to being reached. Both initiatives are forgotten flotsam.

The faculty council and its various standing committees need to be made meaningful once again. The faculty in virtually all areas of university operation and governance can only advise, so there is no harm in making sure the faculty council is the main forum for public discourse before decision-taking, not the “closed-door” meetings of presidential and deans’ staffs and committees.

Times are lean. Budgeting and setting of compensation must be transparent and fair. No future president should arrange exorbitant compensation (e.g., \$325,000 for five years) off the radar screen for doing the job he then has.

Admissions must be kept free of insider influence.

UT presidents preside, but their actions set precedent. They are not Caesars, but they should act like Caesar’s wife.