

Favoritism in UT admissions process fails University

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In my UGS 303 Ethics and Leadership class, my students and I are now dealing with questions of how those who are on the lower rungs of the socioeconomic and political ladders of their societies feel when they believe injustice has been done by those who wield power and make decisions.

The ladder metaphor is a good one. It is used in Bob Dylan's classic song "Lonesome Death of Hattie Carroll." That song reminds us how those who have "rich, wealthy parents to provide and protect them" and "high-office relations in the politics of Maryland" can do things with a "shrug of their shoulders" that have serious negative effects on the lives of those way down below them. Their cavalier actions can destroy the confidence that common people have in fairness and justice in their lives.

In "Hattie Carroll," a judge makes a show that "the ladder of law has no top and no bottom." But his court decision, a wrist-slap sentence in a manslaughter case, makes clear that the ladder is controlled by whoever stands on the uppermost rungs.

The ancient Greek working-class songster Hesiod felt social injustice deeply and for the same reasons. The petty big men who controlled the court system in his backwater community rendered decisions crookedly, an offense against the abstract principle of Justice that the Greeks viewed as a sacred daughter of Zeus.

In this context, I asked my students how they felt about the finding of an independent outside report that President William Powers Jr. kept from the public the fact that he has used his power as president to put preferential "holds" on as many as 300 students per year. Many of these students were then admitted over the objection of the

admissions committee as special favors to members of the Texas state legislature, the UT System Board of Regents and donors to our University.

Some students viewed it as an inevitable fact of life now that state support for a public university like ours has declined to less than 14 percent of our annual operating budget. They argued that UT Austin depends on donors and the support of people of power and influence, and such people expect favors to be done. This is not quite good ethics, nor does it say much about the donors, legislators and regents involved, but it has inspired a robust cynicism among the very students who are asked by the regents, president and faculty to follow the code "What Starts Here Changes the World."

What we could not understand is why, if there is a need to do favors for people of money and power, it was not done openly as it is at places like Yale University.

We may also wonder now what the going rate was to buy what is euphemistically called a "hold." Is it like selling skyboxes and club seats? Will donating \$2 million get your son into the School of Engineering and a mere \$250,000 into the School of Social Work?

While Powers has claimed that no students were displaced by the practice, the fact that additional students were admitted through favoritism clearly shows that more students could have been accommodated on merit alone. Some of my students picked up on this. They imagined what it would feel like to have been turned down and then find out that the same kind of favoritism that got George W. Bush into Yale University, a private institution that can do what it damn well pleases in this regard, was secretly being practiced at a public institution where the playing field, at least in its propaganda, is supposed to be level. Hundreds of applicants who should be here now have been denied a UT education. Promises of future transparency from UT System Chancellor William McRaven are welcome but sound like the kind of business as usual that glosses over the severity of the long-term moral damage done to others here.

I come from a working-class background and vicariously take the injustice here personally. I have spent almost 30 years now as a professor at UT Austin. I have been proud to teach at the top of the public university ladder in our country, a place that I thought admitted all deserving applicants solely on the basis of their hard work, talent and achievement. And so it goes.

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