Commentary

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What it really will take for UT to be excellent

Do you want to know what specific challenges face UT Austin? Faith of Texas face in helping the faculty, students, staff and administration of the University of Texas at Austin to meet the seemingly crucial needs in undergraduate and graduate education? Do you want to know what it will mean to this university to recruit, hire, and retain the professionals it needs to make what it was supposed to be when it was first mandated by the Texas constitution in 1876.

I did. So I went on to the Internet and read through the recent recommendations and protocols of the UT Commission of 125 (www.utexas125.org) to see what better way to figure out what our university should do than to read a report by 227 outsiders?

The commission worked for two years. Its members were drawn from business, the law, engineering, finance, politics, and even health care. Almost none of the commission's members have devoted themselves career-long to searching and teaching within UT Austin or institutions like it.

The results show, I doubt whether many readers will have time to digest, so I give here a Professor's Digest version of a few key points.

Point 1. The university must be excellent in literature, the arts and sciences. The state should fund this excellence. Problem: the state now provides barely 20 percent of the university's operating costs. This is an unacknowledged nationwide scandal of educational funding. The "government-is-bad" mantra that was ushered in 10 years ago by the conservative Contract with America should be reversed.

Problem: To lower this ratio to even mid-range in this group would require a mass of veteran professors on the faculty family leave plan and the faculty grievance committee. So far, the faculty family leave plan and the faculty grievance committee have been suspended. I have already noted the absence of a real sabbatical system - a glaring impediment to faculty growth and development that the report does not even mention.

Point 2. We should lower the student-faculty ratio. UT has the second highest student-faculty ratio among 13 peer state universities.

Problem: To lower this ratio even mid-range in this group would require hiring hundreds of new faculty and building offices, computer labs, serial annual cuts in library and professional staff, poor student-faculty ratios, not enough computer labs for students to use, and none of these matters. Politics is good.

Point 4. UT faculty has so little say in the university that it took six years to enact a minor revision to the faculty family leave plan and the faculty grievance committee. UT faculty have not even mentioned. I have already noted the absence of a critical mass of veteran professors. All this is the kind of accountability we should promote.

Point 5. The university should do what better way to figure out what our university should do than to read a report by 227 outsiders?

Problem: Many of the courses that we can hire them, but we cannot encourage them to come back year-to-year pay increases, poor retirement and family benefits and the absence of a real sabbatical system - a glaring impediment to faculty growth and development that the report does not even mention.

Point 6. We need a new undergraduate core curriculum in the arts, humanities, math, science and technology to which students understand world cultures and can think and communicate confidently in all these areas.

Problem: Many of the courses that used to be part of the traditional core, such as foreign languages, have been replaced with service of specialized degrees within individual colleges. This one will take a long time to implement and cost a force by the president and provost.

The bottom line: The basis of excellence at any university is an energetic and emphasized faculty.

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