Genuine passion is not only largely missing in higher education nowadays, it is discouraged by institutional and government policies and practices. Notice that I say “genuine passion.” Even though it comes from a different Indo-European root, the Latin noun “passio” was used to represent the notions associated with the Greek verb “paskho”, the root of which, “penth”, means “experience.” Those two words – “paskho” and “passio” – have a fundamental sense of “suffering”, that is, a serious knowledge of how grim life can be. The hallmark character of “passion” in Greek tragedy, whose very name, Pentheus, means something like Mr Suffering, is a college-age new king exploring for the first time dimensions of adult power, self-identity and the mysteries of human sexuality and religious fervour.

In Euripides’ tragedy the Bacchae, he is eventually ripped to death by his mother and the women of the city he rules while they are in the throes of an ecstatic religious cult and tapping into a part of our human nature that he has tried to suppress. Part of my easily sustained lifelong passion for teaching Classics comes from trying to understand and convey more fully the real transformative power of communal myths such as this. The experience of studying at any institution of post-secondary education is a privilege of a kind that an infinitesimal percentage of human beings in the history of the world have ever had. To have the native and schooled intelligence, the financial wherewithal and the freedom from life’s often crushing obligations that are necessary to spend four or more years at a college or university is miraculous personal good luck.

The official core purpose of the University of Texas at Austin, where I have held a tenured position and endowed professorship now for 22 years, is that we “transform lives for the benefit of society.” Among the core values that all members of the university community pledge to uphold are the commitment to expand human understanding, create a caring community and seek the truth and express it.

UT Austin is an enormous state research university of 50,000 students, 35,000 of whom are undergraduates, and 1,750 tenured or tenure-track full-time faculty. It is the...
flagship of this system of nine universities, six health institutions and a telecampus serving 160,000 students across our giant state. The student-to-faculty ratio in undergraduate courses at UT Austin is more than 1 to 1. State funding covers a mere 16 per cent of the annual operating budget of the university. Right now, 85 per cent of beginning students gain admission by graduating in the top 10 per cent of their classes at secondary schools, both public and private, in the state. This percentage is rising, and soon there will be more top-10 percenters than there are available places at the university. We are thus fulfilling a prediction made by our last president, Larry Faulkner, that attending UT Austin would come to be viewed as an entitlement rather than as the unique privilege that it still is.

With this sense of entitlement comes focus on self-gratification: “What’s in it for me?” By contrast, a sense of privilege invokes the principle of noblesse oblige, of being duty-bound to pay a debt to the society that has given us such a rare blessing.

One easy way of keeping alive a passion for teaching and learning is to remember daily the core purpose of the university. Yet those faculty, students, administrators and state officials who do take the mission completely to heart are, in my opinion, powerless against those who actually control the processes that lead to decisions about our flagship state university and what resources lead to decisions about education at our flagship university.

Those who do take the mission completely to heart are powerless against those who actually control the processes that lead to decisions about education at our flagship university. Congress, called faculty councils at public universities “imbecile institutions” and called on the regents to reduce the already limited role the faculty plays in governance.

The “breakthrough solutions” that were presented were based on what goes on at a five-year-old business school, called the Austin School, that offers a one-year degree in entrepreneurship to about 20 students, all of whom have full-tuition fellowships.

In 11 faculty all are successful business entrepreneurs. One of the key proposals put forward was that students at state universities in Texas be given contracts that stipulate what their starting salaries will be when they start working.

I am now 56 years old. In the past five years, I have taught two teaching awards. I also founded a research programme focusing on early pre-alphabetic writing systems in Greece and the eastern Mediterranean. I have received distinguished awards for this work, too, most notably a five-year fellowship from the MacArthur Foundation and fullbright excellence appointments at the University of Salzburg and the Universitat Autonoma de Barcelona. I am a fellow of the Society of Antiquaries, London. I am already a dinosaur.

For the past 13 years, I have taught every summer but one in my university’s 15-year-old summer intensive Greek programme. That exceptional summer 1994 I taught with a gifted former student – who has already become a noted scholar on the work of Cormac McCarthy – and the use and depiction of violence in film – a national Telluride seminar for gifted high-school juniors on the topic of myths of war and violence. The Telluride Association is a non-profit organisation that sponsors summer programmes to bring together young people from around the world who have a passion for learning. I also taught in the inaugural year (2006) of the Humanities Institute’s Free Minds Programme, which offers a year-long seminar in traditional humanities (history, philosophy, literature, theatre and Classics) to poverty-level adults. Two years ago, an undergraduate student of mine won the top prize for distinguished undergraduate achievement in research and a graduate student of mine won the award for best dissertation in humanities and fine arts.

In the past 15 years, I have chaired my large department for four years and then served regularly on the faculty council and key committees dealing with the budget, libraries, research policies and the overall co-ordination of faculty council legislation. I do this because I care deeply about higher education, especially public higher education, and feel I have a broad, well-informed international and historical perspective on issues.

I have given many distinguished visiting lectures at universities and at institutions such as the Institute of Classical Studies of the University of London, the Levantis Foundation in Cyprus, the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City and the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC.

A common theme in all is that what human beings are, individually and collectively, and how they face the challenges of being alive. During this time, I have taught and written about war and violence in human societies, ancient and modern, and for the past ten years I have written regular commentaries and book reviews – many of them in Times Higher Education – on cultural and political topics ranging from the social significance of the music of Bob Dylan, Willie Nelson and Pinot Perkins to how policies were formed in the Kennedy, Johnson and now Bush administrations, and how the US looks from abroad (a series of six reports from Spain in 2007). I write frequently about political, social and economic issues, about higher education in Texas, and about values and decisions within my own university.

Never in my life or in my career have I made a choice based on how much money I would receive for doing what I took up next. The total emphasis at the Texas Governor’s Excellence in Teaching Award summit and in the Secretary of Education’s commission report on the financial and economic rewards of pursuing higher education strike me as symptomatic of larger trends ultimately detrimental to the good of our society.

I had the luxury of being relatively poor growing up. My parents were the children of immigrants from Lithuania and Poland. My father worked in the US Postal Service and my mother part-time as a grocery clerk and then in a school cafeteria.

I attended high school, college and graduate school on scholarships, fellowships and teaching assistantships. Since no one in my extended family had ever attended college or university, there were no expectations placed on me other than that I should “do well” at what my family saw as the incomprehensible things I was doing in the 11 years of post-secondary education it took to finish my doctorate.

I made a critical and decisive change in scholarly focus in my junior year in college. The catalyst was one of my professors in a graduate mathematics course who, uncharacteristically for him, spoke to us after a snowy winter weekend in Boston about what a wonderful time he had had curled up in his apartment working on maths problems. It struck me then that I should seek to do something in life about which I was passionate in this way—and mathematics was not it. I also reasoned that the other rewards in academia were too few not to be involved with subjects I really loved studying. I enjoyed ancient history and literature and was literally overwhelmed when I read the first lines of Homer’s Iliad in Greek.

I had never read anything so direct, honest and true in my life. It was then that I decided to study classical languages, history and literature, and to attend graduate school in Classics, as long as I could support myself (as I eventually did).

The first teaching award I received at the University of Texas at Austin was the Jean Holloway Award of the university’s alumni association, the Texas Exes. I still consider it the most extraordinary honour I have received.

It is given to a professor in natural sciences or liberal arts who “demonstrates a warmth of spirit, a concern for society and for the individual, and the ability to impart knowledge while challenging higher students to independent inquiry and creative thought, as well as a respect for the understanding of the permanent values of our culture”. To be thought of having those qualities, to paraphrase Bob Dylan, made me feel a spark tingle in my bones.

In the semester that I received the award, spring 2004, members of the secret selection committee sat in on the large lecture course I
was teaching to well over a hundred students on the topic of Greek myths and our lives. In this course, I look at Greek myths and how they related to fundamental human problems—the Greeks were facing and we still face. I introduce modern paradigms where appropriate. I discovered while giving my lectures that veterans of our use of military force in Iraq and Afghanistan or the girlfriends and spouses of soldiers still deployed in those countries were deeply moved by our discussions of the experiences of soldiers in the Iliad and Euripides’ Trojan Women.

One young woman specifically said the scene between Hector and Andromache in book VI of the Iliad had made her better understand the deep and unexpressed feelings that she and her boyfriend or spouse—I forget which—had felt when she shipped out. Others appreciated our exploration of the figure of Creon in Sophocles’ Antigone and why he might feel such a fierce desire for his own city of Thebes. Here questions about mercenary force in a treasonous attack on his brother in law are raised, and students are persuaded that the figures are not just good literature or the stark truth in lessons of ancient or modern history. I found that watching a documentary about soldiers in Vietnam and reading letters they had written home helped me and my students realize, in the literal sense, what ancient soldiers were going through.

Likewise, the power that Persians’ funeral oration must have had for the collected grieving people of Athens comes alive if it is placed alongside juxtaposed with the magnificent cadences and overview of periods of human history found in Martin Luther King’s last speech. Even the analysis of individual Greek words or rhetorical devices takes on new significance when students see what the stakes were for the Greeks whose words are preserved for us. Here passionate teaching aims at nurturing the capacity for true human sympathy, that is, for experiencing what other human beings experience. You will immediately notice how at odds the criteria of the Holloway award and the passion underlying my teaching are with the philosophy, if we can call it that, of public higher education put forward by the elected officials and political appointees who now control funding, programme initiatives and the overall goals of colleges and universities.

The Holloway criteria reflect the personal outlook of the remarkable individual after whom the award is named. Jean Holloway graduated from the University of Texas at the age of 17 in 1929. She became at 19, and by her own special petition, the youngest person ever to take and pass the State of Texas Bar examination in order to practice law. She learnt to fly and served as assistant to the director of the Women’s Air Force Service Pilots during the Second World War. She received her PhD in English in 1950 and later worked for racial integration as founding member and newsletter editor of the Austin Commission on Human Relations.

In my opinion, the regents of the public universities of Texas and members of the US Secretary of Education’s commission on higher education do not conceive of any students nowadays having the aspirations, sensibilities and social concerns reflected in my bare-bones account of Holloway’s life. Their vision and their policies create no place for such an active mind, creative soul and socially conscious spirit. In my short acceptance speech, I emphasized Holloway’s ceaseless intellectual curiosity, her lack of pretension, her concern for the real world and her firm belief that the world of the mind is not separate from the real world. What I would say now is that her education and her life were guided by genuine passion.

I said these were rare qualities. As I have just intimated, they will soon be extinct qualities, if higher education in the US continues in the direction of the Spellings commission and Governor Perry’s closed-door higher education summit.

Worse yet is that matters are so far gone right now that neither the commission report nor the Governor’s summit generated much in the way of critical response. No regent spoke up in defence of faculty or dared to point out the problems that the supposed “breakthrough solutions” would perpetrate or create.

Whether students at our colleges and universities are headed towards professional careers in law, medicine, business, journalism, engineering, library studies, social work, public affairs or natural sciences, or as teachers or professors in the traditional liberal arts, they need to be “nourished,” as the Latin verb “albeku” that underlies the English terms “alumni” and “alumna” implies. They are not mere consumers shopping in educational malls. This widespread notion is reprehensible. However, higher education has virtually stopped nurturing the civic, social and moral values of general students, most of whom are at the critical transitional stage into adult citizenship, what the ancient Greeks called the “ephebic” stage.

It is hardly any cause for wonder that government officials who have gone through our educational shopping malls make political decisions that show no understanding of the lessons of human history or violate basic decrees within human culture. They have been trained as what Aristotle calls “animate tools.”

During my entire formal education at a Jesuit high school and college and a large state university graduate programme, no one ever discussed with me how much money I would potentially earn by studying one discipline or another. My love of learning, instilled by dedicated teachers in grade school, high school and college, was so strong and deep that I always lived very frugally to have the most precious commodity any human being can have: time. We forget that the words “scholar” and “scholarship” come from the Greek word ""