

A renaissance of higher education?

William Murchison

Quite an audience — 60 members, or thereabouts, of the boards that govern Texas’s various university systems. Never before had the boards met jointly.

Quite a speaker line-up — Gov. **Rick Perry** and **Dick Arme**y, the former U.S. House majority leader.

Quite a set of reform proposals that emerged before day’s end — voucher-type grants for college and university students; greater emphasis on students as “customers” of the facility claiming to educate them; better methods of evaluating faculty; a national accreditation system some day; bonuses and like incentives for good teaching. A fair bit more, as well.

When you’re trying to turn an aircraft carrier out on the ocean, you understand it’s going to take a while. So with steps to improve higher education, an institution famous for dedication to the ideal of running its own show, thank you all so much.

The Higher Education Summit convoked this week in Austin by Perry and the Texas Public Policy Foundation was the merest first step in a process sure to take years, namely, the rationalization of creaky ways and procedures hallowed by nothing more prepossessing than habit and lethargy.

(Full disclosure: I am a senior fellow of the Texas Public Policy Foundation. I performed no work and gave no advice, either on the reform proposals or the conference.)

“Our universities,” Perry said, “are not fulfilling their essential mission in our culture, which is to teach our children.” There is some rhetoric there; some generalization. Some universities do a great job. Others — that’s where the rhetoric comes into play. You get a lot in the modern university, it just may not be very deep: indeed, probably isn’t in department after department, on campus after campus. Not the least reason for which is the universities’ dispo-

sition to do pretty much what they want to do, even when they take public money for the privilege.

Faculties are ridden with tenured holdovers who haven’t rethought their lectures in years. Tenure — a thoroughly awful institution, theoretically designed to protect “academic freedom” — prevents the weeding out of the intellectually stagnant, the barely competent, the over-the-hill. Particular courses, over time, become sacrosanct. You’d need a stick of dynamite to effect renewal.

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Will this change? If by that query is meant, are we going to get rid of tenure as such, the answer is, probably not. On the average college campus, presidents raise money and faculties run the place. Any proposal to abolish tenure would be met with the kind of ferocity and tenacity — plus cunning — that kept Stalingrad out of Nazi hands.

The modest handful of proposals laid before the Austin conference, nevertheless, has transformational potential. Wouldn’t it be something — for instance — to have potential teachers demonstrate actual teaching skills before receiving a grant of tenure? It might be interesting, as proposed, to split research and teaching budgets asunder, so as better to correlate good teaching with the money needed to support it. Without neglecting vital research.

It could prove useful to reward successful teaching with bonuses. A free-market insight, after all, is that incentives matter — the prospect of reward stimulates competition and achievement. (And if socialist profs don’t believe it, they can let free market types take all the bonuses!)

“Vouchers” for college students? Same logic as with voucher proposals for public school students. To empower movement between theoretically competing institutions is to gin up the competition to a higher pitch, with fruitful outcomes for those with the bucks — customers. A student truly is a customer: a buyer of services. Once universities acknowledge as much, and act on the insight, the better for all concerned — universities as well as students.

In *God and Man at Yale*, his provocative assault on the drift of religiously based universities toward secularism, **William F. Buckley, Jr.**, called on the governors of the schools in question to assert their authority: to tell faculty and administrators how things were going to be, rather than waiting to be told. This was in 1950. In 2008, the argument endures. Take charge, Perry told the regents, in effect. Don’t doze, physically or intellectually, through trustees’ meetings. Assume accountability for the results of a university education.

Accountability. Wouldn’t that be a fetching commitment. They wouldn’t like it in the faculty Senate, that’s for sure. But, then, Dick Arme,y, retired academician, had a word about the faculty Senate: “an imbecile institution.” Here’s to fewer imbeciles all round, in academia as in politics.

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