

## COMMENTARY

### Embrace student evaluations of faculty

By BROOKE ROLLINS

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Why do state universities exist and who do they serve? Or to be blunt: Who is the university's customer?

Is it the students — and their parents — who pay tuition? What about the taxpayers who subsidize these schools? Or even the employers who hire graduates? Good arguments can be made for why each of these is, at least in some sense, a customer.

But most Texans would agree that one idea that makes no sense is for the tenured faculty to be the sole judge of its own performance.

Yet last weekend on these pages, Professor Robert Zaretsky of the University of Houston argued that tenured professors should judge themselves, writing: "Until now, at UH as elsewhere, peers have been the professor's customers: professors try to establish one another's professional merit. Promotion and tenure committees, stretching from the departmental to university level, provide a system of checks and balances that register the worth of a professor's 'deliverables,' based on research, service and, yes, teaching."

Say what? Students choose whether or not to attend the University of Houston. Students pay the tuition and often carry huge student loan burdens years after leaving UH. Students must live with whether or not their UH degree prepares them for a successful career and citizenship.

Zaretsky wants us to believe that UH's customers are the tenured faculty, not the students? Only in the ivory tower would someone think that employees should be paid to serve each other — at the expense of taxpayers, parents and students.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation has proposed a voluntary bonus system to reward all university teachers: tenured, tenure-track, and part-time teachers. Bonuses are based on one simple question asked of students: "On a scale of 1 (poor) to 5 (great), how would you rate this class and teacher?"

There are three main reasons why this makes sense:

First, most students in Texas universities are taught by non-tenured or non-tenure track faculty. It is unfair for tenured faculty members to be paid exorbitant salaries to teach a small number of students each year and not reward lower paid, part-time faculty and barely paid teaching assistants for excellent teaching.

Secondly, very few tenured faculty members have ever observed a colleague's class. Therefore, the only way one tenured professor could assess another's teaching would be based on hallway

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gossip or academic research credentials — neither a good measure of teaching effectiveness.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it is learning that matters in the end, not teaching. By default, students — who often are the only other people in a classroom — are the only ones who can judge whether or not a teacher has succeeded.

Many tenured professors might accept a bonus based on student evaluation if it were “adjusted” by a faculty committee based on the difficulty of the subject or some other subjective measure. This is just another way to rig the contest.

Who says freshman biology or accounting 101 have to be boring? They are only boring because of ill-designed curriculum and unenthusiastic teachers. The “adjustment” that needs to be made is to reward the teachers who care enough to inspire students to learn these subjects.

Should General Motors refuse to let customers judge its automobiles because “it’s difficult to build a car that is both attractive and reliable”? Does this mean the United Auto Workers should be allowed to tamper with J.D. Power’s satisfaction ratings before they are published? Nonsense.

Still another group might argue that all this concern about teaching is misdirected; that instead we should focus on creating more Tier One research universities in Texas. But arcane academic research, published to further a tenured faculty member’s prestige, is a poor

substitute for a well-trained mind or a graduate who can find a fulfilling and high-paying job.

The only people who could possibly fear a bonus system based on student satisfaction are those who fear being held accountable by the customers who pay their salaries. That’s exactly why we need such a system in the first place.

*Rollins is president of the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin.*

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