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# A conservative case for tuition regulation

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“Don’t conservatives support deregulation?”

I can’t count the number of times I’ve been asked this question by allies and opponents alike in my struggle against Texas’ current tuition policy.

“Yes,” I always respond. But tuition deregulation at UT didn’t deregulate anything.

When the tuition deregulation policy was proposed in 2003, I opposed it along with my organization, Young Conservatives of Texas. We understood that the policy would not deregulate tuition prices. It wouldn’t expand competition or end government favoritism to allow the best providers to win in the battle for their customers, Texas students.

Instead, the policy merely transferred the power to set tuition and fees from the elected Texas Legislature, a body accountable to the people, to an unelected body — the appointed UT System Board of Regents. This is the underlying problem with the tuition deregulation.

What many conservatives who supported deregulation forgot was that public universities are government agencies, no different from the Department of Transportation or the Department of Public Safety. Allowing them unlimited control to set the fees they charge Texas families would be no different from allowing the Department of Transportation to charge anything it would like for license plates.

Without restraints, government bureaucracies will always find some way to rationalize their need for more tax dollars. As President Ronald Reagan once wittily proremarked, “Government is like a baby: An alimentary canal with a big appetite at one end and no sense of responsibility at the other.”

In the decade from 1998 to 2008, UT served as a poster child for that lack of responsibility. According to

the University's budget office, UT's budget more than doubled during that period from \$997 million to \$2.076 billion. While I'm sure that UT President Bill Powers would provide an emphatic defense for every dollar of that spending, there are some critics who question him, and with good cause. According to "Cutting the Cost of College," a 2007 report by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, administrative costs have risen to 14 percent of higher education budgets. Productivity decline over the last quarter century has become the norm in higher education. It now takes 21 employees to educate every 100 students. This is compared to 18 employees for every 100 students in 1970.

These facts lead one to believe that our University administrators are not interested in efficiency as much as they're interested in using other people's money to fund their pet projects.

As University spending outstrips state appropriations, public Texas universities are forced to look elsewhere for additional funding.

Administrators will claim that our state government has not accommodated them. They'll often stretch the facts to allege that state funding has gone down. But a search of the Legislative Budget Board's Web site will show that state funding has remained relatively stable, and in fact has grown slightly over the last decade. The growth may not have kept pace with rapidly expanding University budgets, but higher education certainly hasn't been shortchanged.

The universities instead have started to tap a different resource — Texas families.

Students and their families after 2003 became the path of least resistance for University administrators wishing to spend more money. In the race to expand their budgets, administrators have rapidly increased tuition. Across the state, total academic costs have grown an average of 53 percent, from \$1,934 per semester in 2003 to \$2,952 per semester in 2007, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Right now, our state representatives and senators are meeting for the 81st Texas legislature. Lawmakers have an important opportunity to pass legislation that would freeze tuition and limit future increases. Any legislation that would limit tuition increases and put the authority over tuition-setting back in the hands of the Legislature would be a dramatic improvement over our current situation.

Our elected officials must act to prevent university administrators from continuing to reach into the wallets of students and their families in their race to spend more money.

Repealing tuition deregulation would protect Texas students and their families, and force our universities to make wise decisions about how best to spend our money in the future.

*McDonald, a UT alum, is the Vice Chairman for Legislative Affairs for Young Conservatives of Texas.*

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