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COMMENTARY

Sandefer: Is tenure worth the cost to Texas?

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In his May 1 column, University of Texas professor Thomas G. Palaima asks us to "thank" tenured professors for improving "what they (have) rightly come to view as 'their' colleges and universities." According to Palaima, tenured professors believe that our colleges and universities belong to them.

When workers and managers believe an organization exists to serve them, and not its customers or its rightful owners, it begins a terminal decline. General Motors serves as a grim reminder of that.

As a successful entrepreneur and a longtime university teacher, I have seen firsthand what happens when tenured faculties act as if the universities belong to them.

For starters, interest in teaching declines. According to the federal government's National Center for Education Statistics:

The average tenured professor now teaches fewer than three classes per year, and often no more than a handful of students at a time, despite the fact that tenured and tenure-track faculty account for the bulk of college costs.

For so little work, the average full professor receives more than \$150,000 annually in salary and benefits.

As a result, the cost of instruction for some tenured faculty members exceeds \$20,000 per student.

So who teaches our children if not tenured faculty? An underclass of teaching assistants, adjuncts and other non-tenured faculty — many of whom are paid \$10 per hour or less. According to The New York Times, 70 percent of the faculties at American universities are made up of non-tenured, non-tenure track faculty.

Don't misunderstand. Our universities have some wonderful teachers, tenured and non-tenured, dedicated to serving students. Those teachers are my friends and heroes, but there are far too few of them, and they pay a price because of perverse institutional incentives.

How does the tenured faculty spend its time? Writing academic journal articles that few people read. Since the tenured faculty answers only to itself, prestige and promotion rests on publishing in journals; graduate students who desire tenure often "co-author" articles for those already in power.

But doesn't academic research drive the economy? The Legislature seems to think so. It continues to support

higher education's thirst for unlimited research funding and more "tier one" universities, never stopping to inquire whether the esoteric research designed to serve the faculty's interest is worth what it costs.

Academic research, properly accounted for, consumes two-thirds of every dollar we spend in American universities.

In the last decade, Texas taxpayers have spent more than \$20 billion on scientific academic research — reportedly the most economically productive research — to generate less than \$14 million a year in net patent income. That's less than a 1 percent rate of return.

That same money invested in college scholarships would have allowed us to double the number of Texas students attending college.

Work done by University of Ohio professor Richard Vedder goes one step further: The waste in our universities is so great that more spending on higher education in a state leads to lower economic growth. California is an example of what happens when runaway higher education spending leads to higher taxes that cripple a state economy.

Palaima is right that tenured faculties do believe that our colleges and universities belong to them. And they might go on strike if pushed too hard. But then the joke might be on them: College costs would plummet, students would continue to be well served by non-tenured faculty, and the state economy would prosper.


The Legislature must stop writing blank checks to schools for tenured professors to spend as they please. Instead, all state higher education funding should be directed to scholarships, so universities once again will have to answer to the people who pay the bills. That's the only way students, parents and taxpayers will ever regain control of our universities.

Sandefer is a longtime teacher at the graduate level at UT and the Acton School of Business.

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