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What Texas A&M's Faculty Ratings Get Right—and Wrong

By Naomi Schaefer Riley

Officials of the Texas A&M University system have proposed a new method for ensuring accountability on its 11 campuses. Faculty members across the country, needless to say, are up in arms. But are they reacting for the right reasons? The simple truth is that administrators got one thing right—but two crucial issues wrong. Before we just storm the gates, perhaps we should sort those issues out.

Consider the proposal. Each member of the faculty will be evaluated according to three criteria: salary, dollars brought in through research, and money generated through teaching. Peter Hugill, a professor of geography at Texas A&M, called the measures "silly" on the Huffington Post. Adam J. Myers III, of the university's Mays Business School, suggested to the local news media that the raw numbers were an "insufficient" basis on which to evaluate professors.

Professors far and wide are still angry about last January's announcement that the system plans to award faculty members up to \$10,000 in bonuses on the basis of student evaluations. The professor-turned-*New York Times*-opinionator Stanley Fish weighed in on that plan in his column, suggesting that the state is "currently in a contest with Arizona and South Carolina for the title 'most retrograde.'" He concluded: "If there ever was a recipe for non-risk-taking, entirely formulaic, dumbed-down teaching, this is it."

Michelle Moosally, an associate professor of English at the University of Houston-Downtown, got to the heart of academic sentiment when she told the *Houston Chronicle*: "Academia is highly specialized. We don't mean to be exclusive. We are a public-serving group of people. But at the same time, that public isn't well-enough aware of what we do and who we are to evaluate us."

The fact that the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation has laid the groundwork for these proposals has not helped their popularity among academics. But the think tank is correct that taxpayers deserve to know how their money is being spent. Public-university operating costs in Texas have gone up more than 60 percent in the last two decades, even after adjusting for inflation, and professors are among the state's highest-paid public employees. The state needs accountability measures, and they must be enforced by a party other than the faculty, who, it could easily be charged, have a conflict of interest. That's what Texas A&M got right.

But Hugill is right, too. These accountability requirements are silly. First, measuring incoming research dollars as part of determining a

faculty member's worth assumes that we want to encourage all faculty members to do research. In fact, if the State of Texas wanted to get its money worth out of its public-education system, voters should demand that professors return to the classroom. Asking how much money professors bring in through research is like opening up a fruit stand and asking how much money employees bring in through the sale of cellphones. Cellphone sales aren't the business. They aren't the mission. And they're distracting employees from selling fruit.

But now we get into territory where *both* the university system and its critics get it wrong.

According to a recent report by the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, students at West Texas A&M University can graduate without taking a single course in literature, a foreign language, economics, or mathematics. Students on the Kingsville campus can go without composition, literature, economics, and math. And at Texas A&M International University, they get through with no foreign language (how international!), no literature, and no economics. Are those colleges producing the kind of educated citizenry the state wants? The answer is no, and the proposed accountability measures don't even begin to address the question. What's more, none of those campuses is graduating even 40 percent of their students.

No doubt there is useful research coming out of the university system. But plenty could be omitted without a great deal of detriment to students' education. For instance, Hugill's most recent contributions have included a chapter on "Transitions in Hegemony: A Theory Based on State Type and Technology" and the article "German Great-Power Relations in the Pages of *Simplicissimus*, 1896-1914." Moosally's master's thesis was titled "Resumptive Pronouns in Modern Standard Arabic: A Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar Account," and her current research interests include "interactions between grammar knowledge and writing abilities/interest [and] cross-linguistic patterns of agreement."

Moosally is right about one thing: The public isn't well aware of what she and many of her colleagues do. But they should be. That is not to say that the public will be able to understand what goes on in all of the chemistry laboratories in Texas. But Moosally teaches English at a college that is not exactly tasked with performing cutting-edge research. Houston-Downtown's mission is to provide "educational opportunities and access to students from a variety of backgrounds including many first-generation college students."

According to a 2004 survey by *The Chronicle*, 71 percent of Americans thought it was very important for colleges to prepare undergraduates for careers, while only 56 percent thought it was very important for colleges to "discover more about the world through research." The survey doesn't specify what kind of research, though most people outside the ivory tower might assume that the question meant hard scientific research, not humanities or social-science research. One indication of the worth people place on

social-science research is apparent from the survey's findings: Only 35 percent of respondents felt it was very important for colleges to "provide useful information to the public on issues affecting their daily lives." (Imagine what they might think about research on information that wasn't useful.)

It's not just that higher education should be held accountable. Nor is it just that too many faculty members don't even want to hear that 'A' word. What Texas A&M officials have also missed is that faculty members must be held accountable for *what* they teach.

So on to the teaching proposal. Proponents of the new evaluation system claim that they are pushing for more focus on teaching by measuring how many students the faculty members at Texas A&M instruct, and at what level. Professors receive more credit for teaching higher-level students. But again, that is backward. The idea should be to give senior faculty members more credit for teaching introductory classes. Freshmen and sophomores are in most need of engaging, experienced faculty members who will help them understand and perhaps even become excited about a particular subject. Instead senior faculty members are being rewarded for gravitating toward small, upper-class and graduate-level seminars, where most of them prefer to be anyway.

Moreover, the metric entirely ignores teaching quality. Who cares how many "student hours" professors put in if they are not particularly good teachers anyway? Faculty members object to student evaluations, though most department chairs and administrators I've spoken with suggest that such assessments are a good gauge at both the top and the bottom of the profession. Students know a really bad professor, and they know a really good one. But they're not particularly helpful at evaluating all those in the middle. It is likely that students hold grudges against tough professors and reward the easy or predictable ones, as Fish has suggested. Perhaps evaluations by recent alumni would be a way of getting around this problem. Imagine receiving a questionnaire five years out of college asking: "Which courses do you think have had the greatest impact on your intellectual and career development?"

Ultimately there needs to be a systemic solution to the problem of teacher quality. Someone—a grown-up, preferably—needs to get into the classroom and watch what is being done there. And senior faculty members should not be exempt from regular classroom visits. Assistant deans, deans, provosts, even presidents may not want the task, but they are the ones in the best position both to understand the material being taught and to gauge whether a student sitting in the back row is grasping it. Real accountability takes time. There is no easy formula for getting around that.

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