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Texas students should not take back seat to research

 By **RONALD L. TROWBRIDGE**
 March 30, 2011, 8:16PM

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In "Texas Exes get adviser to UT regents moved" (Page B1, Friday), an assumption is raised that must be challenged. The article, citing "controversial views expressed by ... the Texas Public Policy Foundation, especially regarding university research," includes quotes from some University of Texas supporters and lawmakers that accept and advance the attractive myth that university research is a superior, inviolate good.

Yes and no.

Recently, the Texas Public Policy Foundation commissioned a poll that revealed decisively that Texans believe that educating students should be the primary aim of higher education and that cost overhead should be appreciably cut. We can and should do better at both teaching and research.

The matter has reached even President Obama, who believes we need to increase the number of graduates. Completion rates are dismal, with only 57 percent of those entering college actually achieving a degree.

Students should be first, research second, in the sense of how such research serves students or wider societal needs. Research otherwise can actually interfere with student learning.

As one who has been a tenured university professor, college vice president, director of the Fulbright Program for the United States government, and frequently publishing scholar, I can attest from decades of experience that the singular quest for research can by itself be counterproductive to the education of students. I cite five problematic areas.

First, research often takes good professors out of the classroom. It is a documented fact that at research universities, most introductory courses at freshmen and sophomore levels are taught by young, inexperienced teaching assistants. Many, if not most, professors are given release time from classrooms to pursue research.

But as Derek Bok, former president of Harvard, reveals: "Fewer than half of all university professors publish as much as one article per year." Students, nonetheless, suffer from the absence of good professors.

Second, much research has little, if any, societal value, or is so esoteric that it appeals only to a very few. Harry Lewis, former dean at Harvard, writes: "Professors have become specialized in their interests, which are ever more distant from what ordinary citizens understand or care for." This, he adds, often leads to the publishing of "nonsense."

Third, much research should be funded, not by students and taxpayers, but rather by private-sector entities that such research serves.

We hear often the defense for research that for every dollar spent on research, the university gains multiple times that dollar from the private sector. Then let the private sector provide seed money for self-serving research. Why should we ask students and taxpayers to fund research that serves BP or General Motors?

Fourth, there is some wisdom in poet and critic John Ciardi's quip that "a university is what a college becomes when it has lost interest in students." External matters thereby come first; students last.

And finally, who teaches the freshmen at their most crucial entry into higher education? Some years ago, a parent asked Dartmouth President John Kemeny, "What is the most important question parents should ask in determining where to send their children?" Kemeny responded, "Ask who teaches the freshmen."

At elite research universities, that answer is usually young, inexperienced teaching assistants not much older than freshmen.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation seeks to put students first, valuing research that serves these students or wider societal needs. Toward those ends, we ask for transparency and accountability for use of what is, after all, taxpayer money.

Trowbridge is a resident of The Woodlands and a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a nonprofit, free-market research institute based in Austin. Trowbridge formerly served as vice president of Hillsdale College in Michigan.

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carpenter 12:31 AM on March 31, 2011

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