

University research sometimes at odds with education

By Ronald Trowbridge/Special to the Express-News
Updated 12:01 a.m., Saturday, April 2, 2011

The San Antonio Express-News' March 23 editorial, "Great universities tied to research," requires a challenge. It accepts and advances the attractive myth that university research is a superior, inviolate good, asserting that "A key factor in achieving and maintaining ... elite status is research." Yes and no.

Recently, the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) commissioned a poll that reveals 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 [Barack 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, and director of the Fulbright Program for the [United States Government](#), I can attest from decades of experience that the singular quest for research can be counterproductive to the education of students. I cite five problematic areas.

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

Second, much research has little, if any, societal value, or is so esoteric that it appeals only to few readers. [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 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. We ask for transparency and accountability for use of what is, after all, taxpayer money.

Ronald L. Trowbridge, Ph.D., is a resident of The Woodlands and a Senior Fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

\$25 Car Insurance?

Do Not Buy Car Insurance until you see this shocking
www.News7BreakingNews.com

universities

LeCordonBleu®Austin (Official Site) Financial Aid
www.LeCordonBleuCollege-Austin.com

Innovative Cancer Therapy

Chat Online With A Cancer Info Expert About Today's
www.CancerCenter.com

Ads by Yahoo!

MYSA

- Home
- News
- Blogs
- Business
- Sports
- Columnists
- Editorials
- Education
- Entertainment
- Forums

Life

- Events Calendar
- Multimedia
- National/International
- Obituaries
- Politics
- Travel
- Traffic
- Weather
- Food
- Spurs

TOPICS

- Community
- Health
- Living Green
- SA
- Military
- Outdoors
- Visitors' Guide
- SA Paws
- SA Cultura
- Do Good

MARKETPLACE

- Autos
- Classifieds
- Find San Antonio
- jobs
- Real Estate
- Shopping
- Business Directory
- Fan Shop

COMMUNITY

- SUBMITTED**
- Calendar
- Photos

OTHER EDITIONS

- e-Edition
- Mobile
- Facebook
- Follow us on Twitter

ABOUT US

- About Us
- Contact Us
- Advertise online
- Advertise in print
- Newspaper Delivery
- Place a classified ad
- EN Subscription
- Services
- Buy Photos
- Archives
- Privacy Policy
- Terms and Conditions



© 2011 Hearst Communications Inc.

