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University research sometimes at odds with education

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

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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.

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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



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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.

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Diogenes 12:24 AM on April 2, 2011

If Texans reject research, it is evidence that Texans lack education, at least about the nature of a university and the differences between a university and a community college. Dr. Trowbridge, like me, probably does not understand the research into relativity that Einstein conducted at a university, yet it has had enormous consequences for the world. If professors are limited to research that is funded by private corporations, we would have nothing but Phillip Morris-sponsored studies proving the health benefits of smoking.

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SA_Roy 6:43 AM on April 2, 2011

Most people who are unfamiliar with higher education won't understand Dr. Trowbridge's article. However, there is much truth in it. I might not call most published research "nonsense", but when I see a paper by an assistant professor that is academically correct but solves no practical problem, and this in an engineering journal, I understand where Trowbridge is coming from. It's also true that graduate students as teaching assistants are a form of cheap labor for teaching undergraduates. I escaped that fate by landing a research fellowship that paid for everything without teaching duties. Some of it was paid for with public funds, including defense money. But only the best students are going to do well in a freshman class held in an auditorium, with an instructor that has to use a seating chart because there are a couple of hundred students in the class. That's what you get in a large research university like UT-Austin.

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