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Trowbridge: University research demands transparency and accountability

Ronald L. Trowbridge, Special Contributor

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Published: 8:54 p.m. Thursday, April 14, 2011

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In last Friday's Statesman, four faculty members at the University of Texas-Austin and Texas A&M University criticized a Houston Chronicle op-ed I wrote on higher education research. I have no quarrel with the value of their selected citations of research, but the picture is vastly wider than the one they paint.

In my 49 years of working in higher education as a professor, vice president, frequently publishing scholar, and director of the Fulbright Program for the U.S. government, I have witnessed endlessly that departmental chairs, deans, presidents, and even trustees will rarely intervene to say that any topic of research has little or no value. Nearly anything goes.

As one Texas A&M professor recently wrote to us, "Most of my colleagues acknowledge this privately. To do so publicly would jeopardize their careers. Think about it: Would you tell your boss that the work you're doing, and for which you are highly rewarded, is of little or no practical value? Not only would you irritate your boss, you'd also alienate yourself from your peers who were working hard in the research game."

Harry Lewis, former dean at Harvard, writes: "Academic presses now publish books selling fewer than 300 copies. 'The demands of productivity,' a humanities editor says, 'are leading to the production of much more nonsense.'"

The problem here is that such futile research costs taxpayers and students money, and takes professors out of the classroom—leaving students to be taught by teaching assistants.

A few years ago, the Texas Public Policy Foundation commissioned research on this problem. Researchers found, for example, that at Texas A&M in the spring semester of 2006, there were 28 sections of freshmen Composition and Rhetoric (English 104). All but three of these sections were taught by young, inexperienced teaching assistants. Professors were given release time from the classroom to conduct research.

Yet former Harvard president Derek Bok reports, "Fewer than half of all professors publish as much as one article per year."

When a parent asked John Kemeny, former president of Dartmouth College, what the most important question was that parents should ask in determining where to send their children, Kemeny responded, "Ask who teaches the freshmen."

The public should demand transparency and accountability of both teaching and research.

Retired, I teach as an adjunct at Lone Star Community College just for the pleasure of it; I enjoy seeing light bulbs turn on. Every year, a senior faculty member sits in on my class to evaluate my teaching ability, providing me and the administration with a written evaluation.

University professors are not subjected to this written evaluation process, either for their teaching or their research. Too bad for students.

I got my Ph.D. in English from the University of Michigan where I had some wonderfully inspirational professors. But I also had some lazy duds—I frankly didn't know how they had the nerve to take their paychecks. Accountability would have been in order.

On the matter of accountability, another curious matter arises. Football coaches, who work with bodies, are subject to intense

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accountability. Professors, who work with minds, are not. Go figure.

It is often argued that if we question research, we are "anti-intellectual." This is a non sequitur because research, as Lewis asserts, can be valuable or it can be "nonsense." And Bok reports that professors don't publish as much as we might think.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation seeks to put students first, valuing research that serves these students or wider societal needs. Toward those ends, we do not reject valuable research but rather ask for transparency and accountability for use of what is, after all, taxpayer money.

These four professors—who between them appear to be teaching a grand total of three classes in the current semester—barely scratch the surface on the matter of wider transparency and accountability. Such should be demanded of any public entity that gets public money, including higher education.

Ronald L. Trowbridge is a resident of The Woodlands and a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin

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8:43 AM on April 15, 2011 Report Abuse

Indeed we deserve more accountability and transparency from our state universities. Way too much pork in the budget ... Research is important to the extent it furthers valuable knowledge or can be monetized through commercialization. But academic arrogance does not often tolerate such standards on the campuses we fund. This is an important conversation ... if we care about education quality and fiscal prudence.




tt

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9:30 PM on April 14, 2011 Report Abuse

According to Dissertation Abstracts International, Mr. Trowbridge's Ph.D. research culminated in a thesis titled "The Echoes of Swift and Sterne in the Works of Thomas Carlyle" (U. of Michigan, 1967). Its introduction concludes as follows: "This study proves without doubt that any thorough understanding of Carlyle's formation must include the places of Swift and Sterne."


Rather than call Trowbridge's thesis "nonsense," I'm willing to give it the benefit of the doubt: his research may well discover something important about Carlyle—a very good writer who, though not popular today, is worth studying. I won't judge the thesis by the fact that only two libraries in the world (Michigan and Goettingen) own it. That's not how ideas should be evaluated. Instead, you've got to read the research (and, in this case, Swift, Sterne, and Carlyle).



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