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Texas needs higher education reform

By **DICK ARMEY**
HOUSTON CHRONICLE
April 17, 2011, 9:18PM

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As a former economics professor at Austin College and the University of North Texas, I have seen firsthand the great potential of Texas students in higher education. Yet my 20 years in academia taught me that universities often serve the comfort and security of the faculty rather than fostering the potential of these students.

I applaud Gov. Rick Perry for courageously tackling much needed higher education reform.

Texas students deserve the very best education. As Gov. Perry recently said, "Our universities are not fulfilling their essential mission in our culture, which is to teach our children." For example, the University of Texas at Austin is the highest-ranked university in Texas and has the third-largest endowment in the country. But the latest U.S. News poll ranks UT-Austin as only 47th best in the

nation.

It has become more common for Texans to leave the state to pursue college degrees from higher-ranked universities elsewhere.

Texas clearly has fallen behind other states in higher education. At the same time, tuition at public universities has skyrocketed while Texan families are struggling to make ends meet. Since 1994, tuition at Texas public universities has increased at an average rate of 9.8 percent annually. These soaring costs have done little to help Texas students. A public opinion survey released by the Texas Public Policy Foundation found that 80 percent of Texas voters think Texas colleges and universities can be run more efficiently.

Eliminating tenure offers an important step toward improving education. My university experience suggests that tenure provides everyone who has it the ability to bully everyone who does not.

I strongly believe that tenure is destructive to academic freedom. At a minimum, professors should be required to demonstrate actual teaching skills before receiving tenure.

Taxpayers should not be forced to write a blank check for tenured professors to do as they please. Gov. Perry and I have both recommended free market reforms that would tie school funding to academic results. Gov. Perry has successfully enacted merit pay for K-12 public schooling; a similar system for higher education would likely boost the rankings of our colleges and universities nationwide.

A professor's main goal should be to serve the educational needs of students. Yet in most Texas universities research has displaced teaching. A Texas Performance Review found that the average professor at a research university teaches only 1.9 courses per semester. Roughly 22 percent of faculty members do not teach a single course. We could easily remove administrative bloat and reduce tuition by requiring universities to separate research and teaching budgets.

Another big step would be to restructure university administration in ways that eliminate the faculty's iron grip over questions of governance. Administrators should be allowed to administrate, with a rigorous system of vertical lines of authority. This would eliminate the cronyism that dominates our current universities while allowing decisions on curriculum and personnel to be made on the basis of need and merit creating a more efficient student-centered

environment.

Texas should not settle for anything less than world-renowned universities. The incentives in our higher education system should attract the best professors and researchers in the world and provide our students the best education possible.

Let's start by allowing researchers to keep up to 90 percent of the research dollars they generate instead of the 50 percent that is typically the limit today. Disclosing the salaries of tenured professors would be another useful reform, along with how many students they teach and how many funded research dollars they bring in. At Texas A&M University, only 49 out of 3,000 faculty members brought in enough money to pay for their salaries and overhead over the past five years.

Higher education reform in Texas is a win-win. Professors would be paid based on how well they teach rather than some fancy title and students would receive a better education. These reforms put students first by refocusing the incentives of professors so they better serve the students for which the universities were created.

With tuition rates and taxes at all-time highs, Texas universities are obligated to provide a better service to students. Reform is long overdue. Texas' future competitiveness in the world hangs in the balance.

Arme y, the former majority leader of the House of Representatives, is the chairman of FreedomWorks, a nationwide grass-roots organization fighting for lower taxes, less government and freedom, and the author of "Give Us Liberty: A Tea Party Manifesto."

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UnrepProLib 6:29 AM on April 18, 2011

Tuition at Texas universities rose 58 percent between 2003, when schools were first allowed to set their own rates, and 2007. (7/10/08 Houston Chron) These are real post deregulation stats. Perry, Armev, and their masters have created this problem, and are trying to affix blame on the faculty. Armev needs to stay with his day job as head pimp for the Koch wh**es.

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1 reply



CaliforniaLiving 11:14 AM on April 18, 2011

Dick has a good idea, but it doesn't seem as though he fully understands the workings of an institution of higher learning.

Issue #1: Categorizing the educational contribution of a faculty member by total student count is misleading. Some math profs can teach 300+ student super-lectures multiple times per week to inflate numbers where faculty in the humanities need to focus on student interaction -- 25 students per class, maximum.

Issue #2: Eliminating tenure is a neat idea so long as you are willing to be utterly destroyed (politically) by the faculty unions known as "Academic Senates".

Issue #3: Citizens don't write blank checks to many faculty as most are grant-supported.

Issue #4: Dick states that pay should be tied to academic affect of faculty on students, and gives a general statement that such a system has been enacted in K-12... but gives no hint as to its success. In other words, he's saying, "This experiment is being run on our K-12 teachers and our children, why not run it on more people?" -- That's not good research, that's politics.

Issue #5: Research has not displaced teaching. Research has always ranked more important than teaching at major universities. I'm not saying it's the way things should be, but don't act like there's been some subtle revolution. In college, it's always been that the students are responsible for their own education while the faculty and lecturers are there to provide information and guidance. That's how we can receive full credit for a course with only 3 hours in class per week-- the rest is on the student to learn.

Issue #6: If you allow faculty to keep 90% of their grant money instead of the typical 50%, how in the world would the faculty be supported? Where do you think the money to pay for laboratories, staff salaries, and graduate student funding comes from?

Higher education reform in Texas (and where I'm from in California) would definitely be "win-win" but only if the reformers fully understand the system as is and what the system should be in the future. Dick Armev does not understand it. He may have been a faculty member at one time, but as is the issue with most faculty, he didn't bother to care beyond his own lab or academic papers. He's a better example of the general apathy of the world and people around him that frequently plagues faculty than an insightful fiscal and academic revolutionary.

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georgex 9:56 AM on April 18, 2011

Tenure helps our professors to have freedom of thought and expression and got controlled by politicians like Dick Armev. He is one of the influential people who wish government stav

by politicians like Rick Warren, he is one of the immoral people that governments stay out of the way of corporations and with deregulation they can do whatever to the people. In regards to college education the state has shifted more of the costs to the students over the last 60 years when public college tuition was under a \$100 for full load per semester. This was to make them costs near what the privates charged. He also says taxes are at an all time high which disregards the truth that taxes are historically low.

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