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The abuse of higher education

By **Ronald L. Trowbridge, Ph.D.**

Texas Governor Rick Perry's request for transparency and accountability in higher education has set the faculty furries loose.

On May 16, [Gov. Perry responded](#), "The big lie making the rounds in Texas is that elected or appointed officials want to undermine or deemphasize research at our colleges and universities. That disinformation campaign is nothing more than an attempt to shut down an open discussion about ways to improve our state universities and make them more effective, accountable, affordable and transparent."

What Perry seeks to achieve in Texas would be a laudable goal for every state in the country.

Let me start at the beginning. I began college teaching in 1961 at the University of Michigan. In the '70s I began to witness the steady demise of higher education—not higher *research*, but higher *education*.

Today, higher education is actually abusive—in two ways. One, it is staggeringly and unnecessarily expensive. Two, too many good teachers are taken out of the classroom.

How did we get in this mess?

It began in the '70s with the glut of Ph.D. graduates. I watched it happen with my colleagues. With more and more applicants applying for fewer and fewer positions, administrators needed new ways to distinguish among candidates. As it would be difficult to assess teaching abilities of a new Ph.D. candidate, focus switched to the quality of their publications.

It logically followed that publication replaced teaching; education became replaced with research. Publication was first, students came second. Prestige and image outside the classroom replaced teaching within it.

When I began university teaching, the average teaching load was five classes, or 15 credit hours per semester. It then dropped to four classes, then to three classes, and then today commonly to two or even a mere one class. Reduced teaching loads were granted so that professors could conduct research. It was now the external prestige of the university that mattered—more so than the internal education of students.

But much research has now become virtually worthless. I could cite a plethora of examples to support my charge, but let me cite just three representative examples.

John Silber, former dean at the University of Texas-Austin and president of Boston University, recently told the [Texas Tribune](#) that many products of research "aren't worth anything."

Hofstra University law professor [Richard Neumann](#) reported at a conference this April that it costs approximately \$100,000 for a tenured law professor to publish one article per year and that 43 percent of law review articles are never cited by anyone. In Neumann's words, "At least a third of these things have no value."

[World Shakespeare Bibliography](#) reports that from 1980 to mid-2010, there were 39,222 scholarly articles published on Shakespeare. Professors can research and publish anything they wish; it's a free country. But should they be given reduced teaching loads, at student and taxpayer expense, to publish the 39,223rd article?

Today, countless professors are virtually semi-retired. They teach one or two classes, totaling often some 40 students a semester. Their salaries are in six figures, and they teach 30 weeks a year, with 22 weeks off. Once they get tenure, indolence often sets in and they don't have to research or publish anything.

A study released this May by the [Center for College Affordability and Productivity](#) revealed that of the roughly 4,200 faculty members at the University of Texas-Austin, the 840 most productive teachers taught 57 percent of all student credit hours, while the least productive 840 taught only 2 percent of all student credit hours. For the lower 80 percent of faculty, the average teaching load was 63 students per year.

CCAP reported that if the lower 80 percent of faculty taught just half the load of the top 20 percent – roughly 150 students per year – UT-Austin would save more than a quarter billion dollars per year. That savings would be enough to reduce tuition by more than half.

I suspect that many universities in the country aren't as bad as UT, but abuse is nonetheless rife. Too many students are taught by young, inexperienced teaching assistants, and costs continue to rise exorbitantly.

Residents in every state should put relentless pressure on regents and trustees of universities to demand transparency and accountability of teaching loads and research. Of research, the public and regents must ask: how does each research project serve either students or wider societal needs?

Administrators and faculty will fight this exposure tooth and nail, but they must be held accountable

for expenditure of public money. Only then will we get the best worlds of teaching and research.

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