



# Trowbridge: Higher education needs reform

Posted: July 24, 2011 - 4:34am

The Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education recently formed to defend the status quo against the efforts of university regents to promote transparency and accountability in higher education.

Yet there is much about the status quo that simply cannot be defended.

Higher education today needs reform in two ways. First, by reducing its staggeringly and unnecessarily high costs; and second, by increasing instructional quality, which has suffered as many good professors have taken themselves out of the classroom to be replaced with inexperienced part-timers and teaching assistants.

When I began university teaching in the 1960s, the average teaching load was five classes per semester. It then dropped to four classes, then to three, and now commonly to two or even one class per semester. Reduced teaching loads permitted professors to conduct research.

The 1970s began a glut of Ph.D graduates. I watched it happen with my colleagues. With more applicants applying for fewer positions, administrators needed new ways to distinguish among qualified candidates. It became difficult to assess teaching abilities of new Ph.D graduates, and the focus switched to their publications.

It logically followed that publication began to supersede teaching — education was in large measure replaced with research, and publishing took priority over teaching. Prestige and image outside the classroom became more important than teaching within it. It was now the external image of the university that mattered more than the internal education of students.

A recent study by the Center for College Affordability and Productivity revealed that at the University of Texas-Austin, 80 percent of all professors teach on average only 63 students a year, or 32 students a semester. Such a light teaching load is exorbitantly expensive to students and taxpayers.

We agree with UT-Austin President Bill Powers that there are some benefits of smaller classes. Our disagreement is not necessarily the size of classes, but the number of them. If professors taught more, we could have more students being taught better — by actual professors often in smaller classes.

With greater productivity, student tuition and taxpayer subsidies could be appreciably lowered.

The average college senior now graduates with more than \$23,000 in outstanding loans. By the end of 2011, U.S. student-loan debt will reach \$1 trillion. Since 1994, the average tuition at Texas public universities has increased roughly 10 percent per year — and at least 5 percent in every year.

What about the supposed harm to the image of Texas universities? What harm is there in replacing young teaching assistants with experienced professors? What harm is there to students and the public in making college more affordable so that tuition and taxpayer subsidies can be reduced?

Only at our top public universities, UT-Austin and Texas A&M University, does the 4-year graduation rate top 50 percent — and barely. One reason five- and six-year graduation rates are so much higher than four-year rates is because too many students have to work full-time and study part-time because college costs so much.

If Texas can increase teaching expectations of its full-time faculty, it can achieve substantial cost efficiencies. If those efficiencies are applied toward reducing tuition, more students would be financially able to take a full-time student load. And if more students are able to finish their degrees promptly, that would free up more spaces enabling more students to receive a Texas higher education.

How would any of these developments harm the images of our Texas public universities?

John Stuart Mill's insight explains why open exposure and debate over higher education is healthy. Any opinion, he writes, "very commonly does contain a portion of truth; and since the general or prevailing opinion on any subject is rarely or never the whole truth, it is only by the collision of adverse opinions that the truth has any chance of being supplied."

Regents should open the doors and windows of the ivory towers and let the constructive collisions begin in earnest.

Ronald L. Trowbridge is a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Comment

Share

2

Recommend

Follow This Article