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GUEST COLUMN: Where are the higher education reform ideas?

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August 05, 2011 6:00 AM

William Murchison

One thing about a good ruckus: it gets everybody talking about whatever problem is at hand. One thing it doesn't do is guarantee that out of the talking will come panoply of useful solutions.

Take the current controversy over reducing fast-rising costs at Texas public colleges and universities, which didn't turn into a controversy until leading lights of the academic establishment took umbrage at the idea of outsiders looking over their shoulders.

You'd have thought some regional convention of mouth-organ players had proposed touching up Beethoven's Ninth.

Sober-minded proposals to get more teachers teaching, and at reasonable cost, have lacked an important complement: namely, a counter set of proposals which people of varied philosophical dispositions could sift through, prior to ironing out differences and moving on.

The nearest thing thus far to a creative response is the naming of a University of Texas task force in July to study ways of reducing costs and increasing academic achievement.

As it happens, the chairman of the task force has rejected practically every outside proposal he and the University have so far encountered.

The essential question is where does this get us? If public, taxpayer-supported universities declare themselves off limits for new thinking by taxpayers, such changes as the universities actually implement may amount more to feather-dusting and furniture-rearrangement than anything else. Texas academicians who suppose themselves somehow singled out for callous criticism ought to get over it.

The problems of the universities have a universality too rarely acknowledged: high costs reflected in ever-higher rates of tuition; over-staffing; a 50 percent increase in graduation time for many students, compared with the traditional four years; the durable effects of parceling out lifetime jobs through the tenure process. On and on.

"(H)igher education," says The Economist, "is ... marred by inefficiencies and skewed incentives ... Industries that cease to offer value for money sooner or later get shaken up. American universities are ripe for shaking."

Meanwhile some within the universities themselves are starting to stir and ask important questions. The July 15 Chronicle of Higher Education cites a new Chronicle-Moody's Investors Service survey of college chief financial officers, who said — unsurprisingly — that times are tight.

Asked to name the one strategy they would use to address cost issues "if they didn't have to worry about consequences," nearly two in five said teaching loads should be increased. Another 17 percent said, "eliminate tenure."

Moody's John C. Nelson, who works with colleges and universities, said, yep: Faculty productivity is "the last big area where there are really material efficiencies" to be found.

Another consultant said the CFOs are far from blaming faculty for bad work habits. "But they question the current form of the faculty model, which still allows for senior professors to teach under-enrolled classes and degree programs and gives administrators little ability to dictate when and how classes are taught, and whether that model can be sustained financially."

See? This isn't kooky stuff, this notion, this intuition, that particular things can't keep going on the way they currently are at great universities.

Nor does it make sense to see outside critics as bearers of animosity toward schools their proposals are meant to rescue and fortify, rather than sabotage and degrade.

Who's got it in, really, for the University of Texas? Not even the once-reliable Aggies: collaborators more than anything else these days in the great enterprise of moving Texas forward.

From inside the circled wagon train where defenders of established academic ways blaze away at critics, it would

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be nice to see ideas, rather than rifle smoke, rising.

Ideas for controlling tuition, improving graduation rates, making better use of the best professors, etc.

The newly formed Texas Coalition for Excellence in Higher Education has declared that "the question is not whether higher education needs to improve, but how to effect change in a constructive way."

Indeed. All we need now are some proposals.

William Murchison is a senior fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation, a non-profit, free-market research institute based in Austin.

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- Yes, this is a Christian nation, and it's fine for politicians to act accordingly.**
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- I don't care. It's just a political stunt.**

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