

Rick Perry Is a Higher-Education Visionary. Seriously.

Kevin Carey | August 25, 2011 | 12:00 am | 20 comments

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Rick Perry is wrong about many things, including (but not limited to) the reality of climate change, the treasonous nature of quantitative easing, and the execution of innocent men. But give the man credit: He's got some smart ideas about higher education. The fact that most liberals think otherwise reveals a glaring weakness in the progressive education agenda.

Perry's push to reform the academy came late in his decade-long tenure as Texas governor, after he finished filling the state's public university governing boards with his personal appointees. In 2008, he urged university leaders to begin implementing "Seven Breakthrough Solutions" for reforming higher education that had been developed by the conservative Texas Public Policy Foundation.

Taken together, the seven solutions are remarkably student-friendly. Four of them focus on improving the quality of university teaching by developing new methods of evaluating teaching performance, tying tenure to success in the classroom, separating the teaching and research functions within university budgets, and using teaching budgets to reward professors who excel at helping students learn. The fifth solution would give prospective students choosing colleges more information about things like class size, graduation rates, and earnings in the job market after graduation. The sixth would make state higher education subsidies more student-focused, and the seventh would shift university accreditation toward measures of academic outcomes.

Anyone who has suffered through a mind-numbing university lecture or signed up for a star professor's course, only to be taught by an indentured graduate teaching assistant with a tenuous grasp of the English language, knows that university teaching is often terrible. A landmark study of college student learning published earlier this year by the sociologists Richard Arum and Josipa Roksa of NYU and the University of Virginia found that "American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students, and persistent or growing [race- and income-based] inequalities over time." Fixing this problem ought to be a bipartisan concern.

But when Texas universities began implementing the seven solutions, academe went apoplectic. Last year, the Texas A&M system published a report comparing the salaries of individual professors to their teaching loads and their success in garnering external research funding. Most professors were pulling their weight. But some were enjoying fat, publicly-funded salaries while doing little work in return. Data from the University of Texas system yielded similar results. At UT-Austin, one group of 1,748 mostly-tenured professors, representing 44 percent of the faculty, generated 54 percent of institutional costs, taught only 27 percent of students, and brought in no external research funding whatsoever.

Like bad teaching, the reality of freeloading professors is openly acknowledged on college campuses. And like bad teaching, it is confirmed by research from within the academy itself. Lawrence Martin, Dean of the Graduate School at SUNY-Stony Brook, has compiled a database of scholarly productivity—including books, journal articles, citations, research grants, and awards—for every tenure-track professor in America. He found that while the top 20 percent of professors are producing a remarkable amount of work, "in most fields for which journal publishing would be expected, fully 20 percent of the faculty associated in Ph.D. training programs have not authored or co-authored a single publication in one of the 16,000 journals indexed" in the previous three years. The fact that some of these laggards simultaneously enjoy light teaching loads is galling.

The backlash against Perry’s agenda came quickly. A group of prominent A&M alumni wrote an open letter calling the reform efforts “damaging,” “self-serving,” and “naive.” More ominously, the president of the Association of American Universities, a cabal of elite research institutions, took the unusual step of sending A&M a public warning. With all the subtlety of a mob enforcer telling a shopkeeper that he’s a got a nice business here and wouldn’t it be a shame if anything happened to it, the AAU president informed the A&M chancellor that “Recent proposals that have been advanced by the Texas Public Policy Foundation, and apparently supported by some regents and Governor Perry, appear to diverge” from the research mission that had won A&M admission to the prestigious AAU in 2001.

Perry’s next big higher education announcement, made during his 2011 State of the State address, challenged public universities to use information technology to create a bachelor’s degree program that would cost students only \$10,000—total. The price of higher education has skyrocketed in recent decades, growing even faster than the health care costs that are threatening to send the federal government into bankruptcy. At the same time, online higher education has grown exponentially, with 5.6 million students—nearly 30 percent of the total—taking at least one online course. A U.S. Department of Education study found that online learning environments are often as good or better than traditional instruction, and for-profit giants like the University of Phoenix have used the cost-saving powers of technology to generate huge profits for shareholders. What nobody has done, however, is use technology to make a serious dent in the cost of public universities. Yet critics dismissed Perry’s idea as “preposterous” and “absurd.”

(continued on next page)

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