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Opinion: How come shared governance always excludes conservatives

SEP 28 Written by: William Lutz
9/28/2011 10:42 AM

At last week's hearing of the Select Committee on Higher Education Governance, Excellence, and Transparency, one of the committee's co-chairs, Sen. Judith Zaffirini (D-Laredo) continuously said that all the committee was seeking was an open, collaborative process.

I've heard this refrain before. School districts often create committees before floating a bond issue to create an "open, collaborative" process. But the superintendent creates and stacks the committee with an end goal in mind - getting public blessing for a specific set of building projects. Conservatives who object are often listened to politely, and then their "input" is ignored when the final report comes out.

I maintain the real purpose of this committee is to scuttle conservative reforms to higher education proposed by Gov. Rick Perry and the Texas Public Policy Foundation. This committee is about preserving the sacred cows in higher education - such as nonstop tuition increases and the ability of faculty members at flagship universities to get away with teaching a mere two courses a semester. And the committee was stacked for that purpose.

That's why I've nicknamed this committee the Select Committee to Preserve Cost Explosion and Left-Wing Bias in Higher Education. When all is said and done, that's what this committee is designed to do, and every Texas conservative ought to be concerned.

Traditionally, I have given Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst the benefit of the doubt. Taken as a whole, he's racked up a decent conservative record. But I am profoundly disappointed by the way he's handled higher education issues the past four years, and this committee is but the most recent example.

This committee does not reflect today's Texas Senate. The senators on the committee are evenly divided between Republicans and Democrats - even though the Senate has a 19-12 Republican majority -- and a Democrat who is notoriously favorable to UT administrators is co-chair.

What bothers me most isn't who *is* on the committee, it's who's *not* on the committee. The most prominent conservative critics of tuition deregulation or higher education in general have been excluded. Sens. Tommy Williams (R-The Woodlands), Steve Ogden (R-Bryan), Brian Birdwell (R-Granbury, vice chair of standing committee on higher education), Dan Patrick (R-Houston), Jane Nelson (R-Lewisville), Troy Fraser (R-Horseshoe Bay) or Florence Shapiro (R-Plano, chair of Senate Education Committee) all would have made excellent members of this committee, and all weren't named.

But they all have one thing in common - they've all publicly expressed concerns about tuition deregulation and cost increases in higher education, and that's why they aren't on this committee. By any measure, the Senators on this committee are to the left of the Senate as a whole and more favorable to the University of Texas administration than the senate as a whole.

There is one vocal critic of tuition deregulation on the committee - Sen. Rodney Ellis (D-Houston). It's a pretty sad day in Texas when Rodney Ellis is what passes for a budget hawk.

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For all the controversy about Speaker Joe Straus, he appointed a fair and balanced committee. First, he named a Republican majority. Second, Straus included one House member who has dared to criticize University of Texas administrators in public, Rep. Lois Kolkhorst (R-Brenham). The House members of this committee are much more reflective of the views of house members on higher education issues than the analagous comparison for the senate members.

In all fairness, last week's hearing exceeded my low expectations. The Texas Public Policy Foundation was allowed to get one panelist named for invited testimony. It wasn't quite the UT administration cheerleading session I expected. But there was a clear message - regents, keep your nose out of the administration's business.

In the end, that's why I think all this is controversial. Texas governors traditionally appointed regents as a reward for party service or campaign contributions, and they generally rubber stamped what was put in front of them, perhaps with minor alteration. Perry just appointed a slate of regents who reflect his policy views and agenda, which is exactly what a governor is supposed to do.

What is more important, process or result? This committee is supposed to examine "best practices," but what happens when national "best practices" bankrupt a generation and fail the public?

Costs are out of control in higher education nationally. Research is esoteric and distanced from the real concerns of real people. That's why many recent college graduates are woefully unprepared for the workplace. We don't rank universities based on what is learned in a classroom.

Perry wants to start fixing these problems. Academics benefit from these problems.

Perhaps the best example of what's wrong with higher education nationally occurred recently at the University of Texas at Austin. A few professors led by Robert Koons created a Program in Western Civilization and American Institutions. It created a firestorm with faculty leaders. Despite the fact that UT has many ethnic and area studies programs, creating a program that portrays the United States of America or Western Civilization positively is a major no-no in academia.

In the wake of the firestorm, Dean of Liberal Arts Randy Diehl - with the support of President Bill Powers -- removed Koons as director. The program got renamed "The Thomas Jefferson Center for the Study of Core Ideas." Note the removal of the words "American" and "Western" from the program's name. Academic freedom doesn't exist anymore if one is conservative.

Imagine what would happen if someone tried to convert the African-American Studies program into the George Washington Carver Center for the Study of Multicultural Ideas. Democrats wouldn't take that sitting down, but conservatives are so used to being excluded from higher education that many GOP politicians are allowing Powers and Diehl to get away with this attack on Texas values.

The Seven Solutions and Perry's higher education agenda are not secret. They were unveiled at public meetings and press conferences. But they do seek to control costs and shake up the status quo.

All this talk of shared governance has one goal in mind - stopping conservative reform and turning on the spigot of government cash again. This committee - and higher education generally -- ought to be judged by its results, and so far those leave a lot to be desired.

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