

180 University of Texas and the future of higher education

Well, that was easy. Then, again, words like "easy" or "simple" or "painless" need to go under the table when the topic is university reform.



William Murchison

Try "miraculous," in that the great majority of commentators on University of Texas Chancellor Francisco Cigarroa's \$243.6 million framework for overhaul of his impressive – if sometimes unwieldy – institution claim to like the result.

Why shouldn't they? Cigarroa bridged philosophical gaps and bound up wounds while devising a strategy theoretically capable of delivering an educational product tailored to the century we're in, rather than the one we left behind a decade ago.

Let's assume and hope at the same time the chancellor means to go whole hog on his plan, with the whole-hog support of the same UT Board of Regents that gave the plan a unanimous thumbs-up. Let's go even further than that.

The UT system is anything but unique in facing modern challenges and inefficiencies, including rising costs, stretched-out graduation rates, high student debt, and classroom shortages of veteran faculty. The Cigarroa plan rings most of the right bells in the Lone Star State. Why couldn't the same ideas, carried out with diligence and precision, work elsewhere?

There's a laboratory feel to the plan: the odor of crucibles, the glint of test tubes. Preliminary results should be fairly swift in coming.

Cigarroa, a transplant surgeon familiar with the scientific method, has made of his reform framework an up-and-running action plan. ("That's like private-sector fast," one regent says admiringly.) Everyone will soon enough find out the direction things are going.

And where's that likely to be? Away from the immediate past, is the short answer. Toward a future in which, we have to hope, student

needs (smaller loans, better teaching) match up with academic doctrines (tenure systems, bias toward research over direct instruction).

Accordingly, the UT system's 15 campuses will offer online measurements of productivity and efficiency at different schools and departments. That's with the help of a "dashboard" that the website MyEdu in Austin will tailor for the system. Users will find on it astoundingly (by present standards) detailed information about professors and departments, including salaries and student evaluations.

The system will push policies, including tuition incentives, likely to make graduation happen in the once-traditional four years, rather than the five or six now widely customary.

So-called "blended" and online learning will draw emphasis through a new, lower-cost Institute for Transformational Learning. Faculty should benefit from incentive-based pay. Post-tenure review is a way of checking on performance without overturning the tenure system itself.

The needs of South Texas' large and growing Hispanic population gain important recognition via the implementation of admissions standards at UT's Brownsville campus. The implication: Systemwide expectations are on the rise; UT wants the most it can get out of all its graduates.

The framework accords individual institutions to devise their own responses to overall objectives. No one-size-fits-all stuff.

Equally notable is a provision making sure it all happens. The regents don't mean to walk away while gazing at the sky, hoping everyone gets the big idea. There is supposed to be follow-up of a constant and rigorous variety. We have to hope so, in that the Cigarroa framework enjoys such wide favor and high hopes.

No grand visionary plan, it must be acknowledged, ever pans out exactly as drafted. Circumstances intervene. New challenges and new critics arise. Tweaks and adjustments follow.

Nonetheless, here goes our second-biggest state's biggest university system into the cauldron of long-over-

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due experimentation. The worst that can happen, maybe, is that we see what doesn't work and get to looking for something that does.

The eyes of America may be on Texas less than Texas likes to suppose, but here is a venture in educational statesmanship worth watching

with a careful eye. If this thing works in Texas the way it's meant to, well, who knows, where it could go?

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