



Policy *Perspective*

Bringing Competition to Higher Education in Texas *The Role of For-Profit Universities*

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This paper is the 4th in a series on the state of higher education in Texas.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Encourage for-profit universities to expand in Texas.
- Create accreditation alternatives at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for colleges and universities that promise and deliver results.
- Shift the vast majority of higher education funding from the state legislature into scholarships and loans so students can choose the education that best fits them.
- Require all colleges—for-profit and not-for-profit—to fully disclose the results they promise to deliver.

As Texas' growing population and vibrant economy brings an ever-increasing demand for higher education opportunities around the state, it is imperative that the state's institutions of higher education are prepared to meet these new demands.

The typical college student in 2007 is far different than most people imagine. Contrary to the popular images of college life, only about seven percent of college students are 18-to-22-years old, live on campus, and study liberal arts. Today, colleges and universities have more non-traditional students looking to obtain or build skills for a wide variety of technical careers, more first-time college students for whom the residential college experience is less important than staying close to home and working, and, too often, students who have left their K-12 education ill-prepared for college.

Just as students and their needs change from one generation to the next, so too should the colleges they attend; however, many of the state's colleges and universities are oblivious to these changing needs and the need for innovation. A combination of state funding and protection from competitive for-profit institutions of higher education insulates Texas public and private colleges and universities from competition.

Dr. Richard Vedder, an economist at Ohio University, scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and recent author of the book *Going Broke By Degree: Why College Costs Too Much*, testified on the need for greater compe-

tion in higher education before the United States House Committee on Education and the Workforce. In his testimony he argues that without a bottom line in higher education, evaluating performance is difficult. Yet, he contrasts the insular and protected nature of public higher education with the marketplace at large, testifying:

In the private for-profit sector, when the prices for products rise with increased demand, profit margins widen and this unleashes a torrent of entrepreneurial activity, as firms scramble to get a share of the highly profitable market. The rise in demand induces an increase in supply, which ultimately leads to prices and profits falling to a more normal level. This has not happened in higher education. While it is true that institutions are competitive with one another, they do not vigorously compete on price, as they do not have the profit incentives to induce them to alter their behavior in response to changing market conditions.

By fundamentally changing the allocation of higher education funding, and directing money to students—not to institutions—students would become the real customers of higher education institutions.

By refocusing colleges and universities on the real customers and allowing students to drive the dollars to the school, colleges and universities will have a new incentive to compete for students. However, simply putting the purchasing power for higher education with the students themselves will not be enough to motivate true competition if the state's public

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and private colleges and universities are protected from new competitors through public policy or accreditation roadblocks.

The way past these roadblocks can be discerned by examining for-profit universities, which are focused on a mission aligned with what many students, parents, and taxpayers want from a university—delivering the tools, skills and knowledge graduates need to compete in the changing economy. Without the subsidies to fill the gaps, failure to meet the needs of their customers drives these institutions out of business. Accordingly, for-profit universities cost less than traditional universities, adapt and expand rapidly to the changing demands of students, and put a premium on efficiency in teaching and administration.

QuickFact:

The United States spends about \$750 billion on education with about \$340 billion going to higher education.

INTRODUCING COMPETITION IN HIGHER EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF FOR-PROFIT HIGHER EDUCATION

The United States “spends more on education than any other nation—about \$750 billion, more than twice as much as on defense, with about \$340 billion going to higher education.”¹ “Of the \$750 billion spent annually, 75 percent is publicly funded and controlled by what might be called the educational establishment, which industry analysts refer to as a bureaucratic monopoly.”² “As large and diverse as it is, the for-profit sector is still a relatively small part of the total education industry, representing approximately 10 percent or \$70 billion of the total \$750 billion spent annually in the United States.”³

Nonetheless, the proprietary-school landscape in the United States is growing and becoming more diverse. “Approximately 7,000 such schools offer instruction beyond the secondary level in such fields as commercial art, electronics, food services and culinary arts, interior design, medical services, photography, and transportation. In terms of numbers

of postsecondary schools, the for-profit sector is, and probably always has been, at least as large as the non-profit sector. In recent years, however, it has become more visible, and ... is the only segment of the higher-education industry that continues to grow.”⁴

The latest surge in for-profit education began in the early 1990s. “In 1991 there was only one for-profit postsecondary, degree-granting, accredited institution listed on the stock exchanges—DeVry, Inc. Eight years later there were 40, of which 16 were ‘major players’ according to industry analysts.”⁵

“In the five years between 1994 and 1999 more than \$4.8 billion in private investment capital was raised, through more than 30 initial public offerings and 30 follow-on offerings, to support new entries into the for-profit education market. An estimated \$500 million was raised in 1999 alone.”⁶

Despite this astounding growth, the rate of expansion would have been much faster were it not for higher education accrediting agencies. These accreditation agencies, staffed by volunteers from traditional universities, are hostile to competition from the for-profit universities. They reject for-profit universities’ focus on results, instead preferring to focus on “input measures” like counting how many Ph.D.’s are on a faculty.

Corporate America, unsatisfied with the results from traditional academia, also has entered the higher education business. “Some estimates show that 10 percent, or \$60 billion, of the total education budget is spent on workplace training and that over an eight-year time span in the 1990s corporate universities grew from 400 to 1,000 institutions while at the same time 200 colleges closed their doors.... In 1998, 18 percent of American companies offered remedial math and reading skills courses.”⁶

Michael Heise, director of the Center for Education Law and Policy at Indiana University, predicts that for-profit universities will grow “until they represent approximately 25 percent of the postsecondary market in terms of total dollars spent annually.” “Investors are chiseling away at the dam of the last remaining government monopoly in the world. Were the dam to break, I expect there would be a flood of investment in educational research and development.”⁸

HOW FOR-PROFIT UNIVERSITIES WORK

So how can for-profit universities, with far lower name recognition, prestige, and resources be more efficient and effective than traditional universities? Quite simply, the for-profits have proven that they can deliver better results, at a lower cost, by running a university like a business that serves and values customers, instead of an institution that serves its tenured faculty.

Traditional universities believe that colleges are extremely complicated labyrinths of intrigue, impossible to fully understand or manage. They see research and education more as alchemy, and thus difficult to measure or organize.

For-profit universities see education as a business. “The essential business dynamics of education, from the perspective of outside business experts looking in, are perceived to be relatively simple compared with those of other industries.”⁹

First, they decide which segment of students they will serve. Then, they decide which skills, tools and knowledge students need to learn. They design a coherent curriculum to deliver these results, a teaching approach that works and a system for measuring progress. They hire teachers who like to teach and pay them for teaching. They hire department heads,

deans and presidents and give them incentives to reach bottom-line results that require the group to serve students in an efficient and effective way.

It is not hard to understand how for-profit universities can be more efficient than traditional universities.

Traditional universities focus on attracting only the best and brightest applicants, “which has fueled the creation of costly amenities, especially those related to expenditures on the physical plant budgets, which may have little to do, directly, with the quality of education. The for-profits, on the other hand, keep costly amenities to a minimum by offering a no-frills alternative, allocating resources instead to expenses that have a direct relationship to student education, such as classroom facilities, instructional laboratories, and educational technology.”¹⁰

As one for-profit educator puts it,

“The emphasis in the for-profits, however, is not on running large classes but on reducing and eliminating very small ones. On my DeVry campus, with 3,500 students, the average class size is 37, and the largest classes have 65 students. Classes in some areas of the curriculum, such as composition, are kept to an average of 27. Like almost all the for-profits, DeVry has found that classes in the range of 30 to 40 students seem to optimize learning, student retention, and efficient deployment of the faculty. However, great care is taken in designing and managing the class schedule to avoid small classes, say, below 15.”¹¹

In addition, for-profit universities have an “obsessive preoccupation with new ideas and innovation.” One observer noted,

“Those I interviewed express a feeling of freedom and lack of limits: ‘Pick your goal. Because this institution will not limit you.’... A number of the interview subjects comment

TalkingPoint:

For-profits have proven that they can deliver better results, at a lower cost, by running a university like a business that serves and values customers.

very simply on wanting to do interesting work. I think my calling is really to do interesting work wherever I happen to find it."¹²

Market forces require for-profit universities to update courses frequently. "Curricula must be updated quickly and continuously, new programs must be developed and launched while the market need is extant, and existing courses and programs that no longer meet current demand must be dropped. Many traditional, non-profit colleges and universities are unresponsive or slow to respond in these ways because they are discipline-driven, not market-driven."¹³

An example of such innovation is the "new e-textbook effort at the University of Phoenix, which switches the course content over to digitized custom textbooks. Pushing the textbook companies with growing clout, the University of Phoenix is revolutionizing how course content is created and distributed. In its initial stages, not only will this new program make the books available to students in digital formats, but also the books will be customized for the University of Phoenix."¹⁴

MEASURING FOR-PROFIT SUCCESS

For-profit universities have two types of oversight. First, and most important, they have oversight from their customers who have received clear learning contracts that spell out the measurable results they can expect. If a for-profit university fails to deliver, word spreads and students stop applying. Second, the for-profit universities are more highly scrutinized by regulators and accreditation agencies than traditional universities.

As an educator at the University of Phoenix describes:

"We've got to be the most highly analyzed institution out there. We've had more accreditation reviews from NCA and programmatic accreditation reviews. And every time we go into a

*new state they do a review. It never ceases to amaze me how many of these reviewers come in and think they're going to cut through that Potemkin village they perceive as here—that there is some smoking gun they're going to uncover. I can't imagine any rock that has not been unturned in this place."*¹⁵

Accordingly, the for-profits "devote considerable time and resources to understanding who their customers are and how to meet their needs, interests and demands. They do this through a combination of market research, typically conducted by the corporate headquarters offices, industry advisory boards and student focus groups at the local campuses, and customer-relations training for staff employees who deal directly with students."¹⁶

A key to the effectiveness of the for-profits is setting a learning contract that includes measurable deliverables.

"If it moves, we measure it." For-profits "measure students not only in the cognitive fields, but also in the affective realm with pre- and post-instruments in their degree program. At the University of Phoenix, they manage through attention to data on customer service and on meeting educational objectives. A primary part of the assessment process is to identify the key criteria that they value, and then measure how well they are meeting that goal."¹⁷

MEETING ITS MISSION

According to one observer, "for-profit providers have highly focused missions, targeted to specific market segments, particular industries, and limited to specific fields of study."¹⁸

By comparison, the missions of traditional universities may attempt to meet a number of priorities. Traditional university mission statements describe the "pursuit of knowledge" and other lofty sounding goals, but seem

torn about whether the needs of the tenured faculty, the students, or the community come first. It is even unclear in traditional universities what the objective is when it comes to educating students. Elite universities promise a high quality education, but there is strong evidence to suggest that prestigious universities have smart graduates because they skim the most talented applicants, not because they educate students.

Perhaps because for-profit universities have been forced to develop a niche in the marketplace, competing head-to-head with public two-year and four-year institutions, the for-profits have developed an identity in building market share in ways that are unconventional for non-profits. Indeed the for-profits realize the high cost of neglecting and writing off a large segment of the population with selectivity, opting instead to attract new students to a new model of higher education.¹⁹ In fact, there are any number of ways for-profits have decided to do this, as proven by one for-profit institution who sees as its mission “to enroll students with creative ability who may have a lackluster academic track record but are

highly motivated to acquire the skills and the college degree they need in order to practice their vocation.”²⁰

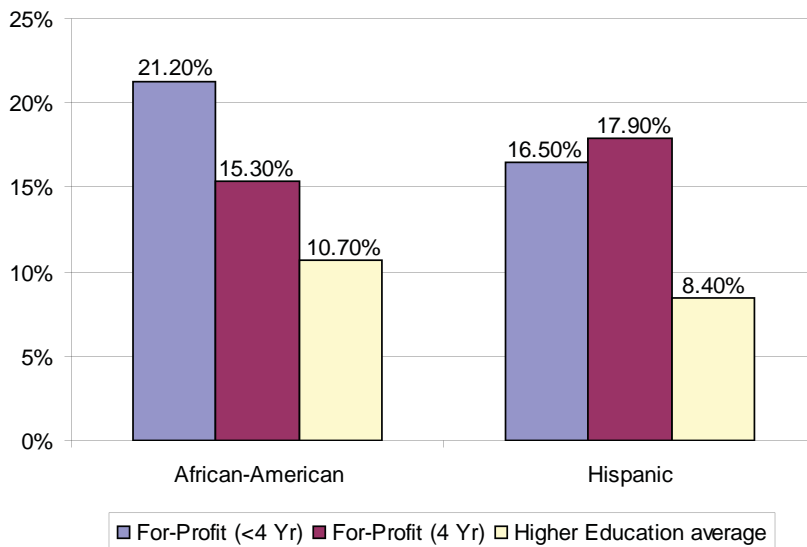
Ultimately, the primary objective of a for-profit university is to be a successful business serving as many qualified customers as possible. As one observer notes: “One of their business drivers is providing greater access to higher education, which is one of the points at which economic opportunity meets social good. For example, African-American students have continued to sustain distinctively high enrollments in for-profit higher education.”²¹

Not surprisingly, given these beliefs, “the journal *Black Issues in Higher Education* has reported that of the top 100 institutions awarding degrees to people of color in 1998, proprietary colleges were major providers.”²²

COMPETITION AND CHANGING DEMOGRAPHICS, CHANGING NEEDS

Again, only about 7 percent of college students are between the age of 18 and 22 years

FIGURE 1: FOR-PROFIT MINORITY ENROLLMENT SUCCESS



Source: Ruch, Richard S., “Higher Ed, Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University” (The John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

TalkingPoint:

Of the top 100 institutions awarding degrees to people of color in 1998, proprietary colleges were major providers.

old, living on campus, and pursuing liberal arts degrees.²³ In fact, over half of all college students in America are adults, many working part-time and an increasing number come from demographic groups that have been underserved by traditional universities.

Perhaps the biggest change in higher education over the past few decades has been the entrance in large numbers of adult learners, who are specifically targeted by the for-profits.²⁴ By the late 1990s, national attendance figures showed that 42 percent of the undergraduate and 59 percent of the graduate students attended part-time.²⁵ As one educator put it, “The focus on access for the underserved has shifted to the adult learners flooding universities.”²⁶

For-profit universities have proven to be extremely effective at enrolling hard to reach demographic groups than traditional universities, attracting up to twice the percentage of African-American and Hispanic students.

“Many factors account for the high minority enrollments in for-profit schools, including the location of the schools in population centers, fewer barriers to admission, high placement rates, and the availability of the full spectrum of financial aid.”²⁷

“Another important difference is the cultural perceptions connected to the residential college experience. For many families with a history of going onto college as 18-year-olds, the experience of leaving home and living in a residence hall is strongly connected to the quality of the educational experience. However, often for first generation college students, the residential experience is less important. Close family ties and cultural attitudes about staying close to the family are often more important.”²⁸

The average student at a for-profit school generally fits the following description:

- 27-year old female;
- ethnic minority (African-American, Hispanic, or Asian);
- U.S. citizen;
- married, with one or two dependents;
- holds a full- or part-time job while going to school full-time; and
- has some prior college experience.²⁹

“By one account, for-profit institutions enroll only 8 percent of postsecondary students, but they enroll 16 percent of all black students, 14 percent of Hispanic students, and 4 percent of Native American students.”³⁰ “The for-profits also tend to attract a higher proportion of women and minority students.”³¹

In sum, it appears true that for-profits do appeal to a great extent to minority populations because of their attention to educational attributes that adult learners value such as practical degrees, financial aid, and convenient locations and formats.³²

MEETING DEMAND

Another advantage of the for-profits is that they are built to scale. In fact, the University of Phoenix now has over 300,000 students in comparison to the largest public campus in the U.S., the University of Texas-Austin, which has approximately 50,000 students.³³

There was a 266 percent growth in the number of four-year, for-profits between 1989 and 1998.³⁴ “Since 1990 the number of for-profit, degree-granting college and university campuses in the United States has quietly increased by 112 percent, from approximately 350 to 750 campuses. During the same period at least 200 non-profit colleges closed their doors.”³⁵

QuickFact:

By the late 1990s, national attendance figures showed that 42 percent of the undergraduate and 59 percent of the graduate students attended part-time.

AFFORDABILITY

A growing number of academic intellectuals in America are insulated from the discipline of free markets. Public universities “receive only about 15 percent of their monies from student tuition and fees. Fully 60 percent of the funding comes from government—most of it from state governments, a substantial chunk from the federal government, and a little from local governments. The other 25 percent is derived from gifts, endowments, and miscellaneous sources, including various enterprises run by the university. To a very large extent—some 60 percent worth—you are watching your tax dollars at work when you look at today’s public universities.³⁶ Private universities, likewise, are highly subsidized by the government funded tuition loans and private donors. In fact, tuition pays for only 20 percent of total college expenses.

Unfortunately, tuition and higher education costs have skyrocketed in recent years. At private schools, average net tuition rose by 138 percent from 1980 to 2000 and universities’ spending rose by almost the same amount

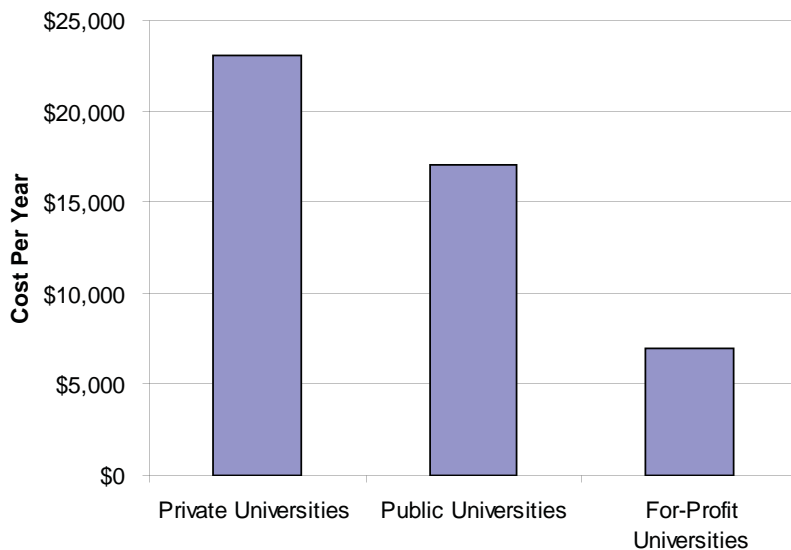
(142 percent).³⁷ At public universities, net tuition increased 176 percent.³⁸

Tuition has increased almost 900 percent over the last thirty years, far faster than the rate of inflation. But tuition only provides 20 percent of the revenue of the average university. That means taxpayers and donors—not students and parents—are paying for four out of five dollars of the cost of higher education.

For-profit universities have far lower costs than public or private universities: \$6,940 average cost per year for the for-profit universities versus \$17,026 per year for public universities and \$23,063 per year for private universities.³⁹

In other words, a degree from a for-profit university would cost students, parents and taxpayers 60 percent less than a public university degree and 70 percent less than a private university degree even though all three types of universities draw most of their teachers from the same labor pool.

FIGURE 2: ANNUAL COST OF HIGHER EDUCATION



Source: Ruch, Richard S., “Higher Ed, Inc.: The Rise of the For-Profit University” (The John Hopkins University Press, 2001).

QuikFact:
 Tuition only provides 20 percent of the revenue of the average university.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To meet growing demands and promote competition, lawmakers should reform higher education funding by funding students rather than institutions and loosen requirements that stifle competition from for-profit institutions. The Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board can create an accreditation alternative for colleges and universities that promises, measures, and delivers results. Similarly, all colleges, whether for-profit or non-for-profit, should provide basic guarantees about the product they are going to deliver, as well as measure their performance and fully disclose those results.

Welcoming for-profit universities to Texas and removing barriers that prevent them from expanding quickly may be the most economical way to provide hundreds of thousands of young Texans with valuable and necessary skills for future success. More important, increased competition will promote precisely the innovation that Texas students need from the state's institutions of higher education.

The next generation of Texans must be equipped with the tools, skills and knowledge they need to launch successful careers. Otherwise, the economy of Texas will suffer. And given demographic realities, many of the students who need such an education will come from lower socioeconomic ranks.

The mission of for-profit universities focuses on delivering “career-launching skills.” By running a university like a business, hiring teachers who teach, and relentlessly measuring results, for-profit universities can be more effective and efficient at delivering an education than traditional universities. And for-profit universities have proven they can expand rapidly to reach hard-to-serve segments of the population, specifically those who Texas will need to educate in the coming decade.

If we are serious about educating the next generation, we should:

- Encourage for-profit universities to expand in Texas;
- Create accreditation alternatives at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board for colleges and universities that promise and deliver results;
- Shift the vast majority of higher education funding from the state legislature into scholarships and loans so students can choose the education that best fits them; and
- Require all colleges—*for-profit and not-for-profit*—to fully disclose the results they promise to deliver.

Traditional universities could learn a great deal from the for-profit schools, but are resistant to change. Perhaps competition would be good for all institutions.

If community and business leaders are serious about providing the next generation of Texans with the tools, skills, and knowledge needed to compete in a 21st century economy, it's time to welcome the for-profits to Texas and let competitive forces begin to reshape our higher education system. ★

TalkingPoint:

State lawmakers should fund students not institutions and loosen requirements that stifle competition from for-profit institutions.

ENDNOTES

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