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Our University – Faculty Leadership

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Our University – Faculty Leadership

On our university campuses the complexities of political activity to create accountability in public resource allocations abound as performance based funding measures evolve. If handled poorly, and without strong faculty leadership, these good intentions will be for naught, at best. Adrianna Kezar of USC correctly reflected:

Faculty members who work directly to advance the institutional mission of teaching, learning, and at some institutions, research, represent the core human resource of higher education.

The efforts and results of public universities are put under great scrutiny. Good.

In many public universities there is an academic leadership vacuum brought about by administrative leadership unfamiliar with the workings of a university; leaders selected by a process that excludes faculty perspective; faculty senates rendered powerless from years of avoiding confrontation on key issues; and university governance that responds only to political pressure.

Some institutions are unfortunate enough to be plagued by all four plights simultaneously. By my recollection pestilence is next.

Recently at Texas A&M University and the University of Texas, an ostensibly reasonable attempt to increase teaching effectiveness and productivity has elicited a barrage of questions about academic processes and the purposes of a research university. Governor Rick Perry, working to implement the “will of the people” and create greater efficiencies and accountability in university performance has suggested that special emphasis should be placed on teaching.

No argument here.

Even with visions of bureaucrats running to and fro’ armed with digital measuring sticks and four dimensional graphic output, the desire cannot be argued.

However, faculty at both institutions decry the intervention, offering that such actions might result in the widgetization of teaching rather than encouraging quality. Additionally, none of the performance measures address the notion that these universities exist, in part, to create new knowledge that will power Texas’ economy in the 21st century. Commentators have recognized that Governor Perry’s approach addresses teaching, but the research mission could go begging according to a *Houston Chronicle* story of April 3, 2011.

As a graduate of each institution, I make this attestation: There was teaching at both ends of the quality spectrum on both campuses. An undeniable burden of university life is that there is risk associated with pursuing excellence while simultaneously seeking

political appeasement pursuing mediocrity. Real faculty members pull in one direction, politics in the other.

Shared governance provides the range of perspectives to create high quality in both the teaching and research environments. According to the Chronicle, "*Dr. Alan Friedman, chair of the UT Faculty Senate, sensed his Aggie colleagues were 'far more angry and dispirited' than the UT faculty. 'It's not that they are any more under attack. It's that they don't feel that their administration — at the chancellor and president level - are on their side,' he said.*"

My *alma maters*: one sharing, one settling.

Outsiders, even well-intentioned elected and appointed officials, may not be fully aware of various aspects of the work environment that create excellent learning experiences for students. Some officials though, to their credit, are excellent fiduciaries that leave to academic leadership the responsibility of balancing missions that make a university work. Respected A&M lay leader Jon Hagler suggested in the *Chronicle* story that former students must stand up for excellence. He is right, and they will follow intelligent faculty leadership.

Aggies know many teachers memorialized with nicknames like "Square Root", "Brown Bag", "Turbo", and "Jaws". Aggies valued excellence in teaching, but I fear it vanishing because supposed leaders ache for thresholds of defendable, measured mediocrity.

Faculty know what quality in teaching and scholarship is, but policing members of their guild is problematic. We do not tolerate physicians and attorneys who defend butchers and hacks who would otherwise be left alone for fear of interference: especially when politically-driven fear festers in dark corners.

Faculty must stridently demand discipline, determination and discrimination from themselves, rather than run from it, or whine it to death: Stewardship of the university ideal is the responsibility of faculty who must fight for this ideal as if their careers depended on it...

Because they do.