

2-13-2013

## Our Universities: Mr. Big

Walter V. Wendler

*Southern Illinois University Carbondale*, [wendler@siu.edu](mailto:wendler@siu.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: [http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch\\_hepc](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc)

---

### Recommended Citation

Wendler, Walter V., "Our Universities: Mr. Big" (2013). *Higher Education Policy Commentary*. Paper 186.  
[http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch\\_hepc/186](http://opensiuc.lib.siu.edu/arch_hepc/186)

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the School of Architecture at OpenSIUC. It has been accepted for inclusion in Higher Education Policy Commentary by an authorized administrator of OpenSIUC. For more information, please contact [opensiuc@lib.siu.edu](mailto:opensiuc@lib.siu.edu).

## Our Universities: Mr. Big

During the past few years, Texas A&M and UT-Austin have been criticized by the Texas Public Policy Foundation and some elected officials. Criticism is healthy, whether driven by ideas or ideologies. However, the critics act as if there are only two public universities in Texas, Texas A&M University and UT Austin. A common criticism was that the two universities are too expensive. Given this kind of criticism it is important to think about a recent plan announced by the Texas A&M University College of Engineering. The Dwight Look College of Engineering recently announced a plan to raise its student population to 25,000 by 2025, an approximately 150% increase. There are 23 public universities in the state which offer engineering degrees certified by the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology in one or more engineering disciplines, and they contribute substantially to the \$1.5 trillion Texas GDP. It appears 21 schools, other than A&M and UT, are discounted or ignored by the A&M plan. These universities are important because they provide first class, mostly undergraduate, education at a cost less than what the largest public research universities must charge.

The College of Engineering plan has a nice ring to it, but is this planned increase driven by the notion of creating better engineers with better ideas in the best interests of the state and the nation? Can it be implemented without diminishing, but adding to, the quality of A&M's existing programs, engineering and otherwise? Is it economical? Does the plan diminish the important role of the regional universities?

If the state needs more engineering graduates, the A&M plan needs to be evaluated against the reality that there are 42 other public four year universities in Texas other than A&M and UT. Seven of these have been designated emerging research universities. Given the diversity of these institutions should they not be partners in meeting the state's needs rather than "the competition"?

Several regional institutions have good undergraduate engineering programs that would benefit from additional state investment. Good regional universities, such as those located in the valley, need the opportunity to deliver more engineering programs locally, to respond to local needs and build the local economy. Some of these institutions are already in the Texas A&M University System. As such, they should be viewed as partners in progress. The expertise of the Texas A&M University programs would seem to be an excellent resource to facilitate the enhancement of engineering at other universities in the A&M System. Such a view might reduce costs and increase quality and provide benefits for student, family and state.

If the leadership of the Texas A&M University System is determined to implement its plans for engineering expansion in College Station, the academic and economic value to college, campus and community must be rigorously assessed.

Harvey Mudd College, in the suburbs of Los Angeles, has a grand total of 777 students, all undergraduates, 42% of them studying engineering; Caltech, not far away, has 978 undergrads. MIT has a 10,894 total enrollment, 4,384 undergrads, 1,425 in engineering, over half at the graduate level. Rose-Hulman in Terre Haute, Indiana, which US News ranks as the best undergraduate engineering program in America, has about 2,100 students. (Harvey Mudd is ranked number two.) By anyone's definition, MIT and Caltech are among the best engineering schools on the planet, while Harvey Mudd College and Rose

Hulman, are only the best undergraduate engineering programs in the nation, according to USNWR. Quality should drive aspiration.

But these schools are small. They look more like Rhode Island than Texas. However, the quality of their undergraduate engineering programs suggest great potential for the engineering programs at the regional universities in our state.

A few questions must be answered:

First: Will Texas A&M engineering programs be in the top 10 nationally because of the plan? If not, drop the plan immediately. Will the quality of the engineering programs be measured by the ideas that faculty bring, by their recognition as national academy members, by the intellectual property they produce and by their ideas to make the world a better place to live? Will students, with their recognition as national merit scholars, scores on the SAT, strong GPAs and high school class rank mean anything. Or, is more and bigger the criteria defining better?

Second: In a geographically diverse state, will engineers educated in College Station better serve the 1,858 cities, towns, communities, and hamlets in Texas with powerful ideas that are imperative to the state's future? As a town, the planned Dwight Look College would place 116 on the list between Paris and San Benito, making the school bigger than nearly 90% of the places people call home in Texas.

Maybe that's a good idea, but where's the beef?

If big in universities is for anything other than the development of ideas and excellence, then big is just bloat. And bloat is bad.

It is politically popular to support the idea of a \$10K BA degree. While a good engineering degree would cost more, distributed engineering educational opportunity would serve the state, communities, profession, and the people of Texas more effectively and more efficiently.

If "*mine is bigger than yours*" is the rule, politics rather than ideas win. That might work in the voting booth, but it should not dominate the schoolyard, wherever it is.

Walter V. Wendler '72 is the former Chancellor of Southern Illinois University Carbondale and previously served as Vice Chancellor for Planning and System Integration of The Texas A&M University System, Executive Assistant to the President, and Dean of the College of Architecture. Visit at <http://walterwendler.com/>.