



Thomas G. Palaima REGULAR CONTRIBUTOR

# Ivory tower and economics of knowledge, part II

There are lots of things people outside the ivory tower do not want to hear about higher education. The results of this year's legislative session prove that Texans continue to hope that ignoring problems will make them go away.



If you want to understand something important and make good decisions about it, you have to be willing to look at it straight, no chaser. Larry Faulkner, president of the University of Texas at Austin, and Nobel Prize-winner Steven Weinberg both know this. They have spoken frankly

about long-term problems that have kept UT-Austin from fulfilling its mission as a leading flagship institution in our state.

What is that mission and what responsibility does the Texas Legislature have in seeing that the mission is performed? In the Faculty Council meeting room in the UT Tower are painted wise sayings of the early leaders of our state. These men fought for its independence and then shaped its way of life. Ashbel Smith (1805-1886) came here from Yale University and served

as surgeon general, diplomat and architect of higher education. He made sure the following mandate was incorporated into the state constitution: "The legislature shall establish, organize and provide for the maintenance, support and direction of a university of the first class." Smith knew what this would mean for the well-being of our state: "Smite the rocks with the rod of knowledge and fountains of unstinted wealth will gush forth."

Consider what Smith and his contemporaries struggled to attain. Would they think that a university that US News and World Report ranks 147th among its national peers in resource support for its undergraduate students meets their constitutional mandate to maintain and support a university of the first class?

There are budgetary problems now at UT-Austin owing to consistent legislative underfunding, even during the boom years. These problems have been exacerbated by the current spike in energy costs, so it would be easy to scapegoat the natural gas markets. But ask yourselves whether an institution is funded sufficiently if utility increases representing less than 2 percent of its total operating budget threaten its basic services.

UT-Austin now is tapping into existing faculty lines

## *Straight talk from the ivory tower.*

in order to meet minimal staff and faculty salary increases. Faulkner candidly says that we are "cannibalizing" money we could and should be using to hire more teachers. This is plain talk, and anyone with common sense appreciates it.

Faulkner also spoke honestly about the poor results nationwide and in Texas of graduating Hispanic (4 percent) and African American (6 percent) doctorates as a contributing factor in the lack of diversity in the candidate pools for key university positions. Texas legislators spun Faulkner's factual statement as prejudiced and exclusionary. Sen. Gonzalo Barrientos, speaking to the Hispanic Caucus, said, "It's 2001, folks. We don't want to see this anymore."

If we don't want to see it anymore, we must start funding higher education for our students according to the original constitutional mandate, in order to retain truly dedicated faculty and staff, create programs that address the needs of first-generation students of all backgrounds and expand public higher education

so that it is open to all talented, hard-working and worthy high school graduates.

Here is my straight talk: In the past four years in my department, two highly recruited faculty, one African American and one Hispanic, have been hired away out of state. They were the only minority faculty among the 25 in our department. Our average yearly salary increases during the past 10 years made normal salaries elsewhere seem like veritable pots of gold. Having living expenses in many categories rise 80 percent to more than 100 percent in a decade, while salaries go up less than 40 percent, gives hard-working faculty the impression that Texas does not want their educational talents. This year, our faculty raise pool is 2.75 percent, and we have been cut back in other ways on instructional support. Projected raise pools for next year are 1 percent lower still.

Facing the Capitol on the south face of the UT Tower are the words, "Ye Shall Know the Truth and the Truth Shall Make You Free." We inside the ivory tower know the truth, and it is hurting us all.

Palaima, a MacArthur fellow, serves on the Faculty Council's Budgetary Advisory Committee at the University of Texas at Austin. You may contact him at [tpalaima@earthlink.net](mailto:tpalaima@earthlink.net).