Actions by UT regents are damaging school's reputation

Ongoing president flap undermines educational mission

By Richard Cherwitz | March 28, 2013 |

While hesitating for the past few months to write about the ongoing skirmish between the University of Texas System board of regents and UT President Bill Powers, I can no longer refrain. The stakes are too high and the potential long-term damages to my institution too severe.

I have been a proud UT faculty member for 34 years. I have witnessed presidents come and go and have observed serious but respectful disagreements between UT and the regents. That is not out of the ordinary. What is transpiring now, however, seems categorically different.

Although I am not privy to all the facts, from where I sit the actions of some of the regents, if not indicative of a "witch hunt," at minimum seem to cross the lines of what is prudent and appropriate behavior in the best interest of the institution.

With all the important things we need to do to improve higher education, these political maneuvers by regents are self-serving, counterproductive and a huge distraction and obstacle to those of us who work in the trenches to educate students and make UT one of the best public research institutions.

Similar to the University of Virginia, the situation at UT represents an important moment in higher education - raising significant issues about how far governing boards should go in the name of "accountability" to oversee universities. This is not a Republican or Democratic issue. Both parties understand that UT should not be micromanaged and that politics should not interfere with governance.

It is appropriate to expect universities to be accountable and reasonable to disagree with a president's policies; but, when governing boards seek to fundamentally alter an institution's mission and metrics of evaluation, as was the case at Virginia and now Texas, they overstep their authority and severely jeopardize the quality of education.

The final straw is the regents' vote last week to undertake what some suggest is the fourth investigation of UT's relationship with the law school foundation.

The turn of events is illogical.

Regents say they want UT to become more efficient and reduce the cost of education.
Powers and his staff take this challenge seriously, implementing substantial and potentially effective measures.

The response by some of the regents to these good-faith efforts is to continue the assault on Powers and UT, now voting to spend $500,000 of taxpayers money to search for a smoking gun by undertaking another, needless investigation of UT's relationship with the law school foundation.

As a teacher of argumentation and critical thinking, I have an example for my class. As a taxpayer, I am outraged. As a professor wishing to stay focused on constructive improvements in higher education, I am deeply troubled; there is so much work that needs to be done and all of this impedes progress.

Moreover, the continuing drama is severely hurting UT's reputation. I have already witnessed its impact on our ability to lure top-notch administrators to help meet objectives shared by UT and the regents. And I now fear the negative impact on UT's ability to recruit the best students and faculty - our lifeblood.

What arguably began as an anti-intellectual challenge to UT's core strength as a public research institution devolved into what appears - to me, at least - as an anti-UT and clearly anti-Bill Powers movement. The tactics have been nasty, far from transparent and reprehensible. Students, faculty, and Texas citizens deserve better from those authorized to govern.

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