

## The sound of Musick

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The University released a second productivity [report](#) Friday, continuing its battle of numbers against critics of public higher education.

Authored again by Marc Musick, sociology professor and associate dean for student affairs at the [College of Liberal Arts](#) — and now the University's go-to number cruncher — the report analyzes faculty productivity through the lens of teaching and externally-funded research.

Among the report's major findings is that the amount of money faculty members bring in through teaching and research is more than double the amount of money the state contributes to faculty salaries and benefits.

The report uses the same subset of data used by Rick O'Donnell — former senior fellow at the [Texas Public Policy Foundation](#) and former [UT System](#) adviser — in July to categorize various UT and Texas A&M faculty members as dodgers, coasters, sherpas, pioneers and stars based on their teaching loads and research. It is also the same data used by Richard Vedder, director of the [Center for College Affordability and Productivity](#), in a report in May that references low teaching loads among UT faculty members as the reason for increases in tuition.

In many ways, Musick's report is meant to serve as a handy pocket guide for University officials to spew off UT's faculty box score as they continue to address productivity critics. It does a fair job in identifying the nuances of the University that can be the root of misinterpretation and in acknowledging the shortfalls in using narrow variables to paint the full picture.

However, Musick's report does nothing to shake the stigma of intractability that hounds higher education institutions.

For starters, while UT and A&M were at the center of the higher education controversy earlier this year, the real targets of criticism were all higher education institutions in the state. Moreover, with elected officials like Florida Gov. Rick Scott praising Texas' controversy as good for higher education reform and with the Cato Institute hosting a conference called "Squeezing the Tower: Are We Getting All We Can from Higher Education?" this Friday in Washington D.C., this is very much a national debate.

In this way, UT is opting to not start anything that changes the world but rather remain in a stance of self-defense. By withdrawing into report-publishing protectionism and hoping to pass four-year graduation rates as a sign of progression, the conversation remains in the arena of the loudest critics.

A further problem is that higher education — especially faculty members — remains vulnerable to outside criticism. Words such as “clockless,” “overpaid” and “elitist” are tossed out shamelessly at faculty members whose only real protection is the already much-criticized institution.

At the root of this problem is a disconnection between the institution and its faculty members and the most potent force of defense: the community. When the extent of a university’s engagement with so many members of its neighboring community is limited to touchdowns and interceptions on Saturdays, the foundation of potential support for its academic mission is marginalized.

In the end, dancing to the songs of faculty productivity distracts us all from asking the real questions that address what public higher education actually provides to the public.