

Citing Shakespeare and Sophocles, UT's Powers defends research

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How many scholarly articles need to be written about Shakespeare?

The answers to that question illustrate the polar views in a running debate in Texas on higher education spending generally and the proper balance between research and teaching specifically.

The question arose at a conference Friday sponsored by the Austin-based Texas Public Policy Foundation, a think tank that contends research gets too much emphasis at the University of Texas, Texas A&M University and other major universities. The foundation helped Gov. Rick Perry organize a meeting of public university regents three years ago at which Perry urged the regents to pursue separation of research and teaching budgets, bonus pay for teachers based solely on student evaluations and other initiatives dubbed "breakthrough solutions."

Ronald Trowbridge, a senior fellow with the Public Policy Foundation, said he had no quarrel with research that serves students or provides some benefit to society. But he turned to the Bard of Avon to argue that some research falls short of those standards.

"A recent study issued by the American Enterprise Institute reveals that from 1980 to 2006, 21,674 scholarly articles were published on William Shakespeare," said Trowbridge, a former vice president of Hillsdale College in Michigan. "Do we need the 21,675th?"

That line of reasoning didn't sit well with his fellow panelist, William Powers Jr., president of the University of Texas.

"Literature is reinterpreted and reanalyzed and rethought in every generation," Powers said. "When Sophocles wrote 'Oedipus,' it wasn't a new story. It was an old story," but one that spoke to Greece at the time of Pericles.

"So having people researching how Shakespeare speaks to each generation — that ought to be an area where fresh ideas are generated and brought into the classroom and disseminated," Powers said. "It's not surprising that Shakespeare and Plato and great works of literature are constantly being reanalyzed and reinterpreted to see what they say to current students and to society at large."

The Public Policy Foundation has challenged higher education institutions on another issue as well, demanding a professor-by-professor accounting of costs and revenue, including salaries, benefits, tuition dollars, research grants and so forth.

On that point, too, Trowbridge and Powers sparred.

Full transparency is essential, Trowbridge said, because the public has a right to know how its tax and tuition dollars are being spent. And only university governing boards have the clout to collect and disclose that information, he said.

"Often trustees and regents become cheerleaders," Trowbridge said. "Their function, though, is to govern, and be cheerleaders."

Powers said it's not just a question of data. More important, he said, is an evaluation of the contributions, many of them intangible, that accrue from professors' work, such as improved civic life years down the road. Such things are hard to measure, but that doesn't make them any less important, he said.

Likewise, Powers said, "It's very hard to know today what (research) is going to be valuable in the future," citing the discovery of the double helix, the molecular structure of DNA, whose benefits in health and technology took years to emerge.

The UT president said he agrees with alumni, students and others who have called on the UT System Board of Regents to protect the mix of research and teaching on the Austin campus. And he said he "wouldn't be optimistic" that his school could offer a bachelor's degree program costing no more than \$10,000, including tuition, fees and books, as Gov. Rick Perry has called on governing boards to develop.

Other speakers at the conference, held at the InterContinental Stephen F. Austin Hotel, called for the elimination of government subsidies for higher education, including student financial aid, grants for research unrelated to national security and other federal aid to schools.

One of those speakers was Neal McCluskey, associate director of the Center for Educational Freedom at the Cato Institute, a Washington-based group that, like the Texas Public Policy Foundation, promotes free markets and individual liberty. McCluskey charged that an adviser to the UT System was "essentially run out of town" for questioning research funding and the balance between research and teaching.

The UT System dismissed the adviser, Rick O'Donnell, on April 19 after he accused unnamed officials at the highest levels of the UT System and UT-Austin of suppressing cost-revenue information on faculty members. A request from the American-Statesman for the data is pending at the UT System.

"I spent a lot of time talking with Rick O'Donnell," Powers said. "There are some things we agree on; there are some things we disagree on. I do think that he has taken the position publicly that devalues the research and the connection of research and teaching. That concerned me and, I think, concerned our alumni."

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