

Regent's Talk, Nov 16, 2006
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On Tuesday, October 31, the Law Center's Institute for Higher Education Law & Governance sponsored, and the Faculty Senate co-sponsored, Charles Miller's presentation on the Spelling Report, the US Government's report on higher education. One of Mr. Miller's points was that he perceived a need for more accountability for higher education. This article discusses why I disagree, since we are accountable to so many constituents.

UH is currently assessed by at least four groups which are central to our mission. First, students and their parents decide whether, and where, to attend college. Second, potential employers decide whether, and from which universities, to recruit new employees. Third, the external research community decides whether, and from which universities, to invest in research. I am going to defer discussing how the fourth group, potential employees, assess our University.

Currently, UH is working hard to improve its US News ranking. The reason is not because their ranking method is particularly valid, but because it is widely used by students and their parents. And, we want to be attractive to strong students interested in exploiting the advantages of a strong research and teaching environment. This competition for good students is driving many of the enhancements we are making at UH, and arises because students have a great many choices in higher education. Further, there is no compulsory education for college, students only attend if they perceive it is worthwhile.

In a similar vein, employers are not required to come to our university to recruit our graduates. Further, firms are not required to hire college graduates at all. Alternatively, they can hire students straight out of high school, or after any number of years in college. Firms only come

to universities to recruit graduates because these students contribute the most to their bottom line. To push this argument further, firms could require SAT scores of their applicants, and could even request essays. If the only contribution of universities is to sort out good students, firms could replicate the university admissions process and save themselves a lot of money. Instead, however, firms generally want to know how successful students have been in college, because this information is important to them in determining their best employees. And, firms generally hire graduates because these people make the firm the most money– which is another way of saying that college graduates are the most valuable employees. To be successful, UH needs to compete not only against all of the other university choices, but has to compete against partial higher education, and against no college at all.

Finally, there are a plethora of assessments in the process of attracting research funding. Firms re-assess their research funding almost continually. The competition to obtain government grants is fierce, and there are new entrants all the time. The competition continues on the publication end, as journals and book publishers have many choices about which material to publish.

To summarize, there are many universities vying for good students, and vying for research funding and publication outlets. Only by offering a university with excellent value to students can UH, or any university, succeed. The competitive environment for US higher education is completely different from elementary and secondary education, which has a virtual government monopoly on provision (about 90% of elementary and secondary students are in government schools), has a guaranteed market (attendance is compulsory at least through age 16), and is in a highly regulated environment (teachers have been highly unionized for a long time). It is probably more true that high schools should adopt the environment of colleges than the inverse. And UH's growing success in this environment is a product of the competitive process which keeps higher education strong.