

Higher Education

By Bill Hobby

For very understandable reasons, Texas' public schools have been getting most of the attention in Austin for the past few months.

But the crisis in our public schools is not the only educational crisis Texas faces. In the last few years we have neglected the state's higher education system to such a degree that we must now stop the decline of the system or pay a steep price in loss of jobs in Texas.

An excellent system of higher education has enabled Texas to attract such projects as the superconducting supercollider, a large transistor research group in Austin, computer research groups in Houston and Austin, biotech research in San Antonio, and others.

To keep up that kind of success and the prosperity it means to Texas, we need to shore up universities, community colleges, and technical institutes. Recent neglect of these institutions shows up in low salaries, large classes, and leaky roofs.

LOW SALARIES. All Texas' real competitors for high tech jobs--the 10 largest states--pay higher faculty salaries. These states also have better health benefits--an increasingly important factor in the competition for good teachers.

LARGE CLASSES. There are 10% more students than there were seven years ago, but only 1.4% more faculty. That means 20% increases in class sizes at some institutions.

LEAKY ROOFS. Buildings have been neglected to the tune of about half a billion dollars in the past few years. The Higher Education Co-ordinating Board estimates that is now the cost of this neglect, or "deferred maintenance". Over \$40,000,000 is now needed for roof and other repairs to keep some college buildings from being condemned as unsafe.

These problems can be solved by raising tuition in such a way that no student is denied an education because of the increase. First, where does Texas stand among the states in higher education costs? Dead last. Tuition at Texas public colleges is the cheapest in the country. In fact, Texas charges out-of-state students less than two state universities (Pennsylvania and Vermont) charge their in-state students.

It costs Texans \$1,021 a year in tuition and fees to go to a public college full-time (30 credit hours).

For as long as Texas can afford to charge the lowest tuition in the country, it's a great thing to do. But with Texas in the middle of its most severe financial crunch in years, it is time to take another look at our state's policy.

The tuition is set by Legislature at \$20 a semester hour, about one-sixth of the cost of a college education. Or, to put it the other way, taxpayers pick up five-sixths and the student (or student's family) picks up the rest.

By setting tuition in Texas so low we lose a lot federal aid that other states get. That is because of the way the Pell grant program works. Pell grants are federally funded scholarships. They are calculated on the basis of family income and size and on the cost of a college education. The higher the tuition, the higher the Pell grant. Nation-wide, Pell grants of about \$4.2 billion account for more than half of all federal aid to higher education.

So cheap is public higher education Texas that private universities (such as Rice, Baylor, SMU, TCU) actually get more federal funds than do state universities (University of Texas, A&M, University of Houston, Texas Tech). There are many more Pell grant students at the big public universities than at the small private ones. But tuition is higher at the private colleges, so their students get larger Pell grants.

A sensible solution would for the legislature to set tuition for Texas residents at 25% of the cost of a college education, instead of putting a dollar amount into law. now Then tuition costs would be calculated annually, taking the matter out of the hands of the Legislature. Tuition for out-of-state students is already calculated automatically, at 100% of the cost.

Pell grants would pick up more of the costs for qualifying families. Adequate scholarship money would be provided from the tuition income to ensure that no student would be turned away. Texas taxpayers would foot less of the bill. The universities would be in better financial, and therefor competitive, shape.

Texans win all the way around.