

Financing Higher Education

By Bill Hobby

State governments are not very glamorous institutions. Governors don't meet with Gorbachev. State senators don't meet with Saddam. State representatives don't get to decide if we are going to trade with China and Mexico.

On the other hand, Presidents and U.S. Senators and House members don't get to decide about the quality of education. (They talk about it a lot, though.)

Education is what state governments are mostly about. Half of every dollar states spend goes for education. When a legislature decides how much to spend for education--and how wisely to spend it--the legislature is deciding the state's future.

More importantly, the legislatures are deciding the nation's future by deciding how well the U.S. can compete with the rest of the world over the next generation or so.

That being so, our future isn't looking so good this week. The Legislature, cheered on by most state officials, is about to make big cuts in education. The Texas House has voted to cut \$1 billion dollars out of public education, starting at the beginning--with kindergarten.

The House appropriations committee voted last Sunday to cut a half billion dollars from higher education. That cut will hurt the most rapidly growing universities the most. They are the universities in El Paso, San Antonio, and South Texas that educate many Hispanic, first-generation college students. The cuts were supported by Republicans and Democrats alike.

Both cuts hit underprivileged Hispanics hardest. Early childhood education, pioneered by the federal Head Start program, has proven most effective with underprivileged children. When the House voted to cut out kindergarten, about 40 members, mostly South Texas Hispanics, took off for the Governor's mansion.

Cold comfort they got.

So much for Democratic reliance on Hispanic voters for statewide majorities. So much for Republican attempts to court Hispanic voters, particularly in South Texas.

The frenzy to cut education is something different from other efforts to "cut out waste in state government." There are no charges in Comptroller John Sharp's report of waste, inefficiency, or fraud in education.

The state is simply deciding it no longer wants to make even the modest effort about education it now makes. By most measures of effort in public and higher education, Texas ranks 49th or 50th among the states. And that's according to studies quoted in the Sharp report.

In the last five years, the state has cut its investment in each college student by 20% in real dollars. So once again, Texas is Number One. But you have to start counting from the bottom.

Not only education, but its first cousin research is a prime target of this year's insanity. For the past few years, research has been the secret of Texas' success in attracting the industries of the future. Texas did not win the battles for the Supercollider near Dallas and national research centers for computers (MCC) and semiconductors (Sematech) in Austin by being a know-nothing state.

The George Bush Presidential Library has gone to Texas A&M. Research centers in physics (UT Austin) and computer science (Rice University) have come to those universities because Texas has thought these things important enough to spend money to get them.

Direct funding for 59 research centers, including the state's primary medical research programs, is threatened by these proposals. Competition for federal and private research dollars is fierce. The money goes to institutions with the best proposals prepared by the best scientists and engineers. The "best" are the few hundred winners of the prizes and the medals. With these high-caliber people in our universities, we earn money and get the best students.

As Peter Flawn, former president of two Texas universities, points out, without that money we will quit being a growing center for research and development. Then we will lose the businesses and industries that depend on R&D. Then we will have lost our ability to compete. We will have lost the researchers and the laboratories that house our successful research programs. In short, we will have lost the game.

There is a certain weird, bi-partisan logic to all this. Let's keep public education for disadvantaged children in Texas so bad that they can't get a good job in a factory or office. That's all right, because the jobs won't be here anyway. Leadership, anyone?

Written in 1991.