

Response to TU Trustee Chair Steve Dorwart's op-ed praising "True Commitment"

by TU Professor Tamara R. Piety

Chairman Dorwart undoubtedly means well, but sadly, he has been misled about what higher education is about and this op-ed demonstrates this. It is ironic, and not a little anger inducing, that the laundry list of "accomplishments" Dorwart lists could just as easily serve as a list of the often ill-advised expenditures of vast sums of money (as well as the commitment to same in the future) that put the University in the position of having the budget issues that have been discussed publicly elsewhere, along with a ruinous, multimillion dollar commitment to athletics, which even if it was cut in half, would still run deficits in the millions.

Only Oxley is really a straight-forward academic enterprise, and even it is made up of the fragments from the misfire of the planned OU-TU medical school that (apparently) no one checked on the accreditation issues before announcing. The rest of this list, Gilcrease, Dylan Archives, etc., while they clearly have educational benefits, are not primarily academic enterprises.

But while TU was building all that student housing, several new buildings like Hardesty and the Performing Arts Center (irony there since theater is being eliminated), taking on Gilcrease, and apparently assigning itself the job of urban renewal, academic programs were languishing because of hiring freezes, cuts to benefits without regard to faculty retention or recruitment, a shift to fill gaps with more contract and adjunct faculty, no raises, reduced support for the library, etc.

Here is the thing: you can have a university without a football team; but you cannot have a football team without a university. And a university, to be a *real* university, one that will rank in the top 100 and that people will pay (or borrow) private university tuition for, requires top notch, *tenured* (and tenure-track) faculty who produce research and scholarship, which may or may not be of immediate, tangible use, but which is necessary to get the good stuff we need as a society from universities. There is no short cut. You cannot do it with just contract faculty. You cannot do it through online and underpaid and overworked adjuncts. You need real, live faculty.

The law school faculty has been allowed to dwindle to a dangerously small size. Four people are retiring next year. One up-and-coming clinician, newly tenured, left for greener pastures. We are only being permitted (that I know of) 1 search. That is not nearly enough.

With those retirements go our entire Native American Law program. That did not have to happen. We have known these retirements were coming for some time, including when we searched 2 years ago for the 2 faculty we hired last year (we have so many holes to fill we could have hired 10 people!), both of whom are terrific and teach needed courses, but they do not teach Native American law. And Native American law continues to be touted on the website. We even have restricted funds in the library for acquiring Native American law materials. But no faculty. That is because the University administration froze hiring and has rebuffed every attempt to call attention to the desperate shortages we have there and elsewhere.

And it is not just Native American law. TU has no full time tax professor since Professor Dennis Bires retired years ago. We have no Family Law faculty. We will be losing our main trusts and estates, con law,

corporations, and labor law professors. We lack depth in virtually every subject but Evidence.

I am sure the College of Law is not alone because I hear similar stories from my colleagues in other colleges.

What were we doing instead of hiring faculty and doing the things you need to do to recruit, support and retain world class faculty? Building. Raising the football coach's salary. Joining a new athletic conference.

Students come to a university because of its reputation. And whether the students know it or not, a university's reputation is built on the excellence of its professors. And it will be the professors who have the most profound impact on the students' lives and futures-not the administrators.

Administrators and the board are custodians of the value it has taken over 100 years to build. The first thing that administrators do if they want to build a first class university is to try to assemble the best faculty. The best universities know this and that is why they pay top dollar for what they hope are the most talented scholars and teachers. It is a tough business: many are called, but few are chosen, and even fewer still become top in their field. If you are a wise custodian of the brand, of the value in the university, you cherish those faculty who are your biggest assets. No one goes to Harvard Law School for the dorms. (Believe me. I lived in them.)

We do have some of those leaders in their fields at TU, although you might be hard pressed to see evidence that the University's trustees fully appreciate that, given this spending spree on everything but investment in its key assets. Instead, there have been various dispiriting and demoralizing moves in the last decade which suggest that even those administrators who *should* understand this point do not.

The dreadful "True Commitment" plan is simply the latest, but perhaps the worst of these attacks on the core value of the university. And this op-ed was apparently published as advance publicity for that plan, a plan which itself reads like a press release written by someone who didn't really have too many concrete proposals (except those massive cuts), little in the way of a rationale or data for why the cuts were necessary except vague non-sequiturs about "excellence" and "the future" and self-discovery, and proposals with few details that read as if they were written by someone who knew very little about what a university actually does. One, the proposal for a so-called professional "super college" calls to mind that line about those who don't study history being doomed to repeat it, except that it wasn't all that long ago that the OU-TU medical school ship ran aground on the accreditation shoals. Might it not have been a good idea to investigate whether this was *feasible* before doing a press release about it?

It is strange how often those in other businesses think that because they were once students, they know all they need to know about being a professor and are happy to prescribe radical surgery for academic programs without consulting those whose business is higher ed. They commonly think we are detached from "real life," are fiscally irresponsible, and don't work in the summers, or really much at all. No doubt this is true for some. But I bet there are plenty of CEOs and VPs for innovations, or CMOs who, if they were kidnapped by aliens might not be missed for days. And before anyone attacks the "utility" of some scholarship or research that he or she does not understand, it might be worth pausing to consider just how much utility is to be gotten from the latest bulletin from management or whether half of all business meetings really were a good use of everyone's time.

I know that if I was suddenly asked to run a law firm, a bank, a chain of retail stores or any number of the other enterprises from which TU's board is drawn, I would be eager (nay desperate) to seek information from those who were knowledgeable about it, rather than to assume that because I had been successful at winning a highly competitive and sought after tenure-track slot at a respected university, and had managed to obtain tenure, that I knew all I needed to know about banking or retail or a half a dozen other enterprises. But that attitude does not seem to work in reverse.

Chairman Dorwart's op-ed suggests that he has more to learn in this area. The changes proposed by the True Commitment plan—cuts to core academic programs, increased teaching loads, larger classes, elimination of the professional schools under the guise of the "super college" — all these and more threaten to destroy the value that TU *already* has been providing, but which has in truth been eroded by the failure to reinvest in its core assets: faculty. Without great programs, including graduate programs, and great faculty, TU will gradually not be worth the name "university" and it certainly won't be worth the money. TU had a niche. This was as a small, liberal arts, STEM heavy university that punched above its weight in many areas. (Although this was apparently a surprise to the Administration who thought that TU "was" whatever department or college happened to have the most enrollment at a particular moment, rather than the collective impressions in the minds of alumni, students, faculty, the community, and the public, especially prospective students.) The True Commitment plan promises to lay waste to key parts of the things that made TU fit that description and to replace that education for what sounds like a glorified trade school. It may have taken 125 years to build, but it can be destroyed in much less time. By the time administrators discover that like some of their other plans over the years that misfired, or like the disastrous presidential hire of a few years back that required bringing Stead Upham back, it may not be possible to pull up or get a "do over." By the time the reputational spiral starts, it may be impossible to turn it around.

It is not yet too late. The administration could concede that this plan is flawed, save whatever is good and workable, and take the rest back to the drawing board, reverse all the excessive administrative hires, commit to fiscal responsibility in athletics, call a moratorium on the hiring of consultants, prioritize fundraising for chairs and professorships, and immediately set out to hire in all those areas that have been starved of resources. It is still not too late. If the University takes those steps to ensure that TU is not charging a premium price for an inferior product, I would agree with Chairman Dorwart that TU will be "ideally positioned" to face the future headwinds. If it does not make at least some of those changes however, I fear it will be sailing into a storm. None of us want that. We don't want to scuttle this ship. I assume that Chairman Dorwart doesn't either. I hope he starts paying more attention to the voices of the faculty who are trying to tell him that this plan is not all that he has been assured that it is.