

May 2, 2019

A reflection on True Commitment from a concerned parent (and professor)...

The controversial announcement of April 11 by the Board (led by Frederic Dorwart), President Gerald Clancy, and Provost Janet Levit regarding the launch of the “True Commitment” reorganization of the University of Tulsa has led to a flurry of criticism by TU students, faculty, and alumni, numerous professional and scholarly organizations, and individual concerned citizens in the Tulsa area and across the nation. Critics have persuasively illuminated the cataclysmic and deleterious impact that “True Commitment” will have on the University, the city of Tulsa, and the state of higher education in general. To steal a university from those who genuinely care about its ethos and legacy is wrong on principle—and this is, I think, is exactly what is happening at TU, the weak arguments about faculty-input and data notwithstanding. Moreover, the “bold vision” that justifies this theft is dangerous not only because it substitutes indoctrination for learning and teaching, but also because it is irrational and unsustainable: if the skills required by the market economy change as rapidly as Dorwart, Clancy, and Levit claim, who can be sure that the pricey training one receives at “True Commitment” TU will continue to be relevant even a few years after graduation? I would like to know how this differs from any run-of-the-mill Ponzi scheme.

But besides those fundamental flaws with “True Commitment,” I see another glaring injustice that must receive more attention. That is the devastating effects that this restructure has had on the real human beings—most of them between the ages of 18- and 22- years-old—who deliberately chose TU over other institutions for what it uniquely offered: small-and-comprehensive; STEM and the liberal and fine arts; classes small enough to allow students the opportunity to have rich conversations with professors and with each other; a faculty accomplished in research, both practical and theoretical; opportunities to encounter the ideas and experiences that aren't the stuff of the ordinary adult life.

The debate about the University of Tulsa - now and in the years to come - must not be conducted in the abstract. It must always be tethered to the concrete lives of the students it serves. Those whom it serves now. At present. To sacrifice these real human beings—and the families who support them—to the hypothetical future-students predicted by the Clancy regime, and to prioritize the decisions of voiceless feet-voters over the good of the young men and women who made outlays of time and money for campus visits, who turned down scholarship offers from other institutions in order to matriculate at TU, who actively participate in all sorts of extracurricular activities, who love learning and spending time in conversations with faculty during office hours, who wear TU gear and call their parents to let them know how final exams went, this is unconscionable.

I am the parent of four children under age 8, and this year I had the joy and privilege of teaching as a visiting assistant professor in the Honors Program at TU. I teach freshmen. Speaking as a teacher, the students in my classes were excellent in every respect. To list their many virtues would require a separate letter. So I will speak on their behalf as a mother. I have gotten to know 65 or so of these affected young persons - some of them over the course of an entire year - and there is no way to quantify the impact that this crisis has had on the young people who chose

to move away from their families, accept the price of TU tuition, and make the effort to lay down roots in the TU and Tulsa community. Each one of my students—regardless of college or major—has been dealt a terrible blow, strategically timed to occur just before final examinations and just after deadlines for transferring had passed. If not they themselves, then their closest peers - and their parents - are scrambling to begin the college search anew, to decide whether to accept an inferior good, or to write off this difficult and precious first year of life out-from-under-the wing. These students know that the Dorwart-Clancy-Levit regime wants them to leave TU in order to hasten the imposition of the True Commitment structure and goals, which require an altogether different sort of student. They wonder why, when they visited campus, no one had the decency to inform them or their parents that a restructure of this magnitude was being considered. And they are angry that, when they met prospective students (those who would be entering in Fall 2019) at Tulsa Time in February, they (and I along with them) unwittingly gave a false impression of future-true-commitment-TU to the high school juniors and seniors who sat with them in seminar.

These young men and women are strong, capable, bright students, and they will be fine regardless of how the situation at TU transpires. But their anger—and mine with them—is justified. As is their deep sense of loss as they face the destruction of something each of them worked so diligently to cultivate. Every parent or guardian or grandparent or anyone who cares at all for a college-aged child has reason to oppose what is happening at the University of Tulsa, for TU, I am sure, is just the beginning. President Clancy, Provost Levit, and the TU Board of Trustees must know that their violation of this trust has not gone unnoticed and they must rectify it. These students are not reducible to a letter grade or a tuition payment, and TU has an obligation to make good on the image it conveyed to these young people and their families. They deserve much better.

Respectfully,

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Note: after May 15th, I can no longer claim to be a TU faculty member. My teaching contract was not renewed for the 2019-2020 academic year as a direct result of the TU restructure.