

**Texas Higher Education Oversight Committee**  
**Oral Testimony by Michael Poliakoff**  
**September 21, 2011**

- I. Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this important discussion. It is an honor to be invited by the Committee and I want to express my admiration for the public discussion that is taking place on higher education. These conversations have been impassioned, but they address the central issues of maximizing access and excellence. In my dozen years of serving as a college professor, I always tried to stress that there is no such thing as a “dumb question.” Indeed, it was often the completely non-expert, out - of - the - box question that got the class focused on the most important topics and themes. Questions and criticisms about higher ed are a vital part of the task of improving higher education. Some concerns may prove misguided, but before we straight-arm them away, it seems appropriate to ask whether our irritation is not at least in part due to the fact that they point to real challenges that must be addressed. A key part of the mission of the American Council of Trustees and Alumni, which I represent, is to support governing boards in asking the questions that faculty and administrators might not be ready to ask and to support them when they take actions that may even be unpopular with their own institutions but are in the interests of the taxpayers.

It is my hope that today’s discussions concerning effective governance, the productivity of higher education, access, affordability, and quality will model the free and open exchange that is the lifeblood of academic discourse.

- II. What are the challenges facing America's higher education, so often called the "envy of the world"?
- III. Nationwide there is a very real crisis of cost and accountability in higher education.
- A. Academically Adrift, published this year by the University of Chicago Press reveals that 45% of the students showed little or no positive change in their critical thinking skills – in other words, their cognitive growth - after two years. After four – expensive – years of college, 36% had little in cognitive gains to show. And this despite an aggregate 3.2 GPA.

*N.B. Kevin Carey quotes the authors in his New Republic piece "American higher education is characterized by limited or no learning for a large proportion of students, and persistent or growing [race- and income-based] inequalities over time."*

- B. Academically Adrift follows the findings of the massive federal survey, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy. The majority of college graduates had difficulty handling the questions that signify proficiency – tasks like comparing the viewpoints of two newspaper editorials or computing and comparing the cost per ounce of food items. The average scores, moreover, dropped significantly between 1992 and 2003.

- C. Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Skills report, “Are They Really Ready for Work” shares the distressing news that more than one-quarter of the business leaders found the writing skills of newly hired four-year college graduates, “deficient.” Less the one quarter found that they had “excellent” preparation for entry level jobs.
- D. A diploma based on limited cognitive gains, deficient writing skills, and limited quantitative literacy is a “ticket to nowhere.” Richard Arum, co-author of *Academically Adrift*, tracked the students from the Class of 2009 in his study. 31% had moved back in with their parents; the majority earn less than \$30,000 per year, often far less than the balance on their student loans.
- E. Meanwhile, America has seen steep tuition increases. “According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, over the past 25 years, average college tuition and fees have risen by 440 percent -- more than four times the rate of inflation and almost twice the rate of medical care.” Governing boards, which have to balance the needs of citizens with the interests of their institutions must, to use a Texas metaphor, draw a line in the sand to protect students.
- F. Overall American expenditure on higher education is twice international average of OECD nations, the highest rate of all.
- G. The Schumpeter column in *The Economist* a year ago asked the mischievous question, “Could America’s universities go the way of its

car companies?” He concludes, “American universities lost their way badly in the era of easy money. If they do not find it again, they may go the way of GM.” Once again, bravo to Texas for taking this problem head-on.

H. A Hollow Core. ACTA reviewed the general education requirements at over 1000 colleges and universities. Texas generally does quite well. Sadly, this was the exception nationwide, rather than the rule. Less than 20% of colleges require a basic course in American History or Government; only 15% require intermediate level study of a foreign language; over one-third do not require college-level mathematics, and 16 percent do not even require a dedicated course in English composition. This is the smoking gun behind the statistics we see in *Academically Adrift*.

Boards of regents and state government need to monitor core requirements carefully – it is a fiduciary duty not only to attend to budgets and finance but to the product of higher education, which is learning. I share a caution with the Joint Oversight Committee not to allow existing requirements for general education to suffer any erosion. It would be a real blow to educational quality.

#### IV. What exactly is The Role of Trustees

A. “Part insider and part outsider, never completely satisfying the advocacy wishes of the university nor the oversight expectations of elected officials, the board’s role is akin to a fiduciary. The ideal

board takes into account the perspectives of students, faculty, parents, administrators, elected officials, and others – yet it is beholden to none of them.”

- B. A great American tradition: lay governance, “brings the perspective of informed citizens to the heart of the university ... by design these responsibilities rest, not with academicians or experts of any kind, not with government employees or even elected officials, but with lay boards.” These are the words of former University of Wisconsin trustee Phyllis Krutsch who wrote an essay on trusteeship for ACTA after her service on the board.
- C. The only sector that is above the fray of the many competing interests in the university, uniquely equipped to adjudicate competing priorities.
- D. Regents and Trustees must be encouraged NOT to be diffident or deferential. Many of them are employers themselves and they represent the employer community in the state. As I have stated in my written testimony, there is ample and heartening evidence that many boards have proactively addressed pressing challenges and they have done so on the basis of solid data and information.
- E. HENCE
  1. They need academic indicators
  2. Texas ahead of the game with the CLA data, same that Arum/Roksa used.
  3. Move to longitudinal testing, robust enough for programs to track their outcomes
  4. Analyze the NSSE data: is this the campus culture we should have?

5. Hear regular reports on outcomes and, where appropriate, interventions

6. Licensure exam results, core requirements

F. ACTA president Anne Neal identified the destructive marginalization of governing boards in an article for Inside Higher Ed: "call it the potty-trained trustee, the board member who shows up at football games, cuts a few big checks, and doesn't meddle in university affairs." It is most unlikely, however, that higher education will see the improvements it needs without active, informed trustees, who are willing to challenge the status quo. (Anne Neal: If the Enron debacle taught us one thing, it is that boards must be independent of management.)

G. South Dakota Board of Regents and the CAAP in my written testimony improved teaching and learning through their mandate – highly controversial at the outset.

V. Close working relationship of Boards and State Government: Overall positives

A. To begin with, there is accountability of Governor for his/her appointees

B. Here is what Benno Schmidt CUNY Board Chair wrote, noted in my written testimony: "For a strategic plan to work, the stars must be aligned. For a public university, this means not only alignment of the trustees and the chancellor, but the alignment of the governor as well. No plan for serious change in any public university will work unless the governor endorses it in concrete detail. That happened at the City University of New York, and it is why changes were able to happen."

- C. The Missouri story. Governor Jay Nixon: “Today, higher education is at a crossroads. To survive and thrive, higher education must make fundamental changes.”
- VI. The Research Controversy is a crucial and timely conversation.
- A. Is teaching neglected at research universities? Here is what Steven Cahn, professor of philosophy and former Provost and Acting President at the CUNY Graduate Center writes in *Saints and Scamps*, in the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition, published last year: “College and university administrators frequently claim to care deeply about the quality of teaching at their institutions. But too often their actions belie their words. ...*If presidents, provosts, and deans were as concerned about teaching as they say, their commitment would be demonstrated by policies quite different from those typically in place.*” That from a former Provost!
- B. The plural of anecdote is not data. But there is also data. Modern Language Association Report of the Task Force on Evaluating Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion. 1339 departments in 734 universities.
1. Percentage of departments ranking scholarship more important than teaching went from 35.4% in 1968 to 75.7% in 2005. Almost 50% of doctorate granting institutions demand one book in print and another in progress for tenure. (exec. Summary) . 54% of administrators at “reform institutions,” that are changing tenure

procedures, stated that “emphasis has increased” on publication productivity.

C. So there is evidence that research is emphasized at the expense of teaching. The other side of the coin is that the research that is expected is not always delivered. Lawrence Martin: The founder of Academic Analytics, a tracking system for research productivity, reports, "in most fields for which journal publishing would be expected fully 20% of the faculty associated in Ph.D. training programs have not authored or co-authored a single publication in one of the 16,000 journals indexed in a three year period. ... Returning to rough cost estimates, if 20% of Ph.D. faculty are not publishing as expected this represents something close to \$2 billion in university investments in scholarship for which the return seems to be nil."

D. A collegial dissent from Robert Berdahl(?)

VII. Conclusion. President Powers very appropriately drew upon the Greco-Roman and the Biblical tradition in his convocation address. I will follow his lead. The Greek word for what is sometimes called a crisis is “kairos.” It doesn’t mean a catastrophe, it means a turning point, a moment of opportunity, where our lives can get better or get worse. As the Deuteronomist would have it, choices are set before us. Sadly, higher education has not, so far, embraced the serious reinventions it needs to ensure high quality and low costs. It is time to reject the notion that to survive higher ed needs more money and minimal public scrutiny. Texas, fortunately, is well positioned to come out of the crisis as the national model for other states to follow. Recently Florida State University has coined the



phrase “Florida Can Do Better than Texas” showing how already the Texas discussion is spawning the kind of thinking that will benefit all students and taxpayers. These are fighting words in Texas: it is my hope that this state will prevail in its efforts to have the finest system of higher education.

Teaching Loads: Aa UTA 2 per semester; faculty without professional activity envisioned for more. <http://www.utexas.edu/finearts/faculty/teaching-load-and-course-enrollment>

1. Make teaching excellence absolutely parallel in importance to research and change the reward system accordingly..
2. Embrace flexible models (like Iowa State)
3. Make all internal research funding competitive, requiring application for released time.
4. Move to longitudinal testing and be guided by the results.
5. Monitor grade distribution, program by program, department by department.