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“Shifts in Philosophy of Higher Education Stirring across U.S.—Controversy surrounding UT System official illuminated ideas on changing Universities”

By Reeve Hamilton



*“Education needs to think in entrepreneurial ways where students are thinking about what their brand is, what their value is, and universities should be doing the same thing.”*

**RICHARD CHERWITZ**, UT Communication Studies Professor who founded Intellectual Entrepreneurship initiative

Before his controversial hiring as a special adviser to the University of Texas System, Rick O’Donnell was a largely unknown quantity in the Austin higher education community.

What could be determined through his available public writings, which questioned traditional models of academic research and accreditation, sparked an uproar that, in the words of House Higher Education Chairman Dan Branch, shook the foundations of UT.

O’Donnell’s ties to the Texas Public Policy Foundation, which supports a set of reforms that have been criticized by the Association of American Universities—the nation’s elite group of research universities—set many on edge. He was reassigned late last month to a lower-level job that ends Aug. 31.

The foundation's work is nowhere to be found in reading lists O'Donnell prepared for University of Texas System task forces investigating ways to lower costs and improve academic excellence. Something that was included was a speech from Gordon Gee, who has described himself as "perhaps the greatest advocate and fan of the American university that exists."

Unlike O'Donnell, Gee—former president of Brown University, former chancellor of Vanderbilt University and current president of Ohio State University—has decades of experience inside the Association of American Universities. Gee's view on the current state of America's public universities? "We really do need to reinvent ourselves," he said.

"The American university is not broken, but it is certainly not reaching its potential in the 21st century," Gee said. "We are organized very vertically, and we need to be organized horizontally around programs, working groups, centers, institutes and around ideas."

That's exactly what communication studies professor Richard Cherwitz has been trying to do at UT since 1997, when he established an initiative known as Intellectual Entrepreneurship, or IE for short. Cherwitz and other faculty involved seek to apply the concept of entrepreneurship to all disciplines, encouraging students and professors to think proactively about their role in society and its relationship to their academic endeavors.

SHIFT: UT's Intellectual Entrepreneurship example of new philosophy

"There are thousands and thousands of students who, five years down the road, wonder why they majored in what they did and have missed an opportunity," Cherwitz said. "Education needs to think in entrepreneurial ways where students are thinking about what their brand is, what their value is, and universities should be doing the same thing."

Cherwitz is careful to point out that IE is neither a program nor a discipline. It is, rather, a philosophy—one that calls for a dismantling of the walls built up over time between academic disciplines, between graduates and undergraduates, and between the university and the surrounding community.

For example, students from various disciplines form teams to address solutions to actual local problems like overcrowded emergency rooms. Mentors in the graduate school and the professional world mentor and provide hands-on research experience to undergraduates.

In papers, Cherwitz has argued for graduate-level courses in all disciplines that encourage real-world applications of research. He also advocates reconsidering the current system of university tenure and promotion, suggesting that research, teaching and service may not be discrete categories, and that perhaps an "engagement" element should be added to the process.

Though it was not conceived of as a diversity driver when Cherwitz founded UT's IE initiative, it has proved to be a good one. More than half of the participants are first-generation or minority

students, and more than 70 percent are women. In Austin, the IE initiative is tucked into the university's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement.

At other universities—many of them institutions championed by reformers like O'Donnell—the principles are being adopted on a grander scale.

“Whether you call it IE or something else, this is where education has to go if we want to be competitive and deal with all of the problems this country faces,” Cherwitz said.

UT's Cockrell School of Engineering took a step down that path with the recent hiring of high-tech inventor and pundit Bob Metcalfe as its first professor of innovation. Engineering Dean Gregory Fenves said Metcalfe will “do a better job of connecting the university to the Austin and Texas ecosystems, the entrepreneurs and mentors who can work with faculty and students and move ideas into useful applications.”

Cherwitz said the university whose philosophy best illustrates the IE philosophy is Arizona State University.

Since Michael Crow, previously a provost at Columbia University, took over as president in 2002, ASU has made strides to become the self-described New American University. Writings on Crow's efforts were also featured prominently in O'Donnell's reading lists.

“You can't operate the great public university on the New England liberal arts college model”, said Crow, who has pushed ASU to not only improve its quality, but expand its enrollment in the process. “You can't make a university great while being exclusive. You have to make the university great by achieving tremendous things while being inclusive.”

In the last nine years, ASU has tripled its research activity while adding 23,000 students to the university with only minimal faculty expansion, Crow said.

Since Crow's arrival, the ASU faculty has rapidly increased its number of members in groups like the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and the National Academy of Sciences. It now boasts three Nobel laureates. Included in Crow's eight pillars of the new American university is “conduct use-inspired research.” It's fourth on the list, right below “value entrepreneurship.”

Holden Thorp, the chancellor of University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill—an AAU school—and author of the recently released book “Engines of Innovation: The Entrepreneurial University in the Twenty-First Century,” admitted that he was initially skeptical of pushes to boost entrepreneurship on his campus.

“I didn't think it was worth my time because I didn't think the campus would embrace it,” he said. Now, the school's minor in entrepreneurship, which is open to students in any discipline, is so popular that it's overbooked. Classes are taught by professors and entrepreneurs, and, Thorp said, “getting that chemistry right is critical.”

He said innovating without upsetting the old guard is “the secret to creating change in a university.”

At UT, one struggle, Cherwitz said, has been convincing academics that these entrepreneurship activities do not distract from their primary research mission. “It drives me crazy, because they are not antithetical notions,” he said. “Why do these things have to be separated? Why can’t you simultaneously be using engagement to promote research and research to promote engagement?”

Of course, a roadblock to change is nothing new at a university. In 2004, UT’s Commission of 125, a group of citizens assembled to construct a vision of the future of the University of Texas at Austin, completed its final report. “All large organizations resist change, and the recommendations of this report will undoubtedly encounter resistance.” Now, UT President William Powers Jr. says that many of its recommendations are being implemented.

Gee said he always laughs when people say universities are liberal.

“When it comes to change,” he said, “they are the most conservative institutions.