

## Texas Q&A: Robert Luskin (Jan./Feb. 2005)

In reference to the anomaly of Travis County going Democratic, maybe Robert should take age into account since Travis County and the border counties have a younger voting population than other counties in Texas, especially when you take into account the 50,000 UT students who can vote. John Kerry won only one age group in the 2004 election (18-29 year olds — 54 percent to 45 percent for Bush). As Winston Churchill said, "If you're not a liberal at 20, you have no heart, and if you're not a conservative at 40, you have no head." The number of college degrees owned by conservatives in Travis County and similar university towns evidently cannot overcome the "naiveté factor."

*R. Grant Lannon, MBA '86,  
Austin*

## The Citizen-Scholar (January/February 2005)

Responding to Rick Cherwitz's challenge in the latest issue for readers to participate in the dialogue about how UT should engage with the community, I offer some of the musings of the Subcommittee of the Commission of 125 that was charged with considering these issues over the last several years.

That subcommittee was chaired by Melinda Perrin, and Rick was one of the faculty members who served as an invaluable internal resource

for us during our deliberations. We considered concepts as radical as compulsory curriculum for public service as part of a graduation requirement and as pecuniary as overhaul of faculty compensation schemes to create a financial incentive for "academic engagement." What we all agreed on, and the concept that survived the editing process for the commission's final report, is that public higher education has a special providence that the privates cannot reproduce. That unique franchise basically comes down to broad demographic access and relevance to the community that sustains us. While adequate public funding, of course, is no longer a given, the public mission remains.

How the intended remove of basic research and free academic thought should interface with the gritty realities of the day (political, physical, and economic) is obviously difficult, but if smart people accept that it is part of their core purpose, many opportunities will occur. Sometimes it is as simple as connecting the dots in public debate. Chancellor Yudof, in his remarks on this same subject, references the 1983 report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education ("A Nation At Risk"), yet the current media debate over outsourcing and immigration policy never connects the simple cause-and-effect relationship at issue. If you tolerate under-performance in math and science curriculum, 20 years later those jobs will move to places that do not

tolerate that same under-performance (or those people will immigrate under H1B visas). There are similarly stark — but rarely expressed — relationships between healthcare and education spending, environmental policy and quality-of-life, public spending, and private capital formation.

There are many other types of opportunities as well to share the University's archives, to apply its research, to export its intellectual honesty, and much more. The important first step is to acknowledge that aspect of the mission and start asking the right questions. The University has done that, and I applaud the effort.

*Paul Hobby, JD '85,  
Life Member,  
Houston*

Challenging universities to build synergies with their communities, Rick Cherwitz and his colleagues have called for "academic engagement." This surprising alliance urged a new norm, to employ and inform academic expertise in relation to the public good.

Can we realize our rhetoric? Given half a chance, academics will find this wider scope deeply appealing. At the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, we tested this on the most hermetic of fields. The humanities are like New York in Sinatra's song: if public scholarship can make it there, it will make it anywhere. We offered graduate students a measly \$2,000 to take their learning to the streets. The surprising efforts

are exemplified by a UT anthropology student who took on a group of delinquent girls who had been sexually abused as children, using everything she knew — storytelling, art, dance, autobiographical writing — to improve their self-images.

To a person, students emphasized delight in discovering the efficacy of their learning. They described the experience as two-way — their scholarly work was immensely strengthened by the lived experience. Nearly all of them completed their work speedily and graduated — because they became aware that their abilities translated into tens of possibilities beyond the academy. Many of them did, of course, become academics, but a new kind of academic.

It is usual to say that scholars must stand apart from pressing social reality, serving as stern critics of it. But this presumes someone else gets to make social reality. I'd rather constitute reality than criticize it.

How do we get from a sequestered status quo to academic engagement? Let me amplify four proposals advanced in the essays. We first require an environment for making universities truly public. Every university must create a continuing, dynamic dialogue between the mentors and the employers of students, between academics and leaders in government, business, cultural institutions, K-12 education. I'm not talking about meetings every three years but about an-every-hour-of-the-day exchange. Open the

windows of the faculty lounge to the freshening breeze of urgent life.

This new environment must be accompanied by an expectation. One writer notes the three criteria for faculty evaluation and calls for service to society, now “a distant third,” to be acknowledged importantly. I’d go further. Make the rigorous application of knowledge a normal faculty expectation, especially because this kind of service wonderfully blends the other criteria: important scholarship and effective teaching. And give faculty the time by cutting the number of committees in half and membership in the remaining ones by two-thirds.

This expectation requires an inviting structure. Problem solving, several contributors note, requires multiple disciplines. Universities always praise interdisciplinarity and then fail to fund it. Yet such efforts bring new ways of organizing knowledge that challenge old boundaries. Instead of making them mere icing on an otherwise traditional cake, create a cross-woven quilt. Fund equally those departments that remain vital and those interdisciplinary programs that are provably efficacious — and then challenge all others.

Finally, as Chancellor Mark Yudof argues, if we are really serious about recreating the university as public-spirited, a first test is to meet our nearest neighbors and share the rich life of the disciplines with teachers and students in K-12. The gap between schools and universities is arguably greater

in the United States than anywhere else in the world. We can close it.

In all, the movement toward academic engagement is less a revolution than a restoration. Most liberal-arts colleges were created with an eye to serving humankind. And later, the great land-grant universities were formed with the express purpose “to reduce knowledge to practice.”

But there is no reduction. When universities give away sole ownership of knowledge, they will gain far more than they lose. Jill Dolan speaks for the potential joy. Describing how the theater program redefined itself as “performance as public practice,” Dolan exclaims, “I believe deeply in performance’s power to make the world better.”

I love that belief, and it is what most academics feel about their own interest, if they would be plain. Be plain, scholars. Go for it. The calm countryside of thought is beautiful and replenishing, but the city of events awaits. Make that city not the hardening of hope but the realization of our highest thought, our best American dreams.

*Robert Weisbuch, President  
Woodrow Wilson National  
Fellowship Foundation*

The scholarly replies to Professor Cherwitz’s conundrums were interesting and thought-provoking. I felt that Harris and Erickson provided the most concise response with their discourse on addiction study. However, the overviews provided by Evans and Yudof

merely raised larger questions. Evans advocates Thomas Jefferson’s “aristocracy of virtue and talent” with a goal of “realizing Jefferson’s virtuous aristocracy,” yet makes no mention of virtue, that is, a particular moral excellence, in his subsequent text. Evans writes only of “talent.” Yudof’s stated mission is to offer our students an education “for personal success,” that “nurtures them as future leaders of Texas.” Our great nation was built with a strong moral compass. Our great state received a black eye because of the actions of the leaders at Enron — these men and women who carried the patina of superior university educations. A primary focus must be to nurture future leaders who are morally fit to lead.

*David Spencer Mathis,  
BBA ’77, Houston*

### **Little Ricky from Hickory** (January/February 2005)

Rick Barnes’ comment, “I want my players to graduate,” is a welcome change. No players recruited in the ’96-’97 year graduated. In contrast, 100 percent at TCU, 75 percent at Rice, and 67 percent at SMU graduated. It appears recruits have not been college material as DeLoss Dodds advises \$2 million is spent annually on athletes’ tutoring costs. In this same period 100 percent of our women players graduated. We should all look forward to reviewing the ’97-’98 statistics when published by the NCAA.

*Joe M. Bell, BBA ’52,  
Longview*

How clever of *ALCALDE* editors to choose a Providence-era photograph of a young Coach Rick Barnes flashing (inadvertently?) a “Hook ’em Horns” sign (page 47), foreshadowing his eventual career path to the University.

*Gary Mitchell, BA ’86  
Houston*

### **The Great Equalizer** (2110 San Jacinto, January/February 2005)

Enjoyed your column about the various “droppings.” Speaking to the point of the bat droppings, in the early ’90s, the University of Florida’s baseball stadium was invaded by Mexican free-tail bats. A consultant was called in and much hand-wringing ensued. The result was that the underside of the stands were screened and the bats trapped and moved to a specially constructed “bat house” about a mile away. As I recall, the structure cost about \$20,000 and had to be smeared with bat guano inside in order to convince the bats to move there. It is now a popular evening activity for folks to come and watch the bats fly out for their nightly feeding. However, we here in Gainesville don’t have the huge population like the one under the Congress Avenue bridge. Most of ours are in the bat house.

*Henry Aldrich, BA ’63,  
PhD ’66, Gainesville, Fla.*