

## **Stealth Budget Cuts Hurt Higher Education**

*By Bill Hobby*

It is the age of the knowledge worker. Our high speed electronically connected information age economy demands new skills.

Today's jobs require more formal education, the ability to acquire and apply theoretical and analytical knowledge and a habit of continuous learning. Producing an automobile requires 40 percent ideas, skills and knowledge and 60 percent energy and material. Producing a computer chip requires 98 percent ideas, skills and knowledge and only 2 percent energy and raw materials.

Knowledge workers are essential to our economy, and higher education is essential to produce knowledge workers. No wonder that cities as diverse as Midland and Laredo consider their universities to be engines of economic development.

In a decade when prisons and school equity have been front burner issues in Texas, higher education has been neglected.

The higher education budget hasn't been cut, thanks to the insistence of Lieutenant Governor Bullock, Speaker Laney, Senator Montford and Representative Junell. But it has remained flat compared to criminal justice, health and human services and public schools.

Texas ranks 49 among the 50 states in appropriations plus tuition per student--\$5,084 per student compared to a national average of \$6,019. Higher education spending, 18 percent of the budget 10 years ago, has shrunk to 12 percent.

We Texans have a lot to brag about in our system of higher education, public and private. No state has greater access to a college education. Tuition is low. There are public two-year and four-year universities in every corner of the state. The South Texas/Border Initiative, with \$302 million in state funds, will result in new buildings and degree programs to match the expanding economy on the Mexican border.

State universities bring nearly \$900 million in federal and private research funds to Texas. There are six Nobel prize winners in the University of Texas system alone.

There are exciting projects underway. The University of Texas System recently created a task force to recommend ways universities could work more effectively with public schools to improve the quality of education.

This task force identified 200 existing projects involving UT universities and public schools. It also proposed five initiatives involving better training for school professionals, better delivery of education programs and outreach activities for students and families.

One proposal would expand the Centers for Professional Development and Technology so more new teachers could benefit from field training in these technology-rich classrooms. Another would create educational leadership institutes to provide training for principals.

Another would expand the very successful outreach effort to minority students in public schools. This project, called the University Connection, is an attempt to increase the number of Hispanics and African Americans who enroll in universities. The program helps junior high and high school students improve their academic and test-taking skills, explore career opportunities and aim for college. Of the 421 University Outreach seniors who graduated in 1993, 311, 74 percent, were accepted at institutions of higher education, a considerably better percentage than the 48 percent of African Americans and 55

percent of Hispanics who typically go to college.  
It's a good project, and it deserves more funding.

The major problem with the budget bill now being considered by the Legislature isn't the amount allocated for higher education, a modest .4 percent increase. It is the stealth cuts on the table that would subtract \$302 million from the higher ed budget proposed for 1996-97. (Some of these cuts affect all state agencies.)

The proposals freeze employees, reduce contributions to insurance and retirement programs and make across the board cuts in special university initiatives. The bottom line would be a four percent cut in university budgets.

State universities educate 89 percent of Texas students who pursue a college degree. The rest are educated in 42 private institutions of higher education. Texas has a good program to help students who attend these universities. The Tuition Equalization Grants (TEG) provide payments averaging \$1,416 a year per student.

TEG's are a good deal for taxpayers. The state pays \$4,309 a year to educate a student at a state university and \$1,416 to educate that student at a private institution.

The \$50 million TEG program now meets only 38 percent of the demand, and schools now must reserve the grants for the neediest students. Comptroller John Sharp recommends a \$20 million increase to make financial aid available to more students and increase the size of the grants.

That is a modest proposal which will help private universities to continue their efforts to educate students from lower-income families. TEG recipients come from families with an average income of \$23,000 a year. About 43 percent of them are minority.

*Originally published February, 1995, in the Austin American Statesman.*