

Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin: The Texas Higher Education  
Coordination Board's Writing on the Wall and Doctoral Education in  
Texas (8 pp.)

Philip Cohen

UT-Arlington

CGS Summer Workshop, 2005

The Book of Daniel describes Belshazzar's great feast at which his princes, wives, concubines drank to their idols with wine in the sacred vessels his father Nebuchadnezzar had plundered from the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. At that feast, a mysterious moving finger appeared and struck fear into the king by writing four inscrutable words, "Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin," upon one wall of the banquet hall. Only the prophet Daniel was able to explain the meaning of the words to Belshazzar. The writing on the wall was a warning of divine judgment, a doom that was shortly thereafter visited upon the Chaldean (Kal) King when Darius slew him and inherited his kingdom.

Today I'm charged with discussing a similar piece of prophetic writing, albeit a less ominous one. I'm referring to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board's Report on Doctoral Education in Texas. At 124 pages, it is considerably longer than the four words that baffled Belshazzar. Now you're certainly not the Chaldeans, and I am most assuredly no Daniel. But the CB's report reminds me of that ancient writing because its potential to transform utterly the

practice of doctoral education in Texas has filled central administrators with fear, luckily, though, not for our lives.

Many of us involved in graduate education have watched with mounting anxiety the growing number of calls for accountability, first for K-12 public education and then for undergraduate public education. Few of us deny that educational users of the public purse need to be accountable. Still, accountability discussions in higher education are rife with multiple ironies. Public investment declines in inverse proportion to increasing government regulation and oversight. Politicians rail against the rising cost of college while cutting funding. Parents and students demand accountability, 24/7, for their dollars that fund less and less of our budgets. The situation would be comic if it weren't so tragic, or vice versa. Graduate Deans have wondered when our programs would begin feeling these pressures.

In Texas, that time came last fall. As part of an overall drive for accountability in higher education, the CB issued its report in two parts: Past Trends and Critical Issues in Doctoral Education and Recommendations for the State. These two documents thoughtfully and carefully argue that the state has a compelling interest in the following areas: developing a statewide vision for creating new programs; improving program quality and attrition and time-to-degree rates; increasing minority participation in programs and degree conferrals, especially in STEM fields; making data about program performance widely available; and meeting workforce needs by broadening curricula and emphasizing transportable skills. To buttress its specific directives for change, the report stresses the

high cost of doctoral education relative to baccalaureate and master's programs in financial aid and tuition benefits over many years, equipment, laboratories, library resources, faculty salaries, and low faculty-student ratios.

The report first notes the significant up-tick in new programs over the past few years and recommends extending and making more rigorous the planning process. Significantly, the CB also calls for recurring assessment to identify doctoral programs that have a high demand for their graduates and those that have a low demand. These reviews would also identify those institutions that are best suited to offer the high demand programs. The goal is to impose some order on Texas's wide open frontier approach to program creation and reduce the substantial autonomy individual public universities currently have as regards their missions. To rationalize the existing statewide planning process, the report also proposes to reserve new doctoral programs for qualified universities in populous areas with a large number of baccalaureate graduates and unmet regional needs. The CB is concerned about access to doctoral programs in sparsely populated parts of the state in the south and west, especially in key professional areas like education and public administration. Nevertheless, the report recommends that research universities with existing PhD programs expand and serve these areas through cooperative partnerships with local universities rather than allow the latter to create free-standing doctoral programs.

As a Graduate Dean, I have my doubts about the CB's ability to identify winners and to insulate doctoral program creation from

political pressures. As a taxpayer, however, I give them credit for trying to make program creation independent of every Texas legislator's dreams for his or her local university. Furthermore, some of Texas' newest doctoral programs have a whiff of smoke and mirrors about them, especially when it comes to the sponsors' assertion that no new resources are required. These proposed reforms may frustrate the doctoral aspirations of some universities. But they may also encourage those of us who wish to change our ways to do so even though our universities may not yet be at the same stage of repentance.

Now many Texas pundits have opined that these recommendations import the California Master Plan to our state. Created in 1960, this plan, you'll recall, assigned doctoral education almost exclusively to the University of California system and limited the California State University System to baccalaureate and master's programs. Depending on where you stand, the master plan successfully allowed undergraduate and graduate programs to develop rationally without excessive duplication and mission creep or it continually frustrated the legitimate aspirations of comprehensive institutions to offer doctoral programs in areas where they had the competence and resources to do so effectively. The CB is quick to note that it is not creating the Lone Star equivalent of the Golden State's plan. Rather it is simply raising the bar for new programs.

But its praise for the California plan has some observers shaking their heads. The plan makes sense for California. As one Texas Provost complained to me, California is long and slender like

a banana. You can put 10 UC campuses in that banana and serve the entire state with PhD programs. But Texas is shaped differently. The south and west are under-served with PhD programs. Others suggest that the CB's new Commissioner of Higher Education, Dr. Raymund Paredes, previously a UCLA-based professor and administrator, is bent on bringing a version of the California plan to Texas because undergraduate education can only be improved if unnecessary and duplicative PhD programs are curtailed.

But one doesn't need the specter of California or other conspiracy theories to realize that Texas has a legitimate interest in significantly improving its high-cost and labor-intensive public doctoral programs. To help accomplish this goal, the CB also proposes conducting periodic reviews of doctoral programs in selected disciplines of importance to the state. These reviews would trigger a range of consequences for poorly performing programs from explanations to plans for improvement to program closure. The CB already assesses undergraduate, master's and doctoral programs on a regular basis, but does so primarily by reviewing the number of graduates over certain periods of time. Now much more rigorous assessments of doctoral programs will be performed. No one expects that programs will be closed arbitrarily or capriciously. And everyone expects that programs will be given a reasonable time to improve. Nevertheless, the writing is on the wall.

Perhaps the most promising aspect of the report is its stance on diversity, time-to-degree and completion rates, narrow curricula, and preparation for non-academic employment in doctoral programs. Here the CB has waded into the broader national debate

on doctoral education. Indeed, much of the report reads like earlier studies from the usual suspects such as the Association of American Universities, the American Council on Education, the National Research Council, Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and, of course, the Council of Graduate Schools. In its call to improve mentoring, advising, social and academic integration, and financial support, the report echoes and endorses many of the findings from these earlier studies. It also recommends balancing the depth of disciplinary doctoral curricula with interdisciplinary approaches and broadening them to include skills that prepare graduates for work in business, industry, government, health-related facilities, and non-profit organizations as well as academe.

How aggressively the CB will translate its carrots and sticks into actual practice still remains to be seen. In response to criticism of the first draft of the report, CB officials added to the final version a recommendation to create an advisory board to advise them on how best to implement the report's findings. Consisting mostly of Graduate Deans from PhD-granting universities and health-related institutions and a smattering of Provosts and Vice Presidents, this board has begun meeting on a regular basis. The advisory board may seek to thwart the CB's recommendations or it may constructively assist in their implementation.

The writing on the CB's wall suggests that Texas Graduate Deans will become more vocal advocates for improving our doctoral program performance, especially our completion, time-to-degree, and minority participation rates. Given how decentralized graduate education is at many universities, this is a difficult task. But it's a

critical one because of the potential new costs to our institutions for non-compliance. Now it's not just the usual suspects calling for improvements in doctoral education based on evidence that many students who do not complete their degree are, in fact, doing well academically. Now it's the state of Texas directing programs at public universities to pay more attention to recruiting and admissions practices, visitation programs, orientations, mentoring, professional development, dissertation workshops, and career counseling and placement.

At my university, we have already begun incorporating an agenda for graduate education into our strategic planning process, an agenda that focuses on recruiting, admitting, supporting, retaining, and graduating better qualified doctoral students. This agenda has broad support from faculty, students, and administrators. Knowing that effective strategic planning is often the road not taken, however, our Office of Graduate Studies will also work with graduate faculty, students, and staff over the next few years to create Preparing Future Faculty and Preparing Future Professionals programs for our doctoral students. We hope to build an institutional infrastructure that can help coordinate and support best practices in doctoral education.

First, however, we need to develop reliable data on our 35 PhD programs and almost 900 doctoral students. Now my university has a deluge of data when it comes to graduate recruiting, admissions, and enrollments and degree conferrals. When it comes to persistence, however, that torrent slows to a trickle. We have one completion report that covers all doctoral students admitted in

1994. This cohort is not broken out by full-time or part-time, gender or ethnicity, US or int'l, or graduate program, so the data is fairly useless. God knows who commissioned it or why. We're going to start producing this data regularly, in part because the CB is directing us to so. Then we can begin the more difficult process of improving our culture. Folks on campus are already lining up to work with us. But that may simply because I've pledged significant annual funds to support this initiative. It's always a pleasure to watch the power of ready money.

The CB's Mene Mene Tekel Upharsin may prove especially ominous for graduate programs in the humanities and social sciences, especially those programs that lack national prominence. Recall that the report recommends monitoring the performance of all doctoral programs, including those whose graduates are not in high demand. It seems likely that such programs that also suffer from poor completion rates will face increased pressure to mend their ways. Given that doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences often have longer time-to-degree and poorer completion rates than those in the sciences and professional schools, we may think more seriously about preparing students in the former programs for work outside the academy. Graduate Deans may also urge humanities and social sciences programs yet again to pursue programming and research collaborations with high demand programs elsewhere in the university.

Traditionally, it's been difficult to create new doctoral programs in Texas and more difficult to make major changes in them once they've been approved. Indeed, it may be more difficult

to eliminate poorly performing programs than to defeat an incumbent in the United States Congress. Now the CB is seeking to change this scenario. Each individual element of its program is not especially threatening to PhD-granting universities and universities with aspirations to join the club. Indeed, many of these measures will help improve doctoral education in Texas. They will most likely cause Graduate Deans to champion reform more effectively at their institutions and, with a little luck, help them avoid a metaphorical version of Belshazzar's fate.