

## A University Can't Afford Unfavorable Balance of Trade



Perhaps someone should work out a system for attaching precise economic value to each product turned out by the University of Oklahoma and its sister institutions. We could count so much for each doctor, lawyer, mathematician, English teacher, accountant, petroleum engineer, etc., and we could call our total output the GAP (Gross Academic Product).

Of course, it wouldn't be an easy task. Opinions vary sharply on the relative value of these professions, so we could refer to the discrepancy in the totals as the GAP gap.

Yet we probably could come up with figures on projected life earnings, consumer spending, taxable income, economic output, and the like. We would have to assign an arbitrary value to all the intangibles — cultural and social contributions, the value of any children produced, strengthening of church and community, volunteer services rendered — all that quality of life stuff.

But if we could devise a workable system, we could establish a top quality comprehensive university much as you would try to build, say, a new General Motors plant. The granting of each degree would become the equivalent of completing a new \$12,000 Camaro, for instance.

Then whenever we hit an economic snag, we could close down a few assembly lines and lay off workers until demand picked up, at which time we could crank up the classrooms again and start slapping together some more architects or chemists or geologists or dentists — maybe even a pianist or two.

Unfortunately, education just is not a stop-and-go industry. When we cut

back production, we tend to lose our most skilled workers. The time, effort and money which has been spent in bringing them along and supporting their programs must be largely written off, and when the crisis has passed, we start all over.

The loss of momentum can be particularly crippling for institutions which have major long-term projects under way, such as OU's Energy Center and the new music building. They must watch as public and private money, already appropriated or pledged for those purposes, slips away into other state budgets, other philanthropies.

But the worst part is what happens to the product when the plant cuts back. The raw materials suddenly are hard to come by. Other out-of-state institutions begin siphoning off the best stuff, even that which has been made in Oklahoma.

The best and brightest of Oklahoma's young people will not suffer from the absence of a first-rate comprehensive university in their state — not if they can afford to travel. Unfortunately, in too many cases, when you send your children away to school, you have sent them away for good.

And while Oklahoma sends away its best students, the out-of-state students we will be able to attract in return are apt to be those who cannot get into the better schools at home. They call that an "unfavorable balance of trade," which, in purely economic terms, is supposed to be bad.

Selling the continued pursuit of excellence in education in the face of economic hard times is not easy. It never has been. A 1929 *Sooner Magazine* quoted from an *Oklahoma*

*City Times* editorial condemning the governor and the legislature in those difficult days for taking nearly half of a \$2 million state treasury deficit from University of Oklahoma appropriations:

"Education, and particularly higher education, which develops leadership and furthers science and culture, is among a state's greatest assets. This state can slight it only to its lasting disadvantage, no matter on what economy plea the slight is predicated. The legislature should realize that you cannot block the development of a modern school for two or three years without loss of prestige, efficiency and usefulness to the state."

By the time this edition of *Sooner Magazine* is published, the issue of a tax increase to avert the massive revenue shortfalls which threaten all areas of public funding may have been settled, at least for the time being. But the recurring question of the willingness of the state to commit itself to quality education, kindergarten through college, will not have been answered until a sustained program of educational progress is accepted as absolutely necessary to Oklahoma's development as a state.

The old *Times* editorial said, "There is a practical value to such an educational development that makes it the soundest of investments," and declared that the state which fails to make provision for its future is unfair to its youth.

In 1983, in this age of mobility and individual opportunity, perhaps it is reasonable to say that the state which fails to provide for its youth has no future at all.

—CAROL J. BURR