

Welcoming Remarks: NSF Workshop

Feb, 24, 2005

7:30 PM, Alumni House

Opportunities and Treats: A View from the Top

This title was assigned by Cathy Manduca. An earlier discussion when we discussed my making welcoming remarks, I came up with the alternative title: “What can departments do to save themselves?” Thinking more about using that title made me realize that it sounded too much like a neoconservative solution to unwanted pregnancies. I’m not sure saving ourselves is the right phrase for geoscience departments, unless we are referring to not getting screwed by the administration.

So, the “View from the Top” it is, but “Top” is certainly not meant here in terms of status., Rather I am thinking in terms of my being at a place in my university where most of the external and internal pressures come to rest as they impact the academic life of this College. There is almost nothing in the realm of budget, resource allocation (space, people, money, capital projects), political pressure, color of the diploma portfolios, parental complaints, law suits, or institutional aspirations that does not move across my desk – some times sticking there for way too long.

Much of this gets passed on to deans, sometimes with guidance and sometimes without, and some I try very, very hard to keep from the levels above me or adjacent to me in the interests of preserving faculty governance, quality of research and scholarship, and curricular integrity. I spend an inordinate amount of time as an ambassador from the land of scholarship, teaching, and intellect to the adjacent principalities of political affairs, public relations, athletics, finance, administration, development and alumni affairs, and student life.

This lends me one perspective among many, not necessarily the best perspective, but perhaps one that you don't get to hear too often uncluttered by all the conditional phrases and weasel words that administrators are so adept at using. How many of you have received the memo that begins: "Thank you for sharing your candid views on this very complex and perplexing matter." Did you know that this means: "Butt out; I haven't a clue what to do"?

I became interested in the future of geoscience departments when I became chair of one. It was 1989. We were a few years post-oil boom and the demand for graduates in the energy and mineral business was tanking. The Recession of 1990 was just taking hold and state funding of higher education began the first of its major retrenchments from which I predict it will not recover in our lives. The vocabulary for this "at the top" is that "the states have changed the contract between the public and higher education." What this really means is that in the competition among transportation, health care, K-12 education, public safety, mental health, the environment, recreation, and higher education, we rank pretty much dead last in the budget wars since 1) we serve only a minority of the population at any time, 2) we're all a bunch of elitist liberals anyway, and 3) unlike the prisons, we can charge our customers.

I spent my first two years as department chair playing a game I called: Budget Jeopardy. I expect some of you also know this game. Across the top of the board, are categories like "Faculty Positions" "Graduate stipends" "Travel" "Operating Budgets" "Administrative/technical staff" and "Equipment". Along the left side are – "5% cut, 10% cut, 20% cut" etc. The contestants were me and my fellow department chairs and the dean was the M.C. I remember struggling with the rules of this game. If you chose travel for 5%, do you simply invite that cut and move on to the next one? If you say positions for 10% and, by the way, this will put you out of business, do you tempt the ruthless dean or her

toady, the provost, who is looking for a non-essential program or two to slice and dice to accept the challenge?

I watched at that time, geology department after geology department go under the budget knife and even a few to be eliminated, consolidated, or otherwise subjected to near death experiences. Friends would call in a panic – from Emory, NC State, Old Dominion, Virginia State (one of two HBCU's with a geology program in the south at that time), Whittier, George Mason. The list grew long and the geo-hemorrhaging seemed not to stop. It became clear to me that we were in trouble. Somehow, we had failed to persuade our colleagues across the academy that we were essential, part of the core, and otherwise integral to the modern university.

Somewhere in the midst of this blood letting, I arrived in the deans office at Chapel Hill as a deanlet. I was now part of the Inquisition, in charge of a \$50M+/yr budget for all of A&S in a university of some 24,000 students and 3000 faculty. It was 1992 and we were cutting some more. Now I was doing it to my friends, or at least people who used to be my friends.

I should note, and it will come as no surprise to you, that I have never had an economics course, an accounting course, or any academic background for this assignment beyond balancing my checkbook. I have always found it fascinating that an institution dedicated to training professionals to assume positions of leadership in society does absolutely nothing to train its own leaders in the essential skills. But, somehow, I learned a lot of things before I did too much irreversible damage.

Some of the things I learned that are relevant to our present concerns are:

- There is such a thing as an unhealthy department -- and deans can smell the disease and decay.
- There are few, maybe no, master templates or infallible metrics that deans have to measure departmental excellence. We do use a lot of proxies. Many times these proxies are “unselfishly” offered up by the units under budget review. These include:
 - NRC rankings -- I recall that Geology at UNC was 50/100 or smack at the 50th percentile while MSci was 15/30, smack at the 50th percentile, but somehow #15 seemed better than #50. Of course, the NRC rankings being close to a decade and a half old are never used now, unless one is in the top twenty.
 - External grants – how much are you generating, especially IDC. This is not “fayaaar,” as my teenage kids used to say, but very easy to measure and graph
 - Enrollments – sometimes it was total enrollments, lumping general education/service course to hide the fact that there were 2000 freshman taking Rx for Jx and 3 majors; and sometimes a focus on how essential the grad TA’s were to the freshman offerings.
 - External program reviews where we hope we can get outsiders to make tough decisions for us – they rarely did as they almost always recommended a larger building, more faculty, and better annual resources.

Thanks.
- When measurement failed, departments can offer up all kinds of reasons why they must be left unharmed. The typical litany includes:
 - Vociferous, *ad hominem* attacks on the stupidity, blindness, and ineptness of the dean’s office since every one knows that a liberal arts university cannot exist without, for example, Geology.

- Chapel Hill has always been strong in Geology, you just can't do this.
- Phone calls and letters of support from outside scholars, alumni, donors, students, parents, the local chapter of the DAR, the Chancellor's cousin's brother-in-law who was a geology major in 1949; Elmo, Sponge-Bob, Colin Powell, or Madonna – anyone who will provide an endorsement. By the way, those who call and say, “If you cut geology, I'll stop giving,” better have been major donors because confirmation of their giving history is one phone call away.

I also learned that making cuts is never easy, always noisy, often personal. Realize, hence, that too many administrators would prefer to do it, Oz-like, behind a curtain, make the announcement as they leave for two weeks in Cancun, and hope that their associate dean or vice-provost will have put out the fire storm before they get back.

What I really learned was that the winners and losers shared certain characteristics. There were two kinds of winners:

1. The obvious winners are the top-ranked, central-to-the liberal arts venture, high-enrollment programs whose failure would be an embarrassment to the institution in political, financial, or academic and preferably all three. An example from my world: William & Mary and Colonial American History or the Virginia Institute Marine Science.
2. The less obvious winners were those who simply have their act together. It was almost always a combination of factors that made them easy to pass over. These include some of all of:
 - they manage change creatively and willingly
 - they are congenial and collaborative
 - they are student-centered

- they mentor, as opposed to eating, their young faculty
- their staff like to work there and stay a long time
- they have enrollments at levels comparable to similar units
- they appear dynamic and upwardly mobile
- they play nice with others and others come to their defense
- they don't whine
- they work hard and have fun
- they appear to know where they want to go and can articulate this to those who haven't a clue where that is and why anyone would want to go there
- they know and play by the rules
- they can provide internal and external validation of their excellence or potential and they know how to tell this story in the context of the institution's vision, mission, goals, and objectives
- they are willing to take charge of their own destiny
- they don't take things personally.

By the way, it also doesn't hurt to have one of their own on the inside – whether that is in senior level administrative positions or on key committees.

Departmental losers were more Tolstoy-esque – “Happy [departments] are all alike, every unhappy [department] is unhappy in its own way.” I have spent some time worrying about the pathology of unsuccessful programs. Some true innocents have been slaughtered in the budget wars of the past fifteen years, but, as I said earlier, departments that have failed to thrive share some common characteristics. Their most common failures in my mind have been:

- Lack of vision (often they have one, but because they have not done due diligence they have not aligned their vision with that of the university or the senior administrators, e.g., they tout their undergraduate major or terminal masters program

- at a time when the university is clearly making a run at top twenty or AAU status)
- Alienation -- friends in neither high places nor among their compatriots
 - Quaintness, a.k.a. stodginess -- a failure to appear modern among their peers whether we are talking about other science units on campus or neighboring and aspirational peer institutions
 - Entitlement – the appearance or attitude that says we have been here since Moo U opened its doors and there is no way we are not going to be here next year. As Mark Twain said, “Sacred cows make the best hamburger.”
 - Paranoia – they have become so convinced that the upper administration is out to get them, that they get frozen in place like deer in the headlights. Now, paranoiacs have enemies too, but that doesn’t mean you surrender and become your own worst enemy.
 - Disunity, disarray, and departmental infighting. It’s a lot easier to take resources from a bunch of people who are already pains in the butt as opposed to creating a whole new set of enemies to make your life twice as bad – especially if these new guys are well-organized.
 - Cluelessness – failure of the chair or others to be out in the campus community or to understand what is happening, what the rules of engagement are, what kinds of priorities and criteria are being put in place, what the administrative agenda really is
 - Bad luck – wrong place at the wrong time with the wrong provost or dean. I have said way too many times in my life – without apparently realizing that I was kind of foreshadowing my fate – that there are lots of provosts who can imagine a university without a geology department. I can’t, but lots can. I know this because I actually spend time with them in their natural habitats and when they find out I am a geologist

they often treat me like a paleontologist at a Baptist tent revival.

What should we do to preserve the future of our discipline -- from my quasi-Promethean view? That is what we are here to determine. If we can help each other understand the best practices that predict success, the signs of weakness, and the most profitable directions for your program in your institution, we will have accomplished much.

But, were I asked: what one thing must our profession do? I would answer: learn how to change. The business gurus out there love to talk about change.

But, before I say too much about that, let me mention something about the world of business gurus. I have some very bad news: your president, maybe your provost and dean, but certainly your board members read and hear speeches by a bunch of people who tout the obvious as enlightenment. Whether it is Jim Collins, *Good to Great* who makes the startling observation that successful companies are those that have a corporate culture which promotes talented and disciplined people or Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point* and *Blink*, who finds that events cascade, can run away from you or that intuition is important, there is a staggeringly boring literature of best sellers out there that CEO's and their kind read fanatically. It is not a bad idea to be aware of which ones they are reading. It's easy to find out which ones they are – they are stacked six feet high in airport book stores, usually with brightly colored covers as they seem to be the corporate equivalent of candy for kids at the grocery checkout.

Don't buy it; go home and look up the review on Amazon. You'll know all you need to know, which is the vocabulary of this latest craze of the obvious and you will know what the

likely direction of the next high level administrative meeting to which you are not invited will be. These folks have few original ideas, but they have, for better or worse, the ears of your board and president. You might also just glance once in a while at the *Chronicle of Higher Education* at the library. This way you will know what viruses are infecting your senior administration.

I have made this digression because the business fad of the recent past half dozen years has been *change management*, called such things as Total Quality Management (TQM), Continuous Improvement, Outcomes Assessment, the Process of Institutional Effectiveness. Every organization has a different ability to change, a different set of cultural biases about change. To me, change management is what you do when someone is trying to impose change on you. It can be managed well and I think we will hear some very creative examples from some of you as to how your department or program responded positively to change imposed from above or without. I will not deign to offer a set of change management principles that will work universally, but you should listen for those ideas and practices of others that you feel will resonate in your culture.

I will say this: resisting change when change is inevitable is somewhere between a fool's errand and a pyrrhic victory. The senior administration will roll over you if you do not find a strategy to adjust without compromising your principles and mission.

What I will also say that, in many ways, change management is too late.

What you really want is change leadership. You want to control your own destiny in light of what you know about yourself, where you want to go, how you plan to get there. Do not wait to be told to change, or plan, or assess, or evaluate. You must

understand as best you can the conditions and the environment that guides those around and above you. Read, not late at night, the strategic planning documents for your system or school. Someone spent a lot of money and political capital on this thing and until that person is fired or retired, you had better know its language and standards.

Get ahead of the curve, be a change pioneer – even if you plan no change, make it clear that you have looked hard at all you do and can justify why you do it the way you do and should continue to do so, justified in the context of institutional goals and objectives.

Lead the process of change whether in research, teaching, curriculum, outreach.

One great secret: every senior administrator needs successes. If you become one, especially if he or she has to do no work to realize your success, stand back and let him/her bask in the reflected glory; let it be his/her idea. Lose battles, win wars; don't seek credit, seek permission and freedom.

Finally, a reflection on the view from the top based on a quote from the great modern philosopher, Eric Idle. “You better hope that there is intelligent life elsewhere in the universe, because there's bugger-all down here.” You can substitute senior academic administration” for “universe” and I will have offered you some important cautionary advice.