General Faculty Meeting May 8th, 2014

I remember being on this stage last year, listening to my predecessor Jeremy King and wondering what I had gotten myself into. No sooner had I taken over the reins of the faculty senate when it was announced that President Barker was resigning and we were all plunged into campus politics in a big way. Finding the right president for Clemson was everyone’s top priority and there was enormous anxiety about every aspect of the process. I was sitting here on this stage wondering which if the many disaster scenarios playing out in my head I would have the dubious honor of presiding over. But despite some bumps in the road, we managed to pull together to make an excellent hire. President Clements has gotten off to a good start, but he has a tough job at a critical juncture in Clemson’s history and he will need faculty input and support to successfully navigate the many changes that are coming.

You will be happy to hear that I don’t intend to run down a list of all that has happened over the last 12 months or is currently in the works – suffice it to say it’s been an eventful year. Instead, I’d to say a few words about two specific changes that are of great concern to faculty.

The first concern is the search for a new Provost and Executive Vice President. As there was with the presidential search, we have enormous anxiety about every aspect of the process and thus I wanted to give an update on recent developments. The search committee met earlier this week and will soon begin the process of vetting files from what is shaping up to be an excellent pool of candidates. The finalists will then come to campus in late June or early July so that all members of the Clemson community will be able to meet them and take their measure. We understand that the timing here is not convenient for faculty, but there is a real need to fill this position as soon as possible so we can begin to move ahead on multiple strategic fronts. The search committee will insure that key elements of the interview process are made available online, along with electronic means of participation for those who can not be here in person. Watch your Inside Clemson emails for more information about all this as things develop.

The second concern is a question about Clemson’s grand strategic vision. We have taken enormous strides in the past few decades, transforming Clemson from a sleepy little Ag school into a major national university. So far, we have managed to do this without having to be very specific about precisely what kind of school we wanted to be. Having gotten to the threshold of national prominence, however, we find ourselves faced with difficult choices. The one that will most impact what it means to be a member of the Clemson community is the balance between teaching and research. The fact of the matter is that academic institutions like Clemson compete for national prestige primarily in the realm of research. Perhaps in theory pursuit of research excellence need not adversely impact teaching, but since we do not have the vast resources many of our peer institutions command, for us there are clear tradeoffs.
The existential choice we will soon have to make is thus: do we want to be an excellent research university that is also good at undergraduate education or an excellent undergraduate institution that is also good at research? Given the sociology of academia, the default path is clear. And the strains can already be seen: student to faculty ratios are higher than a decade ago, more graduate students and contingent faculty are teaching our courses, and some departments have developed cultures where teaching is not highly valued. So if we truly want to preserve excellence in undergraduate education, as I and many faculty believe we should, then we must take active steps. At a minimum, this includes:

1) Insuring that administrators and faculty at all levels understand that the quality of teaching truly matters.
2) Developing metrics to measure good teaching and associated activities like advising and using them in assessment of faculty.
3) Incentizing good teaching and associated activities in concrete ways.

It’s been an eventful year, and next year looks to be every bit as momentous. I urge you all to lend your support, as well as your critical analysis, to President Clements and the new faculty senate president. Speaking of new faculty senate president, at this time I want to introduce your new faculty senate president, Antonis Katsiyannis. Antonis is an alumni distinguished professor of special education. Please take all your faculty cares and woes to him from now until mid April, not to me (I can’t help smiling when I say that).

So we face a lot of changes and these inevitably produce a lot of angst, but I truly believe that if we work together, we will make it through the next year just as we did this one - stronger than we were before.

Thank You