July 2012
Senate President’s Report

I know many faculty joined me in following the real-time drama on the University of Virginia campus in June. During the crisis, I offered George Cohen, chair of the UVa Faculty Senate, the moral support of our Faculty Senate. Lost in this episode, but of great interest to Clemson faculty, should be Rector Dragas’ enumeration and description of challenges facing UVa that guided her actions (wise or otherwise): declining state and federal funding, the development of online and massive enrollment courses by other institutions, the need to carefully deploy scarce resources, the pressures of stable faculty workload and student educational experience, declining faculty compensation, and the need for increased transparency and accountability related to productivity and educational quality.

I’m sure these sound familiar to most faculty. They are certainly familiar to the Faculty Senate. Indeed, these deeply intertwined issues are of continuing importance to and the subject of active work by the Senate. The tragic irony, however, is that one challenge was missing from this list—an unrecognized challenge at the heart of the whole UVa kerfuffle and also at the heart of its resolution. It would behoove all Clemson faculty to be cognizant of that challenge.

On July 2, Moody’s Investors Services issued a report on threats facing higher education that I hope faculty

Senate President’s Column
Independence Day Special: Hamilton’s Spirit of Accommodation, A Modest QEP, and Campus Decision Making

During our travels north last summer, my family and I finally succumbed to fantastical claims of subterranean grandeur extolled by those roadside signs for Luray Caverns in Virginia. The excursion received a big thumbs up from the wife and kids, so I was vexed about how to follow up this year. Being a history pusher, I easily sold the idea of a visit to Monticello by flashing the kids the back of a nickel and noting the option of a special behind-the-scenes tour that gets one into the upstairs part of the “house”. Those of you who know me and know that the behind-the-scenes tour ticket also comes with a garden tour ticket can see right through this ruse: yes, I really wanted to see the Monticello flora. Why just over-tend, stress, and kill ordinary landscape plants in my garden when I might identify a unique species with historical kitsch to which I could do the same?

I knew it would be hard to just focus on the gardens though. How could one not become steeped in the tea of history when visiting Monticello. Maybe it’s the context we find ourselves in, 200 years removed from Jefferson, that bedevils us with the contradictions of a man who was: so American but so European; so technically advanced and forward-looking and committed to the life of the mind but seemingly overmatched in his wrestles with self-professed inalienable human rights; a reluctant but successful politician; a friend to and enemy of John Adams;
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would read (it’s short and sweet):

Besides the well-known economic challenges in the form of revenue stagnation, Moody’s explicitly identifies weak governance models as a threat to higher education. Going further, Moody’s notes the UVa episode as a demonstration of the “stabilizing effects of the...shared governance model” and the benefits of faculty bodies who “can effectively assert their implicit power”.

While I think Moody’s has joined the swollen ranks of those confusing—to great detriment—power and authority (see my May 2012 column), their report accurately captures the absolutely vital role of effective governance structure and entities in meeting the challenges we face. I believe we have these at Clemson, but urge all of us to renew and enhance our commitment to shared governance, the work of the Senate, and the intellectual authority of faculty. How we might do so—my version of a faculty-centric Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP)—is the topic of this month’s President’s Column below.

The Senate Executive committee received a preview of draft recommendations by the Huron compensation consultants. The data and results presented by Huron were illuminating. While I hope the final report can be made available to faculty after the July Board of Trustees meeting, there is much work to be done over the near- and medium term (few months to few years). I am confident faculty and the Senate will have an active role to play in this work.

Just as the fall semester beings, the U.S. Public Health Service will initiate new requirements for reporting financial conflicts of interest by anyone submitting or working on a PHS grant (this includes NIH). Affected faculty should be alert to these requirements and review an expected new university conflict of interest policy related to these requirements. I anticipate the Senate will have the opportunity to provide feedback on this policy, though this result of the federal rule making process does not give us much flexibility.

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burdened by personal fiscal troubles while warning against the government burden of debt.

In trying to better understand Jefferson’s intellectual relationship with slavery, I turned to political philosophy of the day. Reading the concluding Federalist Paper, I rediscovered an existentially important principle of governance that is as underappreciated as it is relevant to the robustness and productivity of campus and national politics. Inasmuch as university governance is a fundamental challenge and threat to higher education, and the linchpin in addressing a variety of externally-driven challenges, I believe it merits being the centerpiece of a four-part alternative comprehensive faculty-centric QEP program, with broad and profound impact on students, and requiring no genuflecting in front of the altar of those Georgetown publishing executives.

1. The authority of faculty should be better horizontally and vertically integrated within the University enterprise to achieve the Hamiltonian “spirit of accommodation...of reasonable expectations” (Federalist Paper 85). When I think of modestly-sized but research intensive universities, the names that come to mind have deep pockets or a more favorable funding outlook compared to Clemson. At such institutions, second- or third-best decisions are not cause for concern inasmuch as many such decisions can be fixed with money. We don’t have that luxury. For Clemson faculty, the analogy of “tyranny” to our Founding Fathers is a non-first-best decision, which needs to be guarded against because it carries a steep penalty for Clemson faculty compared to colleagues at other institutions.
For Madison, preventing tyranny was not something that could be accomplished simply by relying upon the good will of people (“...experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions”; Federalist Paper 51); rather, prevention was accomplished by distributing power (distinct from authority) in various entities including states and the people. Whether one agrees with him or not, this seemed to be the source of Justice Kennedy’s angst about altering the relationship between government and the People in the Supreme Court’s Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act (PPACA) hearings. Would such a distribution of power work in University governance? I think not given the fundamental structure of a supreme governing board that hires administrators to run the enterprise. But that’s ok.

It was Hamilton who provided the answer in the concluding Federalist Paper, citing the “necessity of a spirit of accommodation” (the underlined emphases are my own). Accommodation is different than compromise, which means giving up or trading things that one considers important. One hears a great deal about the lack of compromise on the national political scene as a crisis that’s preventing us from solving various problems. I think this conclusion is dangerously wrong-headed. Rather, it’s the clamor for and expectation of compromise that is the crisis: we’ve lost our way in forgetting how to accommodate instead of compromise. Who wants to give up their reasonable needs, concerns and principles? No one. Who wants their reasonable needs, concerns, and principles accommodated? Everyone.

When you ask others to simply give up their needs, concerns, and principles, there results the protracted and unnecessary dysfunction to which we are all national witnesses. Hamilton realized that accommodation is not an optional mode of governance, but a necessity. When people work with each other to accommodate, great things can happen.

While structures enforcing accommodation of various needs were built into the federal system (the electoral college, a bicameral legislature, differing lengths of Senate and House terms, etc), Hamilton understood the necessity of accommodation must really be a spirit—embodied, upheld, and practiced by those participating in governance.

The implications of all this for faculty are reasonably clear. For example, it’s not productive for faculty to simply call for the repeal of e-portfolio, which seems to me to be a divisive issue on campus. Rather, faculty should supplement such a call with a means to accommodate the reasonable needs and concerns that e-portfolio addresses for its various proponents, and identify who those various proponents are.

Faculty should also consider more robustly employing the authority they already have. For example, with two Dean searches on the near-horizon, the majority faculty search committees might consider taking the reigns and employing rigorous, tailored case study-based interviews instead of or in addition to the usual stock questions provided by search firms (yawn...). Such an approach can be richly informative about how our future administrators think, act, and come to decisions (as opposed to their extant quasi-static world views) before hiring them.

2. We need a robust system of evaluation of teaching used in annual evaluation, promotion and tenure, and performance pay consideration. A thoughtful look at empirical studies should worry those truly committed to best practices in teaching and evaluation of teaching. Work such as that of Carrell & West, [http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/scarrell/profqual2.pdf](http://www.econ.ucdavis.edu/faculty/scarrell/profqual2.pdf) which I think every faculty member and academic administrator should read, suggests a student-centered system of evaluation is not “better than nothing”—it’s worse than nothing because it penalizes those faculty members committed to effecting deep learning.

As noted above, the spirit of accommodation is extremely powerful, whether for good or bad ends. I believe the rise of student evaluations over the past 40-50 years has, echoing Justice Kennedy,
fundamentally changed the relationship between students and faculty. I do not think it coincidental that: a) the marked decline in student workload documented in Academically Adrift, b) the rise of an overburdened group of contingent faculty lacking the same employment security as your Department’s administrative assistant or the same protection of academic freedom as regular faculty on the tenure-track, c) the national phenomenon of grade inflation, and d) the worrisome decline in student mental health and the increasing reliance on chemical compounds are all coincident with the establishment and entrenchment of student evaluations: the satisfaction nature of the surveys leads to mutual non-aggression pact that is bad for student learning, bad for student health, and bad for faculty—especially at research universities.

Of course, correlation is not causation. Concerning grade inflation, however, there are now quantitative behavioral models robustly demonstrating how this phenomenon arises naturally from student evaluations. I encourage those interested in educational quality to examine such models: http://environment.yale.edu/kotchen/pubs/gradeval.pdf

We also must consider that the sometimes tragic consequences of (d) above cannot be addressed solely as a student affairs issue, and we should stop doing so. It is time for faculty to consider the role of academic policy in this issue.

3. We need to rethink the 4-block system, which is aptly named because it can be a prison for faculty. In this cellblock, our work (regardless of physical units of time and effort) is defined as constant: 4 blocks. The blocks not only mask shadow work, but this ex cathedra defined constant work/effort unit presents challenges in manifesting for faculty the University President’s stated belief “...that we recognize and reward people who are not only doing good work but also taking on additional duties to help the university operate more efficiently and effectively” (Inside Clemson, 5/15/2012). No matter what additional duties faculty undertake, most of us are still “only” doing 4 blocks. As a result, we do what’s convenient: count papers, grant dollars, graduate students graduated, etc. Alas, not everything that counts can be counted—or so said Einstein.

4. We need to incentivize good teaching and other desirable behaviors (perhaps service or student engagement) to enhance quality. Doing so successfully will require addressing the previous 2 bullets of this QEP plan—recognizing quality and effort over just sheer numbers of students or courses taught, and restoring the proper relationship between faculty and students.

Given the ease of quantifying and counting scholarly activities, I believe the expressed de facto preference in rewarding scholarship-related performance that we can easily count rather than teaching performance (a nearly 10:1 preference in monetary units as revealed by an analysis of the sole-factor justifications of 2011 performance raises ≥6% by my physics colleague and last year’s Policy Committee Chair Sean Brittain), is the faculty and chairs responding to incentives. The performance raise analysis and widely-understood justifications for faculty counteroffers (and preemptive offers) clearly suggests to a rational person the activities they should focus on to be financially rewarded—and those activities are not teaching, service, and many forms of student engagement. This is what our own internal market data clearly tell us.

The good news is this can be changed. For example, the University could establish distinct performance pools for scholarship, teaching, and other activities— independent of each other, hard capped, and weighted in whatever proportion desired. The beauty of governance is its ability to step in when markets don’t reach the best decisions.

Jeremy King is solely responsible for the views expressed in The President’s Column. They neither reflect the views of nor are endorsed by the Faculty Senate or Clemson University.