Faculty Senate President Address to the
Clemson University Board of Trustees, July 17, 2015
James A. McCubbin, PhD

Thank you Madame Chair. It’s always a great honor to address this Board.

I want to talk about Clemson’s vision to become the nation’s premier public research and teaching university. Our preeminence in teaching has often been linked to the highest national rankings, and our preeminence in research is embodied, at least in part, by our quest to achieve the highest level of Carnegie research classification. Our greatest challenge is how to achieve both with strategic investment in an atmosphere of limited new resource streams.

First, let me address our challenges in national rankings. As we develop our strategic plan, we must both look back and look forward. Looking back, our rise into the top national rankings was a great example of a vision, a plan and precise execution. But this effort was not just about rankings. Fundamentally, it was about quality. And because of the focus on quality, the ultimate beneficiaries are our students, with the cascade of benefits of Clemson student success.

Our emerging 2020Forward Strategic Plan embodies our vision for the future. Our goals are not just about rankings... we do expect various rankings to bounce around a bit in the short term as we focus on important goals that may not directly affect specific metrics of any particular ranking system. But the long term goal, and I believe this to be realistic, is to continue our climb as our reputational rankings catch up with our quality growth. For example, in the short term, we may target recruitment goals that do not necessarily improve certain selectivity numbers, yet greatly enhance the value of a Clemson education. This is the natural tension between efforts to increase our selectivity and academic excellence, while simultaneously seeking more effective outreach in our public educational mission. Our developing strategic plan is a quest for that perfect balance.

It’s always a challenge to enhance faculty efficiency, but there are clear signs of past success, as well as opportunities for greater success in the future. For example, if you look at “bang for the buck”, Clemson has done much better than
the many rankings indicate. Considering our academic performance, given our limited financial resources, we are probably closer to a Top 10 public institution. Our state funding per student and our endowment size does not allow us to easily reduce section sizes and simultaneously support our research efforts, yet we perform as well or better than many of our top competitors.

And many rankings do not reflect well our graduate and research mission success. In order to achieve the highest Carnegie research classification, we must find ways to increase our faculty efficiency, productivity, and success in graduate education, extramural funding and research expenditures.

Given these limitations, how do we balance all of these goals, the rankings plus the research mission plus the public educational outreach mission? Are there ways we can maximize faculty performance that will help us address all of these competing goals? This is difficult to address at the institutional level because some units have different roles and more flexibility than others. Limited resources usually come with pressure to specialize, to focus on our greatest perceived assets and let other units languish in a supporting role. Yet to emerge as a top comprehensive research university, we need to succeed broadly in all units across campus.

How can we increase faculty performance and success? Many, and perhaps most, of our regular faculty hiring is heavily based on research and scholarship. We do hire great teachers, but in many units, the final hiring decisions are based on research and scholarly excellence. Yet many units do not fully nurture that potential and will, at times, unintentionally discount that activity in workload assignments. I believe we can do much better nurturing faculty research success.

Faculty effort dedicated to the very research talent that we focused on in hiring can often become rather small, after teaching assignments and administrative burden. Our faculty are one of our biggest investments, yet I fear we may not be turning them loose to fully deploy their research talents to the greater success of Clemson’s research mission. For example, we hire professors who are great teachers, however our final selection criteria are heavily weighted for the highest quality research and scholarship. I believe this is the right approach to personnel selection for the very best comprehensive research universities in
the world. However, over the years there has become a disconnection, at least in many units across campus. As do many great institutions, we select the very best scholars, and then assign class preparations, often around 50% effort or more. If we then add graduate or undergraduate mentoring, service and academic advising, we can often have precious little time left for the very research talent we relied on in our personnel selection.

I don’t want to get too deep into the weeds, but I recently did a workload analysis for academic advising. Many of our faculty are responsible for academic advising for undergraduates, and can often be assigned over 30 advisees per semester. This load usually gets around 5% workload effort assignment in our goalsetting. If we extrapolate that effort distribution, a faculty member who does nothing but advising would be responsible for well over 600 advisees. According to the National Academic Advising Association, a generally accepted recommendation for the number of students assigned to a full-time, professional academic advisor is approximately 300. This is an example of the unseen shadow work that fills the day of someone who we expect to be, simultaneously, the world’s best teacher and the world’s best research scholar. We won’t compromise our teaching and can’t compromise other duties, so often research time becomes the orphan child, and is neglected to everyone’s disadvantage. As enrollments grow, this can further erode faculty research success.

No wonder it’s difficult for many units on campus to produce research comparable to top level comprehensive research institutions. The teaching, administrative burden and shadow work can rob our university of the very talent that we hired. I know this level of thought and analysis is a top priority of our upper administration, and I have the absolute highest confidence that we have the right folks for the job. They have inherited a culture and practice, and finely honing the performance efficiency of a large institution will take time and experimentation. I just want to add my two cents in support of their efforts.

I recommend a wider application of two approaches, strategically applied, to increase broad faculty success and productivity. First, consider more strategic roles for specialists who can provide very high quality teaching and advising. This can allow additional research time for faculty who had limited time, yet great potential for high quality research success. (Please note: this is not a
recommendation for reduced numbers of tenured faculty, but to enhance their support systems and strategic effort distribution)

This sets the stage for the next step, further incentivizing campus-wide grant proposal development. While we rightly seek ways to reward a select group of our research superstars, we should also focus pointedly on growing research success from our broader talent pool investment. More research productivity and more grant proposals means more campus-wide publications, more campus-wide extramural funding, more campus-wide funding for graduate students and postdocs, and a much higher institutional reputation nationwide. And that also leads us to higher reputational rankings and the highest Carnegie research classification.

I understand that some of this may be a bit oversimplified, and the actual implementation across highly varied disciplines is extraordinarily complex. But these are the types of strategies we hope to better assess and implement... how to increase quality within the constraints of significant resource limitations ... how to continue to do more with less.

And finally, I know this Board is committed to seeking ways to better tell the full story of Clemson University and to create a campus climate that allows us to successfully recruit a diverse and high quality faculty and student body. I look forward to working with Board’s subcommittee and the President’s Diversity Advisory Council.

Clemson University has one of the most colorful and, at times, controversial stories in all of higher education. It is a story of a true Renaissance man and his tragic family saga that evolved into an extraordinary legacy and gift to South Carolina. It’s also a story of a time of great civil change and turmoil, and the fears and foibles of our human imperfections. But more importantly it’s a story of service, and sacrifice for our country, a story of desegregation with dignity. And most of all it’s a story of the evolution and transcendence of a great university, and our continuing quest to be the engine of economic mobility for all citizens of South Carolina.
I look forward to helping find the ways to tell our story, in its full complexity of history and context. And to tell the story of our vision for a better future for all of the citizens of our great state.

Madame Chair, that concludes my report.

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