

STATE OF THE UNIVERSITY:
COMMENTS FROM CONNER BAILEY
OUTGOING CHAIR, UNIVERSITY FACULTY & SENATE

Acknowledgements and Thanks

I must start with acknowledgement and thanks to members of the leadership team: Patricia Duffy, Kathryn Flynn, Rich Penaskovic, and Willie Larkin. We have worked well together as a group. We have benefited from the assistance of others, including chairs and members of numerous Senate committees, as well as staff within various offices across campus. I would like to acknowledge in particular Beth Weed in the President's office and Margaret Manley in the Provost's office, who have been professional and helpful. My thanks also to Lakeeta White, the administrative assistant who works with the faculty leadership, and to Brian Schwieker and Mike Hornsby, who help with technical set up for meetings of the Senate and University Faculty meetings.

A Year of Change

Much has happened over the past year. At the last Spring meeting of the University Faculty, we had no provost, we had no associate provost for diversity and multicultural affairs, and we had open positions for deans in the library, education, liberal arts, and agriculture. A year ago, we thought that by March 2006 we would be concluding a presidential search, but of course that did not occur.

A year ago we did not know that post-tenure review and academic program review would take center stage, that efforts to establish a strategic plan would move to the fore and then be shelved, or that an initiative related to agriculture would move forward with considerable input from faculty and others and then disappear from view for the past three months.

On the Edge of a Precipice

Let me now address the question "What is the state of our university?" In my view we are poised on the edge of a precipice.

Through their actions in years past, our Board of Trustees has received substantial criticism, much of it justified, and much of it from this body. Through their actions, this university has been brought to the brink of a precipice, loss of SACS accreditation. Past actions of the Board endangered the continued existence of Auburn University and tarnished its reputation, affecting all who work and study here.

Past actions have current consequences, as became obvious when Dr John Kuhnle, the consultant hired to assist in the presidential search process, told us that Auburn's reputation was such that we could not start a successful search until we conducted a thorough institutional assessment and openly embraced willingness to change.

These are unpleasant facts which we must face because history does have consequences. While acknowledging the outcome is in doubt, there is reason to believe that the history of conflict with our Board is moving towards resolution.

On the question of accreditation, we have stepped back from the precipice. Dr. Richardson and the Board deserve credit for this step. The willingness of the Board to commission the Fisher Report in response to Dr Kuhnle's recommendation represents a second step away from the edge. Last week the University Senate passed a resolution thanking the Board for taking a step away from the edge by commissioning the Fisher Report. Whether the Board is serious about fundamentally changing the culture of conflict that surrounds this university remains to be seen. The representatives of all who work at this university have made clear our willingness to do so.

This is so largely because the composition of the Board has changed dramatically in recent years. The Board is no longer as monolithic in viewpoint as once was the case. The most recent and dramatic evidence of this sea-change is the court case to be filed by trustee Dwight Carlisle challenging the Attorney-General's opinion regarding trustee terms. Such differences of opinion were unheard of several years ago. Whatever else may be said about the current Board, it is not dominated by the agenda of one individual.

I believe Mr. Carlisle has done a great service to this university by bringing this matter before the courts. As the Attorney General himself wrote in his opinion, there are two contending constitutional provisions involved, one pertaining to individual terms and the other to staggered terms of trustees. When two constitutional principles are in conflict, it seems reasonable to ask the court system to resolve the matter.

I was disappointed to read the statement by our Interim President and the President Pro Tempore of our Board in response to news of Mr. Carlisle's challenge. I disagree with Dr. Richardson and Mr. McWhorter that challenging the Attorney General's opinion is detrimental to the best interests of Auburn University or that it is "patently unreasonable to show dissension on a matter which is already settled." The matter has not been settled, and will only be settled in the courts. In its lead editorial this morning [March 14, 2006], the Montgomery Advertiser made this same point.

In my view principled dissent in this matter is the sincerest form of loyalty to the institution, and reflective of the kind of openness called for by Dr. John Kuhnle, the consultant hired to assist Auburn University in its search for our next President. Statements critical of open debate reflect Auburn University's troubled past and not, I hope, its future.

Presidential Search

Who will be our next President and how that individual will be chosen are the most important questions to be answered in the coming year. The search for a president presents an important opportunity for creating a strong consensus in support of the successful candidate. An ad hoc committee chaired by Professor Larry Gerber developed a framework for conducting a search.

Allow me to quote from that report: "A search for a president offers a unique opportunity for a university to define its vision for the future and to enhance understanding of the institution's mission. Although the Board of Trustees holds ultimate responsibility for determining the University's mission and selecting a new president, it is highly desirable to develop the widest possible agreement among the University's various constituencies, including most importantly the faculty, on the characteristics and experience a new president ought to possess to insure the greatest chance of that person's success in office."

Achieving agreement among various constituencies on the characteristics and experience of a new president represents a significant challenge and opportunity. What is our model of the contemporary university president?

Some have argued that what is needed is a strong leader capable of keeping the Board of Trustees in their place, and Auburn's history suggests that is a real need.

But strength alone is not enough. Do we want to trade Board micromanagement for an autocratic leadership style which makes a mockery of shared governance? Does the corporate CEO model fit higher education? Do we need a president who understands that expanding market share is not a central goal of the academy?

The Challenge and Reality of Shared Governance

I have come to realize that shared governance is not a privilege, it is a necessity as this university simply could not function without the uncompensated and often unrewarded service faculty and other employees provide through work on various Senate and University committees.

Shared governance is most effective when a firm foundation of trust is established. Trust is particularly important when contentious subjects are being debated, such as post-tenure review.

When last this body met, we spent considerable time discussing the merits of post-tenure review. We approached the subject with intellectual honesty, and told the faculty that before a decision was made on moving forward with post-tenure review that there would be another opportunity for open discussion and a vote.

Since our last meeting the Executive Committee, which I have chaired this past year, has been involved in discussions with Dr. Richardson and Dr. Heilman regarding post-tenure review.

We have consistently taken the position that any post-tenure review process which may be developed in the future needs to be built on a solid annual performance evaluation process for faculty, something we do not have on a uniform basis at this time.

We believed that these concerns were understood and within the past month we were assured that no action was to be taken in establishing a post-tenure review policy until perhaps the Fall with a beta test of post-tenure review in the Spring of 2007. On the basis of this understanding, we decided not to include post-tenure review as an agenda item for this meeting. We were also aware that the Fisher Report recommended that implementation of any post-tenure review policy be postponed until a new President was in place.

Last week, however, after the agenda for this meeting was set, we have learned that Dr. Heilman has been asked to prepare a report for Dr. Richardson on post-tenure review in preparation for the April Board meeting. The Executive Committee is meeting with Drs. Richardson and Heilman tomorrow, and I hope we will be able to confirm that faculty will have an opportunity to discuss and vote on any policy before it comes into effect. If the administration has modified its time frame, the possibility exists that a special called meeting of the University Faculty will be held before the end of this semester.

Concluding Remarks

It has been my privilege to serve this faculty as Chair. In doing so, I have been aware that while elected as an individual, my responsibility has been to serve the faculty as a whole. This responsibility has tended at times to moderate my voice, and certainly at meetings of the Senate and University Faculty I have attempted to fulfill the role of the impartial Chair.

The chair does not and cannot lose him or herself in the role of Chair, but neither can that individual speak only for him or herself. The Chair represents an important collective voice, and where I might have wanted to speak clearly on a matter of importance to me, I have been mindful of this collective responsibility and the fact that not everyone who I represent sees the world in the same way. The balance between being a leader who focuses his or her own light on an issue or one who serves as a reflector of the lights of others is difficult to achieve.

It is now my honor to pass on this challenge to Professor Richard Penaskovic, your new Chair.