

14 May 2007
Faculty Senate Meeting

Speaker's Comments
Speaker R. Douglas Slack
2006-2007

Speaker-elect Price, Secretary-Treasurer Price, fellow senators, any newly elected senators, and friends of the Faculty Senate.

When I began to pen these words (or I should more accurately say “pound them out on my laptop”) I was struck by the tongue in cheek observations recently by Former Speaker Fike, when he observed that under my watch, we have lost our President, our Provost, and our Vice Provost! No explicit connection between my leadership and these losses is ever made, but left hanging is ... The national media is fond of observing that with the exception of our military and military families, rarely have the American people been asked to sacrifice because of our national entanglement in Iraq. I beg to differ. Texas A&M University has given a full measure to help our country because of the civil war in Iraq.

Let me continue.

I wish to read again from the preamble of the TAMU Faculty Senate Constitution:

A university's foundation is its faculty. Therein lies [sic] the knowledge, the commitment to learning, and the source of constructive progress upon which universities rest. The interests of students,

scholarship, and society are best served when the faculty brings its special talents to bear through cooperative participation in the governance of the university.

I recently gave a presentation to the Association of Former Students Board of Directors Meeting. I read from this same part of our constitution. They wanted to know what faculty member think about participation in the governance of the University. We cannot be a Vision 2020 top ten institution with taking advantage of the combined wisdom of the entire TAMU Community. Progress at TAMU necessarily involves informed decision-making with constructive input from all parts of the community – writ large. By “writ large” I mean Faculty, Administrators, Students, the Bryan College Station Community, and even our former students.

I have told different groups in the past year that the faculty do not want to run the campus – we leave that to the administration. Specifically, the color of walls, the width of the sidewalk, the nature of the concept of the Military Walk, locations of parking signs, etc are not the direct concern to faculty members. But the nature of degree programs, courses, granting of degrees, classroom teaching, the administration of the research program, intellectual property, etc are all issues that we must routinely be involved with. I must hasten to add that two non-academic areas that bring faculty members to the edge of their seats with insistence on action: **ATHLETIC TICKET DISTRIBUTION AND PARKING!!!** I must tell you that both have been major issues in my Speakership.

Because of the constructive role that we have played with the Gates and now the Davis presidencies, we have earned a growing influence within the administration. This influence is a two-edged sword. Although we primarily focus on academic issues, and those areas where academics are impacted (such as the Council of Built Environment) we are asked to participate more and more in “running the university via participation in task forces and committees”. Such requests for participation by Faculty Senate members is on the whole good, but adds a burden to the Officers, Executive Committee, and faculty members who are asked to serve. I do not wish to suggest that we don’t wish to participate, but this is by way of letting you know that shared governance responsibilities come with a price.

In looking back over the past year I debated on whether or not to take a fine scale look at what we accomplished versus a focus on the big issues that we tackled. I mercifully chose the latter approach.

- We changed the constitution and bylaws to allow for an inactive status designation for faculty members who find that they may be unavoidably absent from Faculty Senate Meetings for an extended period of time. That option is most relevant for faculty members who find that they are away from campus or their duties during the summer months. See Marilyn if that is your situation this coming June – August.
- At the urging of the Faculty Senate and the Living Wage Coalition, the pay and benefits package for low wage personnel was increased to

be above the Living Wage objective of 130% of the cost of living for a family of 3.

- We had the first ever Faculty Senate-wide Retreat in August 2006. The importance of communication from the Senate at all levels via the caucuses to the rank and file faculty members was highlighted. I wish to highlight examples of excellent Caucus communication with college faculty: Bob Bednarz an EC member from GeoSciences, and Melinda Grant in the College of Education and Human Development are two who I note take their communication roles to heart. Melinda Grants reports get to my house, where my wife received them as an Assistant Lecturer in her college, before I get home after the Faculty Senate meeting!]
- 11 September 2006, we approved the University Studies Degree. The University Studies degree was the first degree program to be initiated by the Faculty Senate. We have taken a measured approach to approval of Areas of Concentration, thus ensuring that the degree program will evolve in a sound matter.
- We passed the infamous rule on “Faculty participation in the Selection, Evaluation, and Retention of Deans” and Department Heads. Although passed it is still not “rule of the land”. Dean of Faculties Watson has reported that the rule is at the system offices.
- In late January 2007 Chancellor Mike McKinney named the Presidential Search Advisory Committee to find candidates for the

Presidency at Texas A&M University. The Advisory Committee is headed by the Speaker of the Faculty Senate and includes two other current senators and the first speaker of the senate. In all 5 of the 14 members of the committee are faculty members and one other individual is a sitting Dean. As a result academic interests make up 43 % of the committee. This is by far the most diverse and representative committee that I have served with. I believe that the strong Faculty Senate representation on the committee is a reflection of the respect that this body has within the System.

- Officers of the Faculty Senate met with minority student leaders (Dec 11, 2006) concerning development of a plan for ensuring that the International and Culture Diversity course requirement achieves goals of exposure of our students to different cultures. These talks, which were prompted by concerns raised by the TAMU student-related racist video that became a part of U-tube, are ongoing. We have an obligation to continue these talks.
- We did change the Bylaws to allow for adjustable multipliers in order to keep the size of the Faculty Senate at the level dictated by the constitution. The Bylaws changes passed unanimously.
- The Faculty Senate passed the Parental Teaching/Workload for Faculty and sent it on to President Davis.

Let me finish this address by commenting on a few items that the Senate should do a better job in, or address:

1. Although the primary finding of our all Faculty-Senate retreat was that communication needed to be enhanced. We barely addressed that finding during the year. Despite a growing faculty membership on the campus (now about 2400), we still have had a hard time electing membership on critical committees such as CAFRT and the Honors Council. And I believe it is because faculty members are busy and not informed about the relevance of the Faculty Senate they remain uninvolved. We have two excellent examples of communication with faculty in GeoSciences and Education and Human Development, we need to export that model to other colleges. Communication with our constituents is critical and we don't do a good job.
2. Parking and Athletic ticket distribution to faculty members were issues this past year. We made progress with the Athletic Department. But Parking issues raised their ugly head again late in Spring. Once again, fee changes were made without adequate explanation to the campus community. The Executive Committee and the Speaker and I were apprised of forthcoming changes. We are not in the business of selling such changes to the faculty. The obligation of communication of rationale or a justification for parking changes lies with the Parking Administration and not the Faculty Senate.
3. We must continue to refine the University Studies Degree and evaluate forthcoming Areas of Concentration. I do believe that

this approach to educational planning will become the norm for those programs not constrained by discipline-related accreditation.

4. We have not made progress in attracting minority faculty members to participation in the Senate. Although minority participation in the Faculty Senate is roughly equivalent to minority representation on the entire faculty, changes in cultural and ethnic attitudes at this institution will not come unless we are bold in encouraging participation of minority faculty members in the governance of the University.

5. Late in Dr. Gates term as President he announced the formation of a taskforce co-headed by the Provost and the Speaker of the Faculty Senate whose mission was to find ways to institutionalize shared governance. We can leave the vehicle in neutral, or we can put the pedal to the metal and move. I for one choose the latter. We must be ever mindful that shared governance can only occur when decision-making occurs within an environment where all relevant parties are at the table. Shared governance is based on mutual trust between the different parts of the academic community. -- among administrators, faculty members and students. Bob Gates was the self-described Agent of Change. We need as a faculty to continue to move the academic engine of the great university forward in the year of angst and uncertainty. We need not to get stuck in neutral.

It has indeed been an honor to be the Speaker of the Faculty Senate at Texas A&M University. In the opportunities that I have had to meet with other system and non-system university faculty senators, I can assure you that we are on the right track. And for that matter, we are envied by our faculty-senator peers all over the state.

In the words from the classic by Frank Sinatra, “this has been a very good year”. Despite the uncertainties with permanent leadership coming on board next year the robust role that the Faculty Senate has played on this campus in the Gates era, I believe will end being the glue that holds this academic community together in this time of uncertainty. We must continue to conduct our business with resolve to safeguard the academic standards of Texas A&M University. The forthcoming year will not be a time to veer from our tradition of giving the President of TAMU sound, rationale advice on academic matters. The only thing that I can be certain of, in this uncertain time, is that we will not have Dr. Gates as the next president of Texas A&M University. As I have been often quoted as saying, “that DNA has left town.”

We have a remarkable faculty on the Texas A&M University campus. As a university we are on the precipice of greatness. The Vision 2020 goal of top ten status is within reach. University leaders around the nation have clearly recognized the prominence of Texas A&M University in leadership across numerous disciplines in higher education nationally. A vehicle in neutral will roll backwards down hill. We have the momentum and with an energized Faculty engine. Let’s Power Forward!

Thank you.