

Speech at Appalachian's General Faculty Meeting

Paul Gates, Chair, Faculty Senate

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Good afternoon; thank you, Chancellor Everts, Provost Kruger, faculty and staff colleagues. I hope your fall semesters have launched smoothly.

Anyone who brings a perspective of at least 8 or 10 years on Appalachian's campus can see that the university has grown rather dramatically in that time. We now have a student body of about 18,300. That size has been reached by growing at an annual rate of about 1.5% in recent years. If current projections hold, incremental growth will increase to about 2% per year, which will mean that we'll enroll about 365 additional students next year and going up slowly to about 395 additional in the last year of the decade. Bear in mind that this is in addition to the 3,200 or so who would arrive in the freshman cohort each year even under a no-growth scenario. That 3,200 figure doesn't include transfers or graduate students, by the way. When all are accounted for, we could be at about 20,200 students five years from today.

That's a lot of students, arriving quickly, and in large numbers. I attended my 40th college reunion in June and was surprised to learn that the student body of my alma mater had grown by 50% since I graduated, and has now levelled off. But on the way back from the airport after that weekend, I realized that Appalachian, which is about 5 times as large, has grown by the same 50% in half that time.

Where these students will live and where they will be taught are pressing matters and getting those answers right are vital to their education and to our success as a university. However, physical infrastructure is not my main focus this afternoon. I'll leave it to some future Senate chair to promote plans for a monorail along the 421 median to ease parking congestion on the Deep Gap campus.

What I'm thinking about today is those students as people and as learners. What are their backgrounds? What will their educational experiences have been like so far? How will they have been affected by the hostility of state government to public education since the beginning of the decade? How will they learn? What new learning styles will we need to adapt to and support? What skills will they need in addition to the oft-cited fundamental abilities to think critically and write and speak effectively?

What will they be interested in as major courses of study? Will they continue to bring a heightened awareness of and concern for environmental issues, alternative energy sources and energy conservation? Will they continue to broaden the definition of sustainability, which suffuses our new 5-year strategic plan and applies to almost every unit on campus? Will they arrive with an enhanced sensitivity to social justice? Some combination of the above? What emerging social, economic and political issues will they have to grapple with? What will they *not* be interested in pursuing?

Full disclosure: As a student I was thoroughly steeped in the liberal arts tradition, and I continue to believe that the primary function of education is not to provide workers, but to develop citizens. That's at the core of my intellectual DNA, so it won't change, but over the last 10 or 12 years, I've thought a lot about the economic landscape today's students will face after graduation and I've become ever-more sensitive to it.

To go back to 1975 again, my friends and I never thought much about being able to get a job. We interviewed with corporate recruiters (except Dow Chemical) and all got multiple job offers. Some of my friends followed that path and some went to grad school. I ditched it all to move to rural Maine to run a small weekly newspaper. But I'm not sure that's realistic today. I suppose the 21st Century equivalent would be developing a new mobile app. But with literally millions of apps out there, it had better be a killer app. Is that a career plan? Will they be able to be successful?

And they do want to be successful, even if they're not always sure what that means. I see that a lot already in my interpersonal contact with students, at least to the extent that it hasn't been replaced by e-mail and texting. Not so long ago, students used my office hours to make sure that they were clear on the 20th Century development of 1st Amendment legal doctrines like fighting words and clear-and-present danger. No more. Now we discuss the Big Questions: Should I apply to law school? Does a master's make me more marketable? I'll graduate in May. What should I do if I'm not sure of anything?

In addition to help in dealing with such angst, what else will they expect from the faculty as they navigate early adulthood? I can only imagine that their expectations will continue to climb as their tuition and fees do likewise. Every other article in the Chronicle and IHE seems to include the phrase "burdensome student debt," which becomes ever more acute as we continue to move from a state-supported institution to a state-located institution. In the face of the

abandonment of the concept of education as a public good, we'd better make sure to do everything we can to deliver capable graduates. Not only because that's what the market demands, and failing to do so will cause our programs to wither, but because capable, adaptable graduates are our best recruiting tool: success begets success.

What kind of faculty will we have to deliver that education? The first baby boomers will hit 70 in January, and even the youngest of that generation turned 50 last December, so retirements are well underway and will continue for years. Who will replace them? Increasingly, the answer is part-time and other non-tenure track faculty. Student credit hours delivered by non-tenure track faculty stood at an already high 35% in 2006-07 and climbed to just over 43% in 2014-15. If recent trends continue, it's plain to see that that figure will be perilously close to 50% by 2020.

Distortion in the contract status of faculty contributes in part to problems with continuity in development and updating of the very programs that Appalachian's sterling reputation has been built on and are to be relied on into the future. Are our faculty assets as fully developed as they could be? Are they deployed in a manner that will achieve maximum effectiveness? Are our academic units structured in such a way as to exploit administrative efficiencies in an environment of diminished resources? Are they structured in ways that will foster symbiotic relationships to the benefit of pedagogy, scholarship and creative endeavors? Are units arranged in such a way that will create new marketing opportunities showcasing the university and making us more attractive to prospective students and faculty? Are our marquee programs packaged to spark an interest in prospective donors?

Appalachian is a different institution than it was when I arrived in 1995 and it will be different in 2025, and even in 2020. How will it be different? I don't know. I would be suspicious of anyone who says they do. Yogi Berra would probably say something like, 'We don't know what the future is going to be like because we haven't gotten there yet.' All we can do is bring to bear our collective accumulated wisdom and try to do what we think best for our students and each other.

Let me leave you with what Heraclitus told us in the 5th Century B.C. and which had been repeatedly borne out over the last 2,500 years: "All is flux, nothing stays still. Nothing endures but change."

Thank you, and have a good semester.