

General Faculty Meeting Address, March 2, 2012
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Good afternoon, colleagues, Chancellor Peacock, Provost Gonzalez, and others in the audience. I bring greetings from Faculty Senate, news about recent Senate projects, updates on plans for the rest of the semester, and a few things for us to all think about.

This year has been a busy one so far—one that certainly has been characterized by change, challenges, even a few crises. When there is a crisis, the ground shifts frighteningly under one's feet, reality may seem shattered, one may feel anger, and/or a loss of control, and/or like things will never be ok again. As academics, we may turn to books for solace, but there we read that we are *Academically Adrift* (Arum and Roska, U Chicago P, 2011) that *Colleges are Wasting our Money and Failing Our Kids* (Hacker and Dreifus, Times Books, 2010), that the country is filled with *Underachieving Colleges* (Derek Bok, Princeton, 2007), and that, according to Professor X, forthcoming this month from Penguin, we need to look *In the Basement of the Ivory Tower*. (I'm not sure what we will find there.....some dead mice? a forgotten moldy sandwich? The very special lamp Aunt Beatrice gave us for our last birthday?) Apparently we need bigger classes, smaller classes, to raise tuition, to lower tuition, to admit more students, and to admit fewer students. Everyone (except us) thinks we need to do more assessment. It's a little exhausting. But is it hopeless? I think not. The Faculty Senate is trying to make sure it is not.....

We started the year with the most draconian cut to our budget in history. In response to the 35-40% cut to our operating budgets, the Faculty Senate held a special session and passed a resolution that asked the Chancellor to institute an administrative fee similar to those in place at many of our sister institutions. The Chancellor acted per our resolution, which enabled the non-teaching areas of the university that have multiple revenue streams to help out the academic areas of the university that depend solely on state support. As I hope you have all been informed, that money was recently released to departments to support the faculty travel and related research expenses that are so central to our academic mission; and although it could never completely compensate for last year's lack of state support for higher education, at least we have been able to continue our work in the academic core of the university knowing we have taken some steps to control our destiny amidst uncertainty.

Similarly, faculty began the fall semester, for the first time in recent history, with a moratorium on OCSAs, that precious semester that comes so infrequently in our academic careers, when we can devote ourselves completely to our scholarship, and in so doing, rejuvenate intellectually, to the benefit of both research and teaching. In response to the OCSA moratorium, in November the Faculty Senate passed a resolution that Off Campus Scholarly Assignments should be reinstated; and our new Provost agreed that this was a priority and was able to make it happen, beginning this Spring semester.

Both of these are examples of excellent partnering between faculty and administration. In times, like the present, when money is tight and frustrations are high, it's tempting to overlook examples such as these and to adopt a pessimistic stance, even an Us vs. Them stance. We can react or be proactive about a crisis; we can do nothing at all; we can scoff at those who believe things will get better; we can look at existing models or we can ignore them; we can imagine

something new. But one thing is for sure, as one of my favorite 19th-century authors, George Eliot, wrote, “Our deeds determine us, as much as we determine our deeds” (*Adam Bede*). So I want to remind everyone about some ongoing projects in which Senate is trying to create collaborative bridges between faculty and administration; and I want to ask that we all think about who we want to be in the midst of these crises. How does each person in this room want to position him or herself with regard to the challenges that affect us all?

First, we continue the process to work out the problems with Gen Ed. If you remember, last year Senate discussed problems in the General Education program with the former Provost and he and I set up a task force that collected considerable information from faculty. This year, the Senate assessed that task force’s report, affirmed that the identified areas were indeed areas of concern, and asked the current Provost to find solutions. At her direction, another, problem-solving survey went out to faculty and a second, solution-finding taskforce has been meeting. When they are finished with their work, the results will come back to Senate, and each of you will be able to communicate to your departmental Senator whether or not you would like him or her to vote to approve the recommended solutions.

I call upon everyone to be patient as this process unfolds. I know that it is beyond annoying that academic change generally happens at a glacial pace. But especially since one of the critiques has been that the program was originally implemented too hastily, we must allow the process the time it needs.

Second, Faculty Senate continues to be involved, albeit very much on the periphery, in the ongoing discussion about the Athletics Feasibility Study. The report that came out in December contained less information than expected, and consequently there has been much faculty critique and a request for more data and more comparative study. As a result, Senate has compiled faculty questions, concerns and comments about the study; we recently sent those to the Chancellor and Athletic Director and are waiting for them to be addressed. I am sure they will be. Additionally, just this past Tuesday, I asked the Chancellor to consider inviting a group of faculty with expertise in generating feasibility studies to come speak with him and other relevant parties, as soon as a more complete data set is generated. Let’s cast aside our skepticism for a moment and concede that no one wants to make a mistake about this issue. Everyone knows the stakes are very high. Good data and sound analyses are of paramount importance. Fortunately, we have time to obtain a supplement to the current feasibility report, because no offers have yet been made. Thus, I call upon the faculty to resist rumor and the impulse to assume that this is all a done deal. I really don’t think it is. And I call upon the Chancellor and his team to involve more faculty before any final decision is made—to take advantage of the considerable expertise right here on this campus.

Senate is involved with many more things at the moment, but I’ll just mention one more—with the help of an ad hoc taskforce constituted by the Provost, we are undertaking a complete *Faculty Handbook* overhaul. Any changes to policy, of course, have gone and will continue to go through the Senate. You will all, therefore, have an opportunity to express your views to your Senator before they vote to approve anything. Our aim in the *Handbook* overhaul, however, is 90% about clarity rather than change, although there will be some change. This is what you all indicated was needed in the faculty survey the Senate conducted last fall. We’ve already

approved a substantial reorganization that should make it easier for everyone to find what they need—starting with the oh-so-English professor-y and not so shocking insight that all like items should be together. That’s right. In one place. Hopefully everyone will be pleased with the final product after the Board of Trustees provides approval in June.

Continuing in this vein, I want remind us all of an important general principal that I hope we all can agree with: Good policies and sound structures protect everybody, no matter where you are in this complicated entity called the university. Unclear, inconsistent, and/or needlessly anomalous structures and policies with too much intended or unintended wiggle room can have very negative consequences—again, intended or unintended.

To the administration, I ask you to renew your commitment to be vigilant about all our policies—especially those regarding conduct and safety of all those in our campus community, especially our students. We must have successful policies that assume innocence until guilt is proven; our policies must never re-victimize survivors; our policies must uphold principles of transparency; our policies must always, always, be interpreted so that they lack bias.

To the faculty, I ask you to respect that certain policies prevent information from being shared.

To both administrators and faculty, let’s remember that if a policy is not working, it can, and should, be changed. In so doing, we must prioritize what is right, even if it that means we must do something less familiar, more risky, less expedient.

To refocus this thread in a slightly different direction, I hope we will all be open to the data and ideas the Provost will soon share with us about promotion and tenure practices. Appalachian is a very different institution than it was 100, 50, even 10 years ago. We really do blend, as the Strategic Plan states, the best qualities of both liberal arts and research institutions. We want the students to interact with us. And we are producing top notch work in our varied fields, and achieving strong acknowledgment for it outside of Appalachian. Thus, I think it is time to consider at least some of the promotion and tenure policies and practices that are more in line with our peers and aspirational peers. We don’t have to adopt every change that is suggested. Talking about it does not mean we will do any of it. But I think we should have a robust discussion.

This has been much more of a serious address than I had originally intended, but it has been a serious day. Serious, but, as I mentioned at the outset, not devoid of hope. I still honestly believe we have the best jobs on the planet. We work insane numbers of hours, but we do so in a self-directed manner. We can find ways to alter and recharge what we do; thus we will rarely be bored. The work, both teaching and research, is tremendously rewarding. Every once in a while—maybe even a couple of times a semester, we are struck with the sense that we are actually doing good in the world. There’s not too many jobs about which one can say all these things. I hope we can hold on to these positives while we think about the things that need to be improved, and how to improve them.

As a postscript, it’s not too late to volunteer to serve on a University-wide committee next year—just submit your name to the Faculty Senate office. If your department is one whose

Senator's term is up, you might consider serving on the Senate. Certainly we hope you will vote in the up and coming university elections and that you will continue to provide feedback on the various surveys that come out of the Senate. Obtaining your feedback, via surveys and through your Senators, is *the* most important factor in Senate committees and on the floor of the Senate, as we debate and vote on policies that affect us all.

Thank you, and have a good rest of the semester.