

Dr. Michael Moore's Spring 2006 Faculty Speech

Good morning.

I'm aware that some of you might expect silly humor, given my earned reputation. But, really, I'm just scholar and editor in the field of modern British history who has spent a good deal of my career trying to find unique and informative scholarship. There are not many jokes in that; but it doesn't, thanks be, lack for humor, nonetheless.

For instance, I recently learned that one Jim Watson, the head of the History, Politics and Philosophy department at Massey University in New Zealand, won an Ig Nobel award for his essay on Richard Buckley's exploding trousers. It seems that Buckley was a depression-era New Zealand dairy farmer whose terrifying pants experience brought new awareness of chemicals in agriculture in New Zealand.

The Ig Nobel awards, an obvious take-off on the prestigious Nobel prizes, are sponsored by the Harvard-Radcliffe Society of Physics Students among other groups, and they are awarded annually to those whose work first makes you laugh, then makes you think.

In addition to Watson's award, other prizes for 2005 went to the inventors of an alarm clock that rings then runs away so you have to get out of bed to turn it off, and artificial testicles for neutered dogs. Watson's paper, published in the University of North Dakota's Agricultural History journal outlines how dairy farmers of the early 1930s raced to embrace sodium chlorate to kill ragwort that threatened pasture grass.

Apparently, and unfortunately, when mixed with the cotton or wool fibers such as in a farmer's work clothes, sodium chlorate became extremely unstable and formed compounds that detonated at the first sign of a spark. And washing was no protection.

Mr. Buckley's trousers were drying in front of the fire, when, according to the newspaper Hawera Star, "they exploded with a loud report".

"Although partially stunned by the force of the explosion, the newspaper explained, [Buckley] had sufficient presence of mind to seize the garments and hurl them from the house, where they smouldered on the lawn with a series of minor detonations".

Mr. Buckley was lucky, says Watson: one farm worker blew himself and a wall out after he had innocently struck a match to see better in a darkened room. The poor chap barely survived. So, I leave you with the rich images of the struggling dairy farmer already in 1930s New Zealand comically dependent upon the modern chemical industry, to come back to Boone.

There have been lots of retirement receptions and parties I've attended this past year, and I suspect there will be more this semester. My generation of faculty at Appalachian is passing the torch, so to speak. I think it is being done with confidence in our future.

So, forgive me a brief look at my faculty generation, which set foundations for Appalachian and made it possible for more recent generations to help build an even more respectable university that creates learning in numerous productive ways. Obviously, some people from those later generations are leading the university right now, and it's clear they intend for us to build new emphases to meet emerging

educational needs.

By 1979 we had added nearly 300 full-time faculty to those who were here in '69. These were mostly people who had been trained in institutions from all around the country and world; and nearly all of them held doctorates or appropriate terminal degrees. Appalachian was transformed. It had hired a professional faculty with professional aspirations. And this forced nearly constant invention and re-invention at Appalachian until the mid-nineties; one result could well be that collaborative work is our hallmark, and thus benefit us as we meet the future daily.

In that same 10 years, Appalachian's student population rose from about 5,000 in 1969 to a little over 9,000 in 1979—and to 13,300 in 2004. However, since 1979 we have had a net increase of only 175 full-time faculty, which brought the total full time faculty to 674 last academic year. It is obvious that excellent replacement hiring has been our salvation. It's equally obvious that faculty positions have been used to underwrite our diverse educational mission, which will continue to put strain on resources as we plan new educational growth.

Three important facts can be gleaned from these numbers. The first is that Appalachian's faculty have over the years become major producers of scholarly learning while offering a very high quality of instruction. The second is that the faculty cohort that transformed Appalachian is retiring and must be replaced; but this is to be done in a climate of comparably reduced public funding, and the demands of a diverse faculty for positions to fill.

The third is that all of this faculty's intelligent work has put Appalachian squarely in the middle of the national map as a quality undergraduate institution; that achievement is a given, it is Appalachian, and it is Appalachian's faculty's commitment; it won't disappear in the public's mind or in Appalachian's mind as we build different emphases upon this base. Many of our faculty have demonstrated they are capable of delivering high-quality graduate instruction along with nationally and internationally recognized scholarly and creative work. It is in these two areas where the soundest of reputations is made in the academic world. Since other communities, political and business, for instance, accept the reputation earned within the academic community, it is crucial that we build the highest quality faculty and programs here; but it is equally crucial that we carefully choose our direction.

To be ready for this, Appalachian faculty need to fully re-assess their evaluation procedures and other reward and development structures to assure that quality with which all wish to be associated. From this, in turn, comes increased confidence and pride in our community of scholars. On those qualities, too, energy is built for our best future. I have not been alone among faculty in urging this necessary introspection, and I am pleased that the provost is taking the lead in asking faculty to assess themselves, their standards, and their expectations.

Because, the nature of academic work is changing. New disciplines and sub-disciplines emerge all the time, and how some are fitted into this university will be profitably argued, and will in the end be absolutely dependent on faculty definition of the fit; and that, in turn, will require invention—fortunately, that's something we have demonstrated as a strength.

How faculty do their work is also changing, even in the most traditional disciplines of the humanities. This will require reassessment of evaluation standards. For instance, a special panel of the MLA is finishing a report that will call for numerous, far-reaching changes in the ways we review for promotion

and tenure. Among the ideas that will be part of the MLA plan are:

- The creation of “multiple pathways” to demonstrating research excellence. The monograph is one way, but so would be journal articles, electronic projects, textbooks, jointly written books, and other approaches.
- The drafting of “memorandums of understanding” between new hires and departments so that those new hires would have a clear sense of expectations in terms of how they would be evaluated for tenure.
- A commitment to treating electronic work with the same respect accorded to work published in print.

So, given the necessity for us to invent and re-invent as academics, this one discipline’s discussion shows that our Task Force on Faculty Evaluation and Development is a welcome opportunity for us.

Recently, the UNC Faculty Assembly polled its members about what they saw as crucial needs of faculty in the university system. It’s no surprise that the overwhelming number one concern was the paucity of benefits on top of weak salary growth. A significant second priority was the need to increase support for graduate education, for student support and support for faculty research. The third priority was to promote meaningful shared governance on campuses. At Appalachian shared governance is getting stronger, and faculty will have the chance to make it more so in its self-evaluation. As for salaries and benefits, everyone here is on the same, unfortunately back page; faculty and staff suffer, so we must do what we can locally to provide useful fringe benefits. Let’s hope that the new Bowles administration is successful with the Legislature; but we will all need to lobby like mad.

The second priority of increased attention to graduate education also is important to Appalachian’s future. We have begun to think about how to do that, and you will be involved in addressing that need. Building strong undergraduate and graduate programs in an area distinctive for Appalachian should be a central objective. I suggest that we look seriously at sustainable development, probably with a scholarly concentration in the Appalachian region.

If the faculty is to review and plan its policies and procedures, then the Faculty Senate, the body that represents faculty most closely with administration, should also re-assess its organizational and representational structure to help this university faculty achieve significant goals and lead productive self-governance. Last fall the Senate formed a committee to do that study, and I expect its report will be made to Senate later this semester.

I have very much enjoyed leading the Faculty Senate during these recent times of transition. I think of it as a fitting way for me to end my career here. Throughout, I have tried to strengthen faculty governance, expand opportunities for scholarly work, and assure fairness and equity for all faculty.

In order to do that we must have policies and practices that are transparent and available to all, and that involve the input of all faculty. Successful self-governance results from successful shared governance, and shared governance requires actively involved faculty. So, I want to thank all of you who are serving, have volunteered for service, and those of you who are prepared to serve. There’s a lot to do. It’s been my privilege to have worked with you all.

Finally, for whatever it is worth, I speak now not as the Faculty Senate Chair, but as one who has taught in five different colleges or universities for the past 42 years, and as one whose professional job as an

editor of an international scholarly journal for 33 of those years made me intimately familiar with faculties in a variety of places around the world. My conclusion is that Appalachian is a university in which you can invest with confidence.