

General Faculty Address - August 26, 2002

By Paul Gates, 2002-2003 Faculty Senate Chair

Good morning! On behalf of the Faculty Senate, I, too, welcome each of you, my colleagues, to the Fall 2002 semester and Appalachian's 103rd academic year.

The last time we convened as a faculty, in mid-January, the Chancellor warned that the state budget deficit was "approaching 1 billion dollars." Later in that meeting, we held a forum on academic freedom, which we discussed mainly in the abstract.

Oh, how things have changed in the intervening 7 or 8 months.

Since January, both of these issues have surged to the fore --- one as a challenge to the University's ability to carry out its mission as a public institution and the other as a challenge to the very idea of a university. As we've watched the deficit figures in the daily press balloon to more than 1.5 billion dollars, we've also seen an accompanying failure of leadership in Raleigh. Afraid of election year fallout, legislators are unwilling or unable to summon the courage to create a realistic revenue plan, and the Governor touts the uncertain benefits of a lottery as the solution. Meanwhile, the state's gilt-edged credit rating --- and the University --- suffers.

Even if Appalachian's budget is cut by 3 to 3 1/2 %, as now seems likely, the method by which that will be achieved is irresponsible at best. Those seemingly modest cuts depend almost entirely on draining one-time money from the Hurricane Floyd, tobacco settlement and highway trust funds. It doesn't take an economist to gauge the effect of using finite sources of money to pay recurring expenses. That Band-aid approach may well get us through the fall, but an additional reversion of funds come February or March is highly likely, further imperiling Appalachian's reputation for excellence. It is this reputation across the Southeast which brings us applicants in numbers far beyond what we can accommodate on campus and allows us to build and educate a capable, involved student body. I'm reluctant to go much beyond next spring, but preliminary economic forecasts don't see any improvement for 2003-2004, which will mean that cuts in addition to those we will be asked to bear this year are on the way.

What are we as a faculty to do? Please bear with me for a few minutes --- I've got an idea. But first, the other problem:

Over the last 3 weeks or so, the papers have also been filled with accounts of --- and commentary on --- the controversy generated by the selection of *Approaching the Qur'an* as the summer reading book by our colleagues in Chapel Hill. As this whole unfortunate story unfolded, it became, whether through ignorance or malice, an affront to the First Amendment and an assault on academic freedom.

I'm willing to give the plaintiffs in this case the benefit of the doubt, to the extent that their belief that recourse to the federal courts over a university reading assignment is a total misunderstanding of what education is and the role of a university in that process. Although not a complete presentation of all facets of Islam --- and the book's author, Michael Sells, has admitted as much in published interviews --- the book is at least a starting point in the effort to acquaint students with one of the least understood --- and, since September 11 --- most controversial of the world's religions. That's what Chapel Hill was trying to do --- introduce an idea and begin the process of education. That one brief discussion --- however imperfect --- constitutes impermissible indoctrination is an argument almost beyond belief.

As Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes once wrote, "There is no such thing as a false idea." There are unpopular ideas and ideas that may make us uncomfortable, but the role of the university is to expose students to, and have them grapple with, that universe which contains those ideas. In that way, they sharpen their critical thinking skills, discover the truth for themselves and thereby are better equipped to defend their beliefs and prevent them from becoming merely dead dogma. In my law class I constantly remind students that the best litigators and appellate advocates understand, and could argue, their opponents' cases just as well as their own. As John Stuart Mill put it, more famously and succinctly, in *On Liberty*: "He who knows only his own side of the case knows little of that."

Somewhat more troubling was the Board of Governors' failure to protect the University by passing a resolution in favor of academic freedom, although the drubbing the Board took in the press was not entirely deserved. As explained to me by Dick Veit, Chair of the Faculty Assembly, the resolution, which received wide support in discussion and received a comfortable 18-10 majority vote, failed on procedural grounds. Because it did not come from a committee, it required 2/3 in favor, or 19 of the 28 votes present. At least some of the negative votes were cast solely in an effort to avoid antagonizing the Legislature in a difficult budget year, but political expediency can never be allowed to trump the core principle of academic

freedom, especially when it had already been violated by the House Appropriations Committee. That's the Board's job --- to protect the University from the vagaries of politics.

And that's the real tragedy and concern --- that the Committee voted to prohibit the use of public funds for an educational endeavor at a public university. Legislators have no business meddling in university reading assignments conceived in the best professional judgment of the faculty. Such action jeopardizes the academic integrity of the entire University System.

So, in the spirit of defending academic freedom, I'd like to offer a brief resolution to the faculty, as has been done at the opening meetings of several of our sister institutions, for your consideration and action:

Resolved:

The faculty of Appalachian State University reaffirms the commitment of this community of scholars to academic freedom and the fair exchange of ideas, as well as our commitment to examining different cultures and conflicting values, with the confidence that thoughtful study and intellectual inquiry are fundamental to this University and the goals of the faculty.

(Note: The resolution was approved unanimously by voice vote.)

If it were ever the case, at minimum these two issues amply demonstrate that universities can no longer take it for granted that we and our contributions to the commonweal are understood and valued. Faced with these continuing challenges, we need, more than ever, an involved, participating faculty --- in short, we need ever more faculty governance. Certainly we need your efforts on campus committees where much of the work involves drafting policy recommendations --- but also in other venues where we make our case for what faculty do and why public support of universities is absolutely critical to the economic and social fabric of this state.

This has begun over the last few months, with individual faculty writing letters to the editor and administrators questioning state legislators pointedly on their views and actions in Raleigh regarding the University. Frankly, we all should be doing this.

What we also need is a concerted effort to reach not just the legislators --- after all, we number only about 600 and so are relatively easy to dismiss --- but the parents of our 12,700 or so students who are depending on us to deliver a quality education to their children and also the taxpayers who more indirectly reap the benefits of an educated and talented workforce. Who could possibly be in a better position to convey the message that support --- both financial and philosophical --- for public higher education is vital than those who are closest to it and who are uniquely equipped to deliver it?

Turning briefly to the Senate's plans for the year, I first want to insure that the Senate fulfills its role as a reliable conduit of information to the faculty, making communication with faculty more effective and less cluttered and difficult to get to. I also want to make the Senate responsive to *your* needs and concerns, so if you'll contact me directly, I'll see that the issue is directed to the proper committee for action, or brought to the attention of the proper administrator for discussion. And either way, I'll keep you informed.

As for specific issues, this year the Senate will be primarily concerned with those that touch on the larger areas of salaries, benefits and workload.

If you'd like to continue this discussion, I invite you to stay while I get together some senators with expertise on the various committees and address these issues in more detail. If you can't stay --- thanks for coming this morning and my very best wishes for a productive semester.