

University Faculty Meeting Address - August 21st, 2003

By Paul Gates, 2003-2004 Faculty Senate Chair

Thank you, Dr. Peacock. Dr. Durham, Faculty Colleagues, good morning and welcome to Appalachian's 105th academic year.

Between the Blaster Worm and two of the continuing problems facing Appalachian and our sister institutions, I was sorely tempted to just dust off last fall's speech and give it again. The text of this morning's speech is still on my hard drive, where the computer bug won't let me into Word Perfect to retrieve it.

But that's not my main concern—I can reconstruct most of my remarks, though they are handwritten and difficult to decipher.

What concerns me far more is that I really could have used most of last year's speech—the problems that I described then are, with a new local twist, still with us.

First, we are now in our third year of permanent cuts to our state appropriation. On top of that, we've suffered a series of one-time reversions from the money we have received.

To add insult and further injury to this pre-existing injury, the Legislature made no headway on a Senate-led proposal that would have raised several hundred million during this budget biennium through increased taxes on tobacco and alcohol. Instead, the Legislature continues to shift the increasingly heavy burden of a college education to the student, instead of spreading it out over a larger group of North Carolina residents, all of whom will reap the benefits of an educated workforce.

By my rough estimate, we'll collect about 1.3 million dollars from the 5% tuition hike, but we've lost about 2.3 million from the 3% appropriation cut. In sum, not only is the Legislature further abdicating its constitutionally mandated responsibility to give strong financial support to public universities, it's not even attempting to mitigate the effect on the student. The students are being left to pay more and we still come up a million dollars short.

Personal income tax increases are never popular, but generate even more opposition when unemployment is up and wages are down. If they haven't already, tuition increases will become a barrier to access—and this at a time when college applications are higher than ever due to increasing numbers of high school graduates, particularly among minority populations.

On top of it all, college education is needed more than ever as North Carolina continues to move from a manufacturing to a knowledge-based economy. The latest example of this trend is the closure of the Pillowtex factory in Kannapolis 3 weeks ago. 6,450 workers—most of whom with no more than a high school diploma—are out of work and without additional education and training, their prospects are bleak. We no longer have a 1930's economy and we can no longer get along with a 1930's tax structure.

You'll recall that a year ago we took a strong stand in this room against those who would overturn a faculty determination on the appropriate text for the Summer Reading Program at Chapel Hill. While we've not had any organized opposition to this year's selection of *Nickel & Dimed* in Boone—it is the same book as Chapel Hill and at least one other UNC campus is reading—and there has been opposition among some Republican legislators again. The arguments are familiar: liberal faculty are trying to indoctrinate impressionable young people with Socialist ideals.

Nonsense.

Provoking thought and discussion, introducing new ideas, developing critical thinking skills and advocacy and rebuttal are exactly what real education entails.

Choosing books which reinforce the received view might be safe, but it also encourages dogmatism and such choices serve the students poorly. Education is of course a transmitter of culture, but it is also a conduit for alternative views of the world and a supporter of the will to examine them dispassionately. As William Butler Yeats put it, "Education is not the filling of a pail, it is the lighting of a fire."

And now, my last topic—parking. Not so much the physical inconvenience but the financial discomfort and what we should do about it.

For a long time we've needed more parking—so we built the Rivers Street deck, and it cost a lot of money. We were confident, however, that the revenue stream was sufficient to both service the debt and eventually repay the indebtedness. But then we had the rug pulled out from under us in the form of an adverse court decision which upheld a long-dormant state law which diverts university parking fines to county school systems.

As I've said many times in the last six months, both in meetings and in print, there is no blame to be assigned for this predicament. We were blindsided. But the debt must still be paid.

However, a 94 million dollar, 85% increase in the parking fee is not the solution. At bottom, this is an issue of fairness. Faculty, staff and students are not the only users of parking, so they should not shoulder the burden alone.

And it is a burden. Coupled with a 17% increase in dependent health coverage (\$312 for children alone and \$744 for a family) it works a severe hardship on many. For the lucky, it only puts a good dent in this year's paltry bonus. For the rest, it either eats up about three-quarters of it or wipes it out entirely—and then some, putting those employees behind where they were last year.

For this year, the decision has been made and the onerous fees paid. But for next year, we need to seek support for parking expenses from other campus units whose activities attract substantial numbers of non-tag holders—people who essentially use and cause wear and tear on our surface lots, presently at our expense.

A little history may be instructive. For Appalachian's first 60 years or so, there were no parking lots on campus. The teacher's college was small and few students had cars anyway, so a system of catch as catch can worked well enough.

But by the early 1960's, Appalachian found itself with a parking problem, not unlike that which we solved with the deck. And 40 years ago the solution was our first parking lot.

Construction costs of \$45,000 or so were contributed by one heavy user of parking—the Athletic Department, with the understanding that the college would shoulder maintenance costs. But football has long since outgrown Stadium Lot and it's time for Athletics to step up once again. However, Cultural Affairs also uses parking and should share the costs with athletics and the rest of us.

Last year the Senate passed a resolution to add a parking surcharge to tickets to these events, but this was turned down. I've since come to understand that NCAA rules may prohibit such a scheme and a fixed amount earmarked specifically for parking would discriminate against the few who walk or do not park on campus.

These objections are easily overcome by a general ticket price increase to a level which more accurately reflects the actual costs of staging campus events.

If the fear is that increased prices may hurt attendance, then the debate shifts to one on the degree to which those who work and go to school here should be subsidizing the entertainment of those who don't.

When we use our season tickets to attend a performance, we park in the same lot as I do when I come to work, but I don't expect my employee hang tag fee to entitle me to that space at that hour, for non-work activities. I would expect sports fans to take the same view.

The parking shortfall is about \$160,000. I don't expect Athletics and Cultural Affairs to solve that deficit problem themselves, but to contribute directly and proportionately to the operation of the campus facilities which they share with the rest of us.

It's only right.