

University Faculty Meeting Address – February 3rd, 2003

By Paul Gates, 2002-2003 Faculty Senate Chair

Good morning colleagues, and welcome to the Spring Faculty Meeting. This time of year, I'm glad that I can say that with a straight face; most Senate chairs haven't been able to recently.

I thought that what I would do this morning is present something of a mid-year report, touching briefly on a few of the Senate's accomplishments so far this year, but more importantly, to bring you up to speed on some of the challenges the university is facing during the remainder of the year, and the Senate's position on them.

The most far-reaching change we've steered through is the elimination of fixed closing dates for faculty and administrative searches. This change brings us into line with practice among other UNC institutions and universities generally. It allows departments and other hiring units the flexibility to determine when the applicant pool is sufficiently broad and deep and to act quickly to hire excellent applicants without the burden of an uncertain hope that additional qualified applicants would somehow materialize before the deadline.

Chairs had been complaining that their hands were tied by having to wait for the deadline and they had often watched the best candidates lured away by other schools. It seems to me that there are few activities more important than DPC hiring in shaping the future of Appalachian, and this will allow them to do that more effectively.

We have also come out in strong support of a continued presence in Washington, DC. The lease on the current App House expires at the end of November, and there is some uncertainty about our ability to provide our students with the many and varied off-campus experiences that are possible in the capital after that date.

Appalachian's ability to offer students of art, history, political science, technology, and criminal justice, among others, an up-close look at important collections and the institutions that shape their disciplines truly sets us apart. The central location of Capitol Hill also provides faculty with a unique opportunity to pursue almost any scholarly interest.

There is little doubt that the administration appreciates the value of the App House, but in tight budget times I don't want out-of-sight to become out-of-mind, and we'll be mounting a stout defense of our southern academic outpost, should that become necessary.

We're also keeping an eye on the state budget and are gearing up to oppose any additional moves against employee health benefits, which may be a tempting target for the Legislature after the House gets around to choosing a speaker.

I'm hardly the first to point this out, but the lifeblood of the university is the faculty and the staff who support us. If Appalachian and other institutions in the UNC system are unable to attract and retain top-notch faculty, North Carolina won't be able to provide the educated, high-quality workforce a modern economy requires.

Tough economic times can't be viewed as an excuse to cut spending on education. Indeed they are a clarion call to bolster these institutions for the day when the state's finances turn around and the economy resumes its growth, ever less dependent on the old props of tobacco, textiles and furniture.

Next week we will be voting on a motion for the administration's redoubled efforts in defense of our health benefits package, which is an important safety net for many state employee families.

On Friday, I'll be at the Board of Trustees meeting, making our case for why this is not the time to

undertake a \$30 – 32 million project, promoted by the Football Opportunities Committee, largely for improvements to Kidd Brewer Stadium, and largely for the benefit of the football program.

Let me emphasize here that the Senate is not anti-athletics – as we are frequently portrayed – but we are opposed to the overemphasis of a program only ancillary to the University's academic mission that such a vast undertaking represents.

And, most urgently, we are opposed to the initial funding coming out of the pockets of students in the form of a \$55 athletic fee increase for next year.

Athletics officials have indicated that we're about in the middle of the Southern Conference in terms of athletic facilities, which seems to me to be just about right for Appalachian, a university where academics are the highest priority. Even the Campus Master Plan indicates that Kidd Brewer Stadium is in good condition, and Owns Field House and Varsity Gym are fair. Broome-Kirk gym is, of course, poor and slated for demolition, but this is hardly cause to sound a \$32-million alarm.

A far more prudent course, the Senate believes – and we passed a motion to this effect in December – is to embark on a campaign to raise private funds for athletics' most pressing needs and build, repair and renovate as those pledged funds roll in.

To impose a higher athletic fee in a time of tuition uncertainty seems particularly unwise. To be sure, the Board of Governors has voted to freeze tuition system-wide, but all this really does is throw the issue right into the lap of legislators. In the current economic environment there are few good solutions, but my hope is that decisions made here on campus don't cause the negative effects of the decisions made in Raleigh to become even more painful for students. I'll get back to that in a minute but let's look at a sketch of the budget picture for a moment.

Most of the one-time money which bailed the state budget out last year in the face of a \$1.3 billion deficit is gone, and with this year's revenue growth at 1 – 2 %, which is less than last year, the coming year's deficit is projected to be at least \$2 billion, according to figures cited at the December meeting of the State Relations Council in Chapel Hill. Estimates are that the governor's budget will have to ask for cuts of at least 3%, and more probably closer to 5%.

Thus, the Legislature is faced with two unpalatable choices with regard to tuition: Raleigh can approve the tuition freeze and cut university appropriations, while fees rise, meaning that students will pay a higher fee while academics suffer. Or, the Legislature can boost tuition again, like last year, and, combined with a higher athletic fee, raise genuine issues of accessibility to the university. This would affect many students, but especially minority populations, which are showing the greatest growth in terms of numbers of high school graduates.

As I hope I've been able to convey, the challenges confronting Appalachian, and higher education in general, are formidable. Which segue brings me to my last point -- the one that comes up every year around this time. That is a plea for you to give of your time and your expertise – that is yourself – for the greater good of the university community through service on not just the Faculty Senate, but on the many university committees which embody the ideal of shared faculty governance. February is the month for university elections, so please give some careful thought as to how you can contribute. We'll be in touch soon soliciting candidates.

Until then, I hope the semester just underway is productive and professionally satisfying for you, and that the groundhog is wrong and spring really is right around the corner.