

University Faculty Meeting Address – January 9th, 2004

By Paul Gates, 2003-2004 Faculty Senate Chair

Good morning—and welcome back.

It takes considerable dedication to turn out on a snowy Friday morning when the semester hasn't really gotten underway yet, and I thank all of you for making that effort. I know you could be updating your syllabi, making sure books have arrived and otherwise preparing for Monday. With that in mind, I won't detain you for long.

In the three previous start-of-the-semester addresses I've made to you, I've excoriated the legislature, railed about parking fees, defended academic freedom and complained about the shrinking state budget appropriation. I've also managed, in a general way, to outline some of the plans the Faculty Senate has had for the coming semester.

Today's address—my last—will touch on some of that, but what I'm primarily up here this morning for is to make a plea: a plea for your even deeper involvement in the life and governance of the University. I'm fully aware that a plea for more of your time is getting harder and harder to respond to because we're all busier than ever before—and probably busier than we ever imagined we could be.

But it's that very state of affairs that underscores the importance of our increased participation—beginning immediately and carrying through especially the next few years as Appalachian undergoes a number of transitions and we determine the next phase of our evolutionary course.

Your increased participation is needed because faculty shared governance at Appalachian is threatened. But, paradoxically, shared governance is not threatened by the campus administration-- it is threatened by our own inertia. That we're not being heard is largely due to the fact that we're not sitting at the tables where the position of the faculty can be presented and recorded in the form of a vote.

This has begun to change in important ways over the past few months, however, which has confirmed my belief that the administration is receptive to Senate and other faculty input at every level. Since the middle of the fall semester I've been attending the Deans' Council and have also been welcomed at meetings of the Administrative Cabinet.

That's a good start, but hardly enough. No one faculty member, nor even a Senate-sized group of faculty, can provide the energy necessary to make the faculty's governing voice effective. Just before forming an ad hoc Committee on Academic Governance in October, a few senators looked at a chart—two charts, actually—of the University's organizational structure. I was stunned by the number and variety of committees and councils with responsibility for recommending to the Vice-Chancellors. Some we knew well, some we never heard of—but all we should have representation on. And we're moving in that direction, but we need your help.

It must be part of my genetic makeup that I'm drawn as strongly to service as I am to teaching and research. Else why would I be standing up here? But I believe that each of us owes the university and everyone in it the benefit of our accumulated wisdom and experience. It's part of the academic compact. Such service is not only to the undivided whole, however—it is also service to ourselves. Though it may at first appear crass and self-serving, I think it's critical to note that by helping to make the university run more smoothly and efficiently, by strengthening policies and streamlining processes, we make Appalachian not just a better university, but a better university to work at.

And I can't overlook the social aspect of service—it's just good fun. (If my wife were here, she'd leap to her feet right here and point out that I'm also the last one to leave a party. Okay, that's true.) But you do meet a lot of very interesting people on committees whom you'd probably not meet otherwise.

I know this asks a lot of each of you, and by now there must be some eye-rolling out there as you wonder where you'd find the time, not to mention the fact that we're all aware that service is the poor relation in

the academic triad. You're nudging each other and muttering, "Doesn't he know service won't get you tenure?"

I'm not trying to knock teaching from the top spot and I'm delighted to see the enhanced regard for research and other creative activity in just the nine years I've been at Appalachian, but service must also be respected and rewarded from the departmental chair level on up, in both tenure and promotion decisions. Everyone must realize that the relationship among the three responsibilities is symbiotic and that as service on campus is recognized as integral to a professional academic life, its accomplishments will accrue to the benefit of teaching and research as well.

It's almost a point of pride that I work parking into this somehow—but not the way you might think. Instead, let me use the Parking Committee as a good example of faculty participation in campus governance coming up short. We need three faculty representatives to that group PDQ so that Barry Sauls can get to work on a recommendation for Business Affairs which makes its recommendation to the Board of Trustees in late March. Of course the Parking Committee isn't the only committee with vacancies. Contact me, we'll talk about your interests, and I'll find a spot where you can make a difference.

That brings us to the Faculty Senate itself. Much of what we've done over the last couple of years has been at the behest of various individuals and groups; much has been undertaken on our own initiative. Some of our proposals have been cheered; some have made us the targets of vague criticisms lobbed from the shadows. That's fine.

This is neither the time nor the place to try to mount a defense of the Senate beyond pointing out that it is the legally constituted and elected body representing the entire faculty. That said, let me again invite both the Senate's supporters and detractors to run for the several seats coming up for election this spring. Or at least vote!

The recent history of Senate elections show that many seats are filled by a handful of votes for unopposed candidates, which is only a marginal improvement over those filled by a smaller number of write-in votes. Most discouraging is filling seats by chair appointment—which of course flies directly in the face of a representative system—so don't make me do it! Taken both together and separately, the dwindling number of candidates and the shrinking number of total votes cast points to a crisis in shared governance that we cannot continue to suffer. And there is no reason we should suffer it with an administration which supports shared governance both in theory and in practice. We have the opportunity, so, please, let's not squander it.

In early February we'll be assembling the ballots, so between now and then, look at your schedules, look into your hearts and talk to your colleagues—then e-mail Cathy in the Senate office with your nominations. Her e-mail is alticece. Or, of course, contact me about that—or anything else.

Again, thank you all for coming this morning. Given that historical aphorisms are one of my several obsessions, let me close with one of my favorites, which seems particularly apt this morning: it's the one uttered by Benjamin Franklin to John Hancock as he stepped forward to sign the Declaration of Independence. "We must all hang together, or assuredly we shall all hang separately."

Have a great semester!