

Speech at Appalachian's General Faculty Meeting
Paul Gates, Chair, Faculty Senate
Spring 2016

Thank you Chancellor Everts, Provost Kruger. Between last week's snow and the knifing wind this afternoon, I don't know if I can say this with a straight face – but welcome to the spring semester.

That knowledge and professionalism are under assault shouldn't be news to any of you, for there's been a near-constant and growing stream of deliberate misinformation, particularly on-line, on everything from climate change to evolution and science in general, to wild claims about race and religion among the antics of would-be presidential nominees.

There are even web sites that claim the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre three years ago was a hoax staged by the government to justify seizure of guns. If this weren't such a plainly offensive and disgusting tactic, it would be funny and easily dismissed. But these claims are all of a piece.

It's time to take back the narrative.

Even if I had expertise beyond that of an educated lay person, I can't take the time to comment on every aspect of these alarming developments, so I'll stick to two that I know something about: Law and education.

A couple of weeks ago I was reading a column in the Louisiana Bar Journal by an acquaintance, now the president of the state bar association, who was a newly licensed young lawyer at about the time I left New Orleans to start my doctorate at the University of Florida. In his president's message, he wrote about a contentious District Attorney's race last fall in Caddo Parish in the far northwestern corner of the state. (LSU-Shreveport, which used to be known as Northwestern Louisiana University is located there.) During the campaign, assistant D.A.s were attacked for their prosecutorial tactics and judges were denounced for their sentencing decisions in well-orchestrated letter-writing campaigns. Judicial independence was also called into question. The policy positions of the candidates were ignored, as was the public safety role played by young lawyers who choose public service careers.

I haven't practiced law since 1991 (though I do keep my license current) but as I read, I became increasingly uncomfortable. So I picked up the phone and called Mark at his St. Charles Avenue office. We talked about our careers for about five minutes, then talked for about 20 minutes about public service and the roles our respective professions play in society. By the time I hung up, I knew the real reason for my discomfort – the disrespect for the law and attorneys that he was writing about parallels the disrespect we see in some quarters for education and teachers.

One of the things Mark told me that frustrated him most is that lawyers don't speak up in their own defense. Professors don't do that either. The irony should not be lost on anyone – the two professions whose members make their living by explaining and questioning have little to say when criticized, or even attacked.

I'm not saying that we should be insulated from public comment. With the prominent place we occupy in public policy debates on education, scrutiny of our profession should not only be expected, but welcomed. We need to know when we fall short. But we deserve to know exactly where we've failed. Our self-regulating status requires that we accept criticism and address our problems. Nor should we reflexively defend faculty who disgrace the profession by personal or professional misconduct or failure to meet the ethical standards that we have established for ourselves.

On the other hand, if we do nothing to defend professors individually or academia generally from unjustified attack, public respect for us and our professional will continue to wane and our system of self-regulation will be threatened. What I want to be clear about is that an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us, so we must respond in concert.

I recognize that some legislators, and even some faculty, believe in the reforms pushed by politically motivated interest groups that sometimes complain about the UNC constituent institutions and their faculty unfairly. New ideas are sometimes scary. Ambiguity and complexity are sometimes frightening to confront. Challenges to existing dogma discomfit some by creating cognitive dissonance which can be paralyzing. Avoidance mechanisms kick in.

There is often plenty of room for debate when it comes to deciding issues related to topics as fundamental to the public welfare as education. But debate and effective advocacy depends on our opposing campaigns intended to demean and sideline our colleagues by not tacitly endorsing them through our silence.

I don't think this problem is confined to our work or reputations. You may have seen just an hour or so ago the e-mail reporting that the state treasurer has put out a proposal that would change our health plan dramatically.

The 80/20 option, which is the most popular, would be eliminated.

Instead, we would be forced into the 70/30 plan, and would have to pay the premium, which is now paid by the state, or we could elect the "consumer-driven" plan, which also carries an employee premium.

A lack of courage has consequences. The public notices when faculty don't stand up for each other. When one side of the story is left out, the misinformation stands and forms the ill-informed basis of public opinion. As public respect for public education declines, our ability to stave off efforts by for-profits to gull unsuspecting students diminishes. DeVry is the latest in a long line to engage in this chicanery. On Wednesday, the U.S. Department of Education and the Federal Trade Commission announced proceedings against the company for exaggerating job placement successes, an all-too-common tactic to attract new enrollees. In legal circles this is known as fraud in the inducement. It's difficult to overstate the threat this kind of dishonesty creates for universities by undermining public confidence in us and the impact it eventually has on the well-being – both economic and social – of North Carolina.

I think it's important – and to some degree strangely comforting – to note that sniping at public universities is not a recent phenomenon. As

far back as 1940, W.J. Cash made this observation in his acclaimed analysis of Southern culture, “The Mind of the South”:

In the schools the growth of the modern mind and the new analysis and criticism was going steadily forward. They had been considerably crippled, of course, by the reduction in income consequent upon the depression. In truth, the more reactionary forces in the various states, and this was particularly true in North Carolina, had more or less successfully taken advantage of the prevailing mood of the depression to cut appropriations for the state universities more than was made necessary by the collapse of the general economy, in the hope of starving the new spirit out and rendering its activities impossible.

But recognition of the longevity of anti-intellectual attitudes and the successes that have been achieved in largely holding them at bay is not an excuse for complacency. The forces that would remake public education are clearly still very much with us and we must be alert to intrusions against our professionalism. To try to understand these attitudes, last summer I re-read Richard Hofstadter’s magisterial “Anti-Intellectualism in American Life,” which was published in 1963, but could have been written last month. I’m still struggling with those attitudes, but to borrow from a quote at least attributed to Thomas Jefferson, “Eternal vigilance is the price of academic freedom.”

If we think we can’t preserve academic freedom – we’re right.

Thank you for coming this afternoon, and best wishes for a productive semester.