



5/08/2019

Open Letter to all T.U. constituencies and friends:

Although I do not know and may never know the outcome of the effort to share the perspective outlined below, the time has now passed for the trustees to have received this communication and for A&S faculty to have responded—thus I open it to the public more generally here:

5/05/2019

Dear Trustees,

Concerned faculty have asked me to forward the letter below to you (initially addressed to my colleagues in Arts and Sciences), with the hope that it can help further inform you about why the T.C. plan for T.U. has distressed such a large number of us that entire colleges have turned, for the first time, to open resolutions and protests rather than the more usual team work we had always elected in the past. As a brief preamble, it is important for you to know, first, that:

(1) the HLC did not require this radical a shift in our university design. Though it required the development of a PPRC, the current budget issues and inflated numbers of programs had already been addressed last fall; thus the PPRC was positioned to take as much time as needed to study the university's history and organization rather than devise a complete transformation of T.U. into something quite different from its historic shape in less than one academic year;

(2) a mistake has been made, probably inadvertently, in enacting the HLC's "shared governance" mandate. "Shared governance" consists in regularly elected committees from amid college faculty—we already have several such duly elected university-level committees, serving as models for this process. ("Shared governance" also means that all deans, provost, and president are faculty members as well. Unlike middle managers in a company, as you probably know, they are carefully considered for appointment by, and accountable to, not only the Board, but to everyone working under them and thus often emerge from within our ranks.)

Instead, nominees for the PPRC were filtered, first, through the deans, then, through an administratively shaped interview process and, then, were asked to sign non-disclosure agreements. Earlier this spring, the plan that resulted was presented directly to you without prior consultation of any of the university's faculty or student constituencies. This means

that not only the concept of “shared governance,” but the claim of “transparency” both were abrogated.

While our identity as a university is complex and our administrators have often been uncertain how best to communicate it to the world, we do have a well-established identity that has attracted and retained several major constituencies over time. The letter that follows brings a thirty-plus-year historical perspective to what that identity has looked like, from the point of view of a dedicated veteran of the Arts and Sciences at T.U. It has been rumored that those in protest of the new plan are averse to change; on the contrary, the last half century has brought more and more rapid changes to which we have both adapted and contributed since many of us not only seek to keep our historical memories fresh and strong, but also to contribute new knowledge. But, to take just one major dimension of change which university administrations have pushed, our operations have been increasingly managed through software programs, each of which requires extra time and thought on our parts to adopt, especially when initially maladapted to our program needs, yet we have done so willingly—witness the extraordinary success of this past year’s new retention effort in Drop Guard.

Let us, together, try to turn this crisis into an opportunity for all of us—for all our long-lived programs, not only the few new or newly named—as we learn to trust more wisely in each other’s experiences, expertise, and knowledge: as a single, collective faculty and staff at a major small private university of the heartlands. Here now is the historical profile I promised above:

4/28/2019

Dear Faculty of Arts and Sciences in all departments, all contracts (all within “the Blue Book”),

If you would please extend your patience to reading this message, I would like to share my perspective, after 31 years here, to help contextualize the wide-spread distress about the new TU plan that you may have noticed.

Crises have frequently struck this university over the years. A foundational crisis underlying today's university took place half a century ago when various professional programs (including, for example, a police academy) were shut down; large investments were made in Arts and Sciences, including the library and graduate programs; and the university began to seek first-rate faculty in the Arts and Sciences as well as the other colleges, with an emphasis on Ph.D.s from highly ranked liberal arts based universities or their equivalents. This first generation are the people who have been retiring in the last ten years or so. Education and Nursing were retained throughout this time, though both went through big changes—both were Schools for a number of years—prior to the current reconfiguration. (I know less about Speech Pathology, though it too has been here throughout my career, excelling in its niche.)

But the approach to the university budget was secretive and apparently not based on the best accounting practices. There were many "R" accounts (i.e., restricted accounts created to benefit this or that, crossing from one year to the next and thus operating beyond, not part of, the annual operating budget). Since I am not an accountant, I do not know if this was necessarily a good or a bad thing, but their murky, nonpublic, under-the-radar existence caused a lot of tension between their recipients and their non-recipients.

Tension arose in particular between the Colleges of Engineering and Arts and Sciences. A nationally recognized, NEH-funded "Tulsa Curriculum" was put in place, intended to give all entering students a liberal arts foundation in addition to the university-wide composition curriculum. Such new requirements for students did not sit well with everyone and appeared to favor Arts and Sciences since only one "block" was dedicated to the hard and applied sciences.

It is quite normal, of course, for faculty of different departments, let alone colleges, to be skeptical of each other. This is not merely a fact of human nature, but of critical thinking, in which higher institutions of learning are grounded, internationally. At the time I arrived here in Spring 1988, however, those tensions exceeded the norm. They were and still are exacerbated at T.U. by (1) habits dating back to Provost Tom Staley and President Twyman's academic redesign (alluded to above), (2) word-of-mouth gossip, often taken too seriously, especially when offered by complaining students, and (3) no occasion to sit down together to see what different program faculty do, how they do it, or how it works. These tensions were merely treated as "congenital" and often taken as basic truths, depending on which sides of the many-angled table you or an ally sat at.

Still, from that point onward, the university developed, specifically, in Engineering, Arts and Sciences, Business, and Law--with all four colleges experiencing highs and lows in correlation to the larger academic "market place." I was not a direct witness to faculty development in the other three colleges but, in Arts and Sciences, the first wave of excellent faculty made canny hiring choices, and the second wave made still cannier choices--such that when the university started to freeze and then shrink us (as parts of prior efforts to spread the crises around), our faculties continued to improve! A sense of "team spirit" also grew here with time, as a distinctive feature of TU (within colleges, at least, less so between them). For, despite its comparatively top-down administrative habits, T.U. has always, successfully, viewed itself and been viewed as a small university where it is relatively easy to encounter people across departmental, college, and administration/staff borders. In addition, Tulsa is a friendly town, and T.U.'s staff, students, and faculty have, historically, reflected that friendliness. During the crises of the last thirty years, we threw ourselves into "pulling" for the university--pulling harder and harder in the last decade as the budget continued to be plagued by deficits.

With each crisis, however (in President Donaldson, President Lawless, and President Upham's tenures), the primary response has been to create new entities and let the old ones take care of themselves without further help. Widely shared processes of attrition often

resulted from these choices. President Donaldson, for example, created Russian Studies, bringing the world-renowned Russian poet Yevgeny Yevtushenko here to live and teach, along with other strategic faculty hires. He was also responsible, though, for a wide-spread, painfully abrupt lay-off of staff (already not well paid, as you probably know). The faculty have been increasingly required to take on duties previously allotted to secretarial staff until secretaries were replaced (altogether, as far as I'm aware, in the departments) by budget-managing administrative assistants. Many duties were transferred to us, prior to the duties also of advising and finally of recruiting. All this gradually became quite "normal" here.

But meanwhile, because it was "the new" that tended to catch the fancy of higher administration, increasingly faculty also began to develop new programs that might entice more students and that would build interdisciplinarity--most notably, in the certificate programs in Arts and Sciences (almost all of which were eradicated last year, as perhaps they should have been). New faculty were rarely, if ever (perhaps in Museum Studies?), hired for these certificate programs. Thus, in addition to faculty having to staff numerous departmental, college, and university committees (for though we are smaller, we still need all the basic committees to govern ourselves), most faculty also became program administrators, without reimbursement.

Under the most recent dean in A&S, the urgency to recruit new students has intensified, and so faculty have had to reduce the number of major-level courses they offer with each passing year, making it more and more difficult for students to satisfy the requirements for various majors, while faculty shifted to the blocks in an effort to recruit students in the general university curriculum for their majors as well as to staff those numerous courses. At the moment of the current crisis, it is with painful irony that we find ourselves under attack for the numbers of our majors. For decades, it was FTEs that counted above all else. Suddenly, at the worst possible moment for many of us, it is numbers of majors.

Nonetheless, the University of Tulsa has in fact developed and sustained a strong, if complex identity. That identity is what we are seeing reflected in the vast outpouring of concern, through petitions, letters, news articles, and public protests. T.U. has secured local, regional, and national recognition as a top-notch liberal arts-based, stem-heavy, small university with similarly rising Business and Law Schools. What makes that possible are faculty who do research as well as teaching. Regardless of whether we have a graduate program or programs, research as well as teaching has been valued, encouraged, and rewarded throughout the last half century. Our course loads and course student numbers have also been carefully maintained to remain competitive with other terrific universities. We could only draw the great faculty we have today because of these factors. We have also drawn the wonderful students that we have precisely because of what this faculty, their research, and T.U.'s small course/courseload emphases enable. (Every time we run a search, we ask faculty outside our departments to meet our candidates; today, external faculty are even included on the search committees. One of the greatest attractions to candidates is the existence of interesting faculty beyond home departments. In an

increasingly interdisciplinary era, in other words, the strength of the individual departmental disciplines is crucial to any possibility for interdisciplinarity.)

While I understand that the new TU plan seems to spread the sacrifices all around, and it also seeks to put Arts and Sciences at the threshold of entering students' experiences, it does so in a manner that will destroy what has been built in A&S when it could so easily have met this crisis through smaller, more incremental measures--such as the Wellspring chairs made possible here at an earlier moment. We actually do have examples of what works, but those have been ignored. Instead we are investing yet again almost entirely in "the new" and untried, unproven. Thus, for example, "Creative Writing" waves its leaf among the rare leaves in Arts and Sciences designated for growth despite the fact that English was producing, as a traditional major, world-acclaimed writers, and only recently created a Creative Writing Major. Due to faculty departures, the Creative Writing major boasts the equivalent of only one faculty member—that is one-half more faculty than when in 1988 when I arrived at T.U. You can take that little example, if you will, and find many parallels with others in this plan by studying others, conferring directly about them with other program faculty.

If you are in a department that seems untouched or if you are on a contract that seems vulnerable, we are all nonetheless part of a larger collective in which we should be conferring with each other as colleagues at this small place as well as in shared governance, framed by the Blue Book.

A university with the single language of Spanish as a university major (not out-sourced somehow to two years abroad, if that is even possible) no longer figures as a major liberal arts institution. French and German, in particular, are not only historical components of this university, but represent two of our closest allies abroad. What signal does that send to all our constituents to demote those languages?

Among the newer languages, there will be no Chinese or Russian?! --the two biggest powerhouses of this world of ours--and all that prior human and financial investment at T.U. simply squandered. Very few dollars are "saved" by doing away with these as currently constituted.

Theater lives at the heart and soul of this university. More popular than any other art among high school students, either as an art or as entertainment, our theater program also feeds and supports numerous commercial as well as nonprofit entities in Tulsa.

Philosophy and religion--the heart and soul of our Honors program as well as the liberal arts, as intensely popular as these have been for bright, high-achieving high school seniors . . . and integral to our achievement of the highest honor accorded on the academic side of the university: the Phi Beta Kappa chapter here.

The Master's programs--these have long been neglected by higher administrators despite how obvious they are as potentially lucrative sources for new students who want to achieve a higher level on their disciplines' pay scales or yearn for more time to be still better educated as complex thinkers and researchers, better equipped for the difficult world they must tackle. Companies increasingly prefer master's over bachelor's degrees in preparation for jobs.

Many more departments and programs than can be detailed in this letter are injured in this plan. Each has a story that most do not know due to keeping their internal struggles and negotiations confidential, for various reasons, but always in the spirit of working for T.U.'s greater good. Ask someone in a department you don't know if they would be willing to share what they have endured—better yet, ask someone in a department or program that you think you do know about, to see how much more there is to learn about our work here.

I wonder, as I have sometimes wondered in the past: has this plan unfolded in this form precisely because this university--hence its programs--are "small"? Yes, "small"--that's what this university is, in all the best senses of what the "small college" and university means. That's who we are, what we can be--what we should try to sustain.

Instead, we have, inadvertently, been small-minded in the development of this plan, in thinking about each other's disciplines, in honoring our last half-century of growth, and in understanding who we have become.

Please think about this; please think again.

Sincerely,



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