

## General Faculty Address

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President Turner, Provost Moore, Chaplain Rankin, Deans and other administrators, and last but emphatically not least, my esteemed faculty colleagues:

When I was in ninth grade, I came down with a bad cold and missed two days of school. Upon my return, I learned to my surprise that in my absence I had been elected Class President. Like most highschool class presidents, I did nothing of any importance, but my uselessness did not prevent my classmates from re-electing me, once again in my absence.

Clearly I have not, in the years between then and now, learned how to successfully avoid being elected to local presidential positions that I had not sought. But I have learned, and continue to learn, how to do better things with them. As an English professor, when I took on this job I naturally considered what I've learned from Shakespeare in this regard, and which of his characters I most wanted to be like. Not, I hope, the delightfully wicked Richard III, who boasts to his audience that "I can smile, and murder while I smile"—and who hilariously says of his brother, whose death he is arranging, "Simple plain Clarence, I do love thee so / That I will shortly send thy soul to heaven." Richard II is different, a delicate soul but a poor and self-serving leader, plus he's whiny about it, and he ends up getting murdered. How about Henry V? Nah; too sneaky, and implausibly heroic. Julius Caesar? NO!! Don't even *think* about that. Forget that I even mentioned him. Henry IV, however, though he stole the crown from Richard II, is much better than him at governing and getting

things done; when confronted with a challenge, his bracingly pragmatic response is “Are these things then necessities? Then let us meet them like necessities.” Now *there’s* a good principle of Shakespearean governance. Even Hamlet, after 4 acts of investigation, indecision, and self-loathing, eventually concludes that “the readiness is all,” and then takes action when opportunities arise.

In my Fall address to the general faculty, I made the case for three related propositions:

- First, that faculty senates are not inherently useless, and in fact ours does quite a lot.
- Second, that although our Senate does sometimes disagree with the administration and/or the Board of Trustees, and sometimes needs to strongly press the faculty’s case, most of the time the Senate is at its best and most effective when it works with the other two estates rather than against them, in cooperative pursuit of shared goals. (Maybe you recall Augustine’s definition of community as “an assembled multitude of rational creatures bound together by common agreement on the objects of their love.”)
- My third proposition was simple: we have a lot to do.

Today I’d like to give you a midterm update on how these things are coming along. Time permits me to talk about only a few examples, but for a fuller enumeration of the Faculty Senate’s many and varied activities last semester, I encourage you to read my fall report in today’s program booklet. And I also encourage you to get involved with the Senate if you aren’t already; elections are coming up!

This is a very interesting time for SMU. We have substantially increased the academic quality of our admitted undergrads, and continue to cultivate our graduate programs. We have a new Provost on the way. We are reconfiguring (NOT severing)

the University's relationship to the Methodist Church. We are embarking on an ambitious capital campaign, and have already received some landmark gifts. We are looking to deepen SMU's bonds to Dallas and North Texas, even as our national profile grows. And we are doing all this in a local, national, and global culture that often seems increasingly fraught with division, instability, violence, and fears that, in Yeats' memorable phrase, the center cannot hold. We are, in short, surrounded by unprecedented opportunity, at a time in which basic values of truth, rationality, democracy, and civil discourse sometimes seem to be crumbling under our feet.

What are we to do under these circumstances? There are many options, mostly bad, but I like the sentiment with which Voltaire's great comic novel *Candide* ends: whatever the world is doing, we can "tend our garden," investing our talents and energy into making things better where we are. In the case of a university, I would argue, that should include standing up affirmatively for things like rationality, democracy, humility, free expression, and civil discourse, in peaceable pursuit of various kinds of knowledge and truth. But it also means just doing our jobs in ways that positively strengthen this institution in its mission to discover and disseminate many forms of knowledge and understanding.

Happily, there is copious evidence in what I'm about to describe that this sort of positive cooperation (as opposed to reflexive negativity or obstructionism) is happening all the time at SMU. Take our recent provostial search, for example. In my 18 years at SMU, I can't think of another top-level hire that proceeded so smoothly and consensually. This is undoubtedly due in part to the efforts of the large and diverse search committee, and its able chairing by Dean Sam Holland. Many faculty turned out for large forums with each finalist, and I was also part of smaller candidate meetings with members of the Senate Executive Committee, and with members of the Board of Trustees. All of these were, in different ways, incisive and

very illuminating, and they resulted in a remarkable convergence of opinion regarding the two top finalists, and even which one edged out the other. And in the end, after receiving what I'm sure was a lot of feedback, including a late-stage discussion of the candidates with me, President Turner agreed with those majority assessments and offered the job to the accomplished and dynamic Elizabeth Lobo, who I am confident will make things exciting at SMU, and whose summer arrival I eagerly anticipate.

And, President Turner, as long as I'm talking about your provostial choices, I'd like to thank you for hiring Peter Moore as Interim Provost. In a temporary position with high stakes and many ways to go wrong, Peter's abundant competence, energy, problem-solving acumen, and good humane sense were exemplary. Working with him this year has been a great pleasure for me, and I'm sure for many others. Sincere thanks to you both.

Here's another instructive example. Last year in an ExCom meeting, someone (I don't remember who) wondered aloud why SMU doesn't have an Ombuds office as many other universities do. The aforementioned Peter Moore took an interest in the idea, and suggested last summer that I convene an ad hoc committee to study the question and make a recommendation, which I did, and that committee is now nearly ready to report. If this initiative comes to fruition, if that seed sown in the Senate (*alliteration!*) is collaboratively nurtured by faculty and administration, SMU faculty members will have a neutral, confidential, and independent resource to turn to for advice, guidance, problem-solving, and perhaps even mediation. I think that would be a very good thing, especially for untenured faculty.

One more mundane example before I move on to my four priorities. Maaaany faculty, including members of the ExCom, were upset at the on-campus parking

situation in September and October; they reported this problem to me, unsparingly, with some suggestions; I talked to President Turner about it; he talked (I think) to one or two VPs, who contacted Mark Rhodes, who in turn reached out to me to close the circuit and discuss the problem in person. At that meeting, which featured increasingly despairing markup of campus parking maps, we agreed on some ways to ameliorate the situation, which from what I've heard has since significantly improved—and will improve even more with the opening of the Hillcrest garage.

Okay, now on to the priorities I laid out in my Fall address: classroom security, free and civil speech, DASS testing accommodations, and library funding. Regarding classroom security, I'm pleased to report that I made a real pain in the neck of myself on the matter in my first few months, and that my arguments were met with interest. Addressing the issue turns out to be a fairly complicated business, so the Emergency Management Committee decided to take on Dallas Hall as a test case, and several of us met with University Park fire and code inspectors right before Christmas to figure out how those classrooms might be best secured. It was an encouraging meeting, and I hope to see these efforts spread and implemented throughout campus until each SMU classroom can offer substantial resistance to unwanted trouble. Special thanks go to Michael Molina, who embraced this issue readily, and to Chris Regis, who greenlit the course we're currently on.

On the matter of free and civil speech, things are moving along nicely. I've put together a committee of people from across campus who were already actively interested in free, rational, civil discourse—which as I said last Fall and many times since, is essential to democracy and civic culture, and to the pursuit of knowledge, understanding, and truth, and which is thus the lifeblood of a healthy university. This quite-wonderful group has met several times, and we're developing plans that range from large public events involving national figures to much smaller, student-oriented

ones, and that generally seek to cultivate a culture of fearless inquiry and productive disagreement for the sake of our entire community. In February the Senate will discuss and vote on a resolution in support of free and civil speech, which I hope and trust will pass handily, and which will undergird the important work that lies ahead. And in the next month or so I hope to debut a dedicated free-speech webpage with links, resources, and a calendar of upcoming speech-related events and opportunities at SMU. I look forward to seeing how these things develop in the months and years to come.

The testing-accommodations issue I discussed last fall has improved as well, thanks to the efforts of Sheri Kunovich and the DASS staff. They have hired an additional staffer, put a new communication system (Accommodate) in place, increased the number of testing seats by 25%, and developed ways to access some other spaces at times of especially high demand. While I don't have specific numbers on this, I'm encouraged by what certainly seems like a very significant step toward the alleviation of excess faculty burden.

Last but not least: library funding, and here the news is more mixed. Yes, it is true and important that the operating budget of SMU's libraries has significantly increased in the past 2-3 years, and I'm grateful for that. But the job is not done. Contrary to the utopian fantasies of the 1990s, when everyone thought the interweb was going to make all information free—FREE!—the reality is that the digital resources on which we increasingly rely have turned out to be very and increasingly expensive. (In recent years, they have consumed the vast majority of our collections budgets.) Consequently, it takes more and more money just to maintain our present collections, and to expand them and their infrastructure will require still more. [Side note: our paper resources are paid for and ready for use as always.] And to develop our libraries to their fullest potential—to make them outstanding 21<sup>st</sup>-century centers

for information, creativity, and research that will serve and stimulate the entire aspirational university—some dedicated investment and fundraising will really be necessary.

On this front, I'm afraid I don't have all the good news I wish I did. There are many worthy needs jostling for attention in the capital campaign that is ramping up, and it's not in the nature of libraries to crow about their own importance; they just calmly provide the foundations for the entire academic enterprise as they have for centuries. The *mode* or media of those foundations may be evolving from paper to digital—much like the transition from manuscripts to print 500 years ago, and the shift from verbal to textual records before that—but their *function* is essentially the same: conserving the achievements of the past so they can be taught in the present and extended in the future. Showing donors that libraries are future-oriented as well as archival, and that they are the real physical and symbolic heart of a university, will take the committed and articulate efforts of faculty, library staff, and everyone involved in fundraising. This may not be the easiest sell when the competition includes sexy things like supercomputers and business and quantum drives and athletics and namable mortar and so forth, but I really believe that if the university is properly focused on the profound importance of our libraries to our past, present, and future, donors can be brought to enthusiastic understanding. So I implore all of us—faculty, administration, trustees, development—to work hard on this together.

Last Fall I introduced you to attendant members of the Senate and especially its Executive Committee, on which I rely. One of my jobs this semester will be training my successor, Aurelie Thiele—Aurelie, could you please stand up so people can see you?—who I expect to do an excellent job as President starting next May, when she ascends the Iron Throne. See how well-rested and care-free she looks! I remember

those halcyon days when I used to be like that... Thanks, Aurelie, for your willingness to serve, and good luck!

People are always asking me how I like my current “special assignment,” and my usual response is that “I don’t regret it.....yet.....but ask me next week and the answer might be different.” To my surprise, though, two-thirds of the way through my term, that answer has not changed much. Being Senate President is a big job and a very busy one, and it’s sometimes exhausting, but it’s also an opportunity to help get good things done—and for this reason I can still say that on the whole it’s been very interesting and indeed a pleasure and an honor to represent this faculty. My sincere thanks to all who are working together, in ways large and small, to make SMU an even better place.

Thank you.