

Faculty Senate President Thiele's Address to Faculty, August 26, 2020

Prepared remarks

(These remarks were lightly edited when the actual speech was given.)

Dear President Turner, dear Provost Loba, dear Chaplain Rankin, dear Deans, dear colleagues:

It is a great honor to stand here today and deliver the Faculty Senate report. This is a very different job than the one I thought I was signing up for when I agreed to run for Faculty Senate President in the Spring of 2019, but I wouldn't change it for the world. It is been such an incredible privilege to meet so many of my extraordinarily talented colleagues and advocate for SMU faculty in those turbulent times.

I have been inspired by the leadership of my predecessors, especially Immediate Past-President Tim Rosendale, who tirelessly advocated for increased funding for libraries, spearheaded a resolution for free and civil speech and oversaw the recommendation for a Faculty Ombuds. But his biggest accomplishment last year may well be to have pushed for classroom-facing faculty to be included on the taskforce for healthy reopening and its various subcommittees. We are extraordinarily grateful to Tim for his leadership of the Faculty Senate over the past academic year. [Applause]

Now usually in this speech the Faculty Senate President reports on the Senate's activity during the previous spring semester, and I think that report is included in your booklet, but this year the Faculty Senate, especially its Executive Committee, also deserves the most thunderous praise for all the hours it has spent working on COVID-19 matters over the summer. Please join me in thanking ExComm. [Applause] I would also like to express my profound gratitude to all of my colleagues on the SMU faculty who took the time to attend one of the many town halls this summer, whether about the reopening of campus or about the experiences of Black students at SMU, and reached out with comments, insights and suggestions. It has been amazingly inspiring to see first-hand how much we faculty care deeply about this institution. I would also like to express my profound gratitude to the many staff members who have tackled the preparations for the campus's reopening, from ordering staggering numbers of new tech equipment to adding countless Plexiglass shields in classrooms to changing innumerable air filters, and to the administrators who found the money for those substantial improvements so that our classrooms could be made as safe as possible. We are particularly grateful to President Turner for placing such a high priority on classroom safety in the times of COVID-19.

Many things set SMU apart in the landscape of academic institutions, from its great location to its amazing campus, but the main one is its phenomenal faculty. It is because SMU faculty are extraordinarily dedicated to ensuring a superior learning experience that so many alumni succeed in whatever endeavor they choose after graduation, and become loyal and generous donors.

Hence I was surprised that in many cases senior administrators did not seek faculty input. I do wish they had. We make better decisions when we work effectively together. I do want to express my gratitude to the newly arrived Provost Loba for her willingness to engage the Faculty Senate and the faculty at large in constructive discussions this summer. She will be returning to the Faculty Senate next week September 2 to discuss her plans for the years ahead

and all faculty is invited. We on the Faculty Senate wish Provost Lobo a hearty welcome to SMU and hope for a productive relationship between the Provost's Office and the Faculty Senate for years ahead.

As we prepared with the reopening of campus, I do wish administrators had talked more about what students *needed* rather than what some students *wanted*. I wish they had talked about the very real *need* for many students to gain important social skills through in-person interactions, about the fact that broadening students' horizons may be best achieved if students are out of the environment where they acquired their current thinking. There was a real case to be made that students needed in-person instruction and we faculty could have argued for or against that case but the fact that the case wasn't made at all, that instead we were just told we will do what the students want, struck me as counterproductive for a university that seeks to raise its academic stature and shape its students as world-changers. The culprit, I suspect, is that the OE2C cuts have led to a situation where there is little bandwidth left for well-meaning administrators to address an emergency.

I also wish that SMU had more seriously considered asymptomatic testing. The claim that it would give students a "false sense of security" defies understanding. Some claim that our approach based on cluster busting that eradicated smallpox, but smallpox didn't have asymptomatic carriers, a rather important detail. Now maybe the political will to test widely asymptomatic students wasn't there because we live in a "red" state, or maybe simply the cost of widespread testing was too high for the university to bear, especially given the risk of testing errors. Whatever the real reasons, many of us faculty will be standing in the classroom for over thirty hours throughout the semester with students, some of which will be asymptomatic carriers of COVID-19, and we deserve an honest discussion of the plans for the fall semester and serious consideration of the broader testing.

The current situation is all the more unfortunate because we SMU professors are a rare breed, even among academics. A lot of universities say they care about research and teaching, but after seeing SMU from up close I am convinced that very few universities, if any, truly care about that mix as much as we do. SMU's model of high-touch instruction makes it uniquely well positioned to rise to national prominence for the twenty-first century, but SMU faculty are the only reason SMU can make this model happen. We faculty are not assembly-line workers and we are not catering waiters either. We help students recognize and fulfill their potential even when they are unsure they have that potential in them. We are the magicians. We are the alchemists. Professors like us are very hard to find and very hard to replace, whether we are tenured or tenure-track or lecturers who deliver the bulk of the outstanding undergraduate instruction SMU is famed for.

Here is something else I wish administrators had said. Some students may feel that the move to online in the spring was not what they "bargained for." But it may have given students far *more* than they "bargained for," because it gave them a lesson in grit and resilience in the face of adversity, both in how they and their friends adjusted and how their instructors reacted to the pandemic. While we would never have willingly imposed this on our students, this real-life lesson in resilience may be worth far more than half a semester of social interactions.

Traditionally, at this point in the speech the Faculty Senate President uses an anecdote from her area of expertise to enliven the speech, so let me end with an engineering example. On May 31, 2009, Air France 447 took off from Rio de Janeiro in route toward Paris. The route is known for its heavy turbulences in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Contrary to other planes, which turned around or altered course to go around the significant turbulences that day, Air France 447 went straight into the storm, about three hours into an eleven-hour flight. Shortly thereafter, air traffic controllers lost contact with the plane. Now the storm is not what made them crash. But the storm created the conditions for a key flight instrument to malfunction and for the cockpit crew to make a spectacular mistake when they got faulty data they didn't know how to interpret.

Some may wish the SMU plane had returned back to the gate or taken another route, but we took off and we are in the air now. Fortunately, two key assets will help us avoid becoming the Air France 447 of academia. First, the crash happened because the two co-pilots, rather than the pilot, were at the helm when they got the faulty instrument readings. This is the difference experience makes. Thankfully, there is no way President Turner is letting anyone else close to the commands. So maybe he'll be our Captain Sullenberger, landing the SMU plane in the Trinity River rather than the Hudson River. Our other asset is that, in this radically novel situation, we may in fact most need a very different expertise, like... "is there a doctor on board?" And for once we don't need medical doctors! [Raises hand.] There are plenty of doctors on the SMU plane, and we'll build that jumbo jet a parachute and a pair of water skis while in flight if we have to so that it can land safely.

For us to weather this storm, we faculty can't advocate for shared governance and then just sit back in the passenger cabin while President Turner pilots the plane in the cockpit. We've got to do our part, delivering superb instruction, obeying best health practices, sharing our expertise and sticking together as a university.

We, like every other academic institution this year, are in for stormy times in the weeks ahead, but please know that the Faculty Senate will always keep fighting for faculty and for the greater good of the SMU community. Together we can achieve anything. Thank you.

-Aurélie Thiele