

An Open Letter to the GSU Community

June 14, 2012

Dear Colleagues:

About This Letter

I write this letter because I will no longer sit by silently as a crisis of leadership engulfs the university I love. No one has helped me compose it, nor have I sought permission from anyone to write and send it. I speak for no one but myself. No one will have seen it before it is sent. Had I access to GSINFO, I would send it to every member of our university community. Since that isn't possible, I am addressing these words to the people I believe should hear them, and I invite every recipient to share them as she or he sees fit.

My purpose is to invite dialog among the various parties who must begin working together if Georgia Southern is to move forward to attain goals upon which there is broad agreement. These parties include the President, Provost, Vice-Presidents, Deans, and Faculty. At the moment, many of us realize there is intense strife among these parties, and we are in danger of descending into warfare that masquerades behind a fragile veneer of civility. It's time for open discussions where *all* parties can be heard, their views respected, and agreement reached. I, for one, wish to be part of those discussions. I hope this letter will serve as a starting point for those conversations.

About Me

In November, I will complete my twenty-third year at Georgia Southern. Hired as an assistant professor, I am now a full professor and Chair of the Department of Literature and Philosophy. The university often calls upon me to serve as its voice during recruitment events for scholarship applicants. At the invitation of Christian Flathman, I composed "We Are the Eagle Nation." I believe I enjoy the respect of many people across campus, and I know I have many friends here. Georgia Southern has been good for me and good to me, and I have no personal axe to grind against any office or individual. Like many of my fellow faculty members, I have invested many years of my life at this place, and I have a stake in its future. I deserve to be heard, and I will be heard.

A Visit to the Faculty Senate

I attended the last meeting of the Faculty Senate, a disheartening experience. The dynamics played out there are symptomatic of the larger problems we currently face. I note the following:

- While the Senate rightly commended Ted Moore for his service as Provost, the resolution was not actually read to him when he re-entered the room. That was an

oversight. More telling, however, was the President's failure to say a word of commendation to the Provost or to ask the Senate to recognize the Provost with even a round of applause. The division between the President and the Provost was evident at the meeting, as it has been evident for a long time. The university community deserves an open and honest discussion of their differences, be they philosophical or on policy matters, and the real reason Provost Moore has left his job after only one year.

- The Senate proposal for a moratorium on hiring additional administrators and/or raising administrators' salaries was ill-advised and, as the President noted, impossible for him to agree to. The President's response to the motion was reasonable and correct. Yet the Senate passed it anyway, as if daring the President to ignore it. Two dynamics are at play: the motion expresses the deep frustration faculty feel over lack of raises, over salary compression, over ever-increasing health insurance costs, and over larger teaching loads. Second, passing the motion despite the President's thoughtful remarks shows that the Senate believes its concerns are not being heard and that reasonable debate is ever more difficult.
- The President's refusal to accept a faculty representative on the President's Council is within his rights according to BOR policy. But here was a missed opportunity to reach out to faculty, inviting their greater participation in decision-making discussions. Instead, standing behind policy, the President sent the message that faculty voices are not welcome at the highest administrative levels.
- The two most significant items of business coming before the Senate, the Career Pathways document and the Teaching Legacy document, never made it to the floor for any serious consideration. Professors Welford and Gossai were advised that they had five minutes apiece to present lengthy, detailed, and important information. When Senators asked for more time to consider these documents, the Senate Moderator scolded them for taking too much time on other matters. The Senate should have been called back into the session the following day and the presenters given as much time as they required to make their presentations. I can only hope that both subjects—that have enormous implications for the future of this university—will be at the top of the Senate's agenda in the fall. Let us not fiddle while Rome burns.

The Provost

The Provost of a university like Georgia Southern ought to be its second officer, not just one Vice-President among equals. The Provost bears the greatest responsibility of any administrator: the oversight of the university's academic program. If Provost Moore resigned his position because *he* holds that point of view but other administrators do not, we all deserve to know it. We deserve to know how things are actually being done and if academics are not, in truth, the most important part of our mission.

Dr. Jean Bartels is an extraordinarily accomplished and capable leader. Her credentials to fill the position of Provost are not in question. I have enormous problems, however, with her appointment to a three-year term as Provost. Indeed, I would have enormous problems with *anyone's* being appointed to such a long-term position without any input from the university community. Given the current climate of distrust and dissension, the appointment of a new Provost to serve for three years sends exactly the wrong message.

The Faculty

I keep hearing that the current administration bears a dismissive and contemptuous attitude toward faculty. From what I observe, there is truth in this observation. To my mind, this is the fundamental mistake any university administration can make. Deans, provosts, and presidents come and go. Many such individuals are building their careers and are often looking to go on to the next, better job. That's their prerogative. Higher administrative offices seem to be revolving doors. But faculty members tend to stay put. Given today's job market in academia, that is understandable. Georgia Southern has a long tradition of faculty members devoting their entire careers to this place. I am among those people, and so are many of my colleagues. We have given Georgia Southern our best years. We've worked hard for small pay. We've taught our thousands of students, and we've celebrated the successes of hundreds of them.

Let me say this as plainly as I can: Georgia Southern belongs to its faculty and staff every bit as much as it belongs to any administrator. In fact, it belongs *more* to us, because when the current deans and higher administrators are long gone, we will still be here, striving to maintain what this place stands for: individual attention to our students, which is why they come here.

The Assessment Mess

The current debacle over GSU's failure to adequately assess student learning is a failure of higher administration. Previous administrators paid assessment some lip service immediately after our last SACS accreditation, then went on to other things. Assessment was left to fend for itself. Then new people were hired, new plans trotted out and then abandoned. Faculty were given lots of misinformation. They did what they were asked, then the rules and the processes changed. Now we face a crisis, and it's not faculty's fault. But it's faculty who are here cleaning up the mess. They deserve an enormous thanks from the administration. It's true: faculty not on twelve-month salaries are being asked to come to work in the summertime without pay to complete the assessment work for the university's sake. Some might complain that faculty have little sense of loyalty, that they should be *glad* to help out in a crisis. I say that if faculty had been properly rewarded, esteemed, and thanked all along, they would render this service gladly.

Unless Things Change . . .

Georgia Southern is at a crossroads. The current administration is trying to lead us in new directions. More doctoral research programs. More publications. A higher national profile. Bigger football (bigger might just not be better, in my opinion). We are about to undertake a huge capital campaign. We have two choices before us: work together, openly discussing everything, listening to one another, and striving for consensus, knowing that we won't always agree on everything. Or the administration and faculty can circle their wagons, retire to hostile positions, and let the battles begin. I wonder at the success of a capital campaign, where extraordinary volunteer effort will be required at every level, if we are busy fighting each other. Who wants that second option? Not I.

What I Suggest

We must begin new and open dialog among all parties. We need a series of open forums. I ask the President to visit every department and every Dean's Advisory Council. Faculty Senate and the higher administration must declare a truce and start listening to and respecting each other. Individuals who have not yet let their voices be heard now need to speak up without fear of reprisal. We should all begin talking *to* each other instead of *about* each other. We need many more ideas than I possess. Let's put our university above ourselves. And what *is* our university? That leads me to my last points.

The Most Important People at Georgia Southern . . .

are not its president, nor its provost. Nor its other vice-presidents, deans, department chairs, advisors, staff members, or faculty members. The most important people here are our *students*, and when we forget that, we might as well turn off the lights, lock the doors, and go home.

The most important person on our campus is the young woman from a small southeast Georgia town who will enter here as a freshman in August. She will be nervous but excited. She might not know what she wants to study, but will find her interest sparked in a biology course, or a sociology class, or in a philosophy class. A certain professor will ask a certain question, present a certain problem, discuss a certain topic that this student has never heard of or thought of before. And then her education begins.

The most important person on our campus is the young man from Atlanta who could have gone to UGA but chose us because he was impressed by our personal regard for him as a student and as a person. He already knows he wants to study business, but he, too, will be surprised at how his intellectual field is enlarged by what he hears in an American history class, or in a geology lab, or at a construction site.

These young kids are more important than we are. That's what we've told the world through our choice to help educate them, prepare them for the challenges of citizenship that lie ahead. We are here because we've chosen to serve them.

Servant Leadership

My friend Tim used to teach a course in church leadership, designed for people interested in various kinds of ministry, including pastoral ministry. At the end of the course, each graduate received a gift. Not a diploma. Not an engraved plaque. Not a gift certificate.

A toilet brush.

A reminder that true leadership is servant leadership. The higher the level of leadership, the greater the responsibility. The greater the call to service.

We Are Still the Eagle Nation

I wrote these words, I stand by them, and I want Georgia Southern's leaders to live up to them:

"We hold of highest worth the equality of all people and their freedom to think, believe, and express themselves."

Here there can be no second-class citizens, at that includes faculty. They are not second-class to department chairs, deans, vice-presidents, or to the president. We must hold of highest worth *everyone's* freedom to express her- or himself. I'm standing on that belief now, as I complete this letter.

"We value honesty and honor in the workplace, on the field of sport, and in our communities."

It's time we were all honest with each other.

"We are proud of our great university and are grateful for all it has given us."

May that always be true.

I welcome your responses. I welcome new opportunities for us to reason together for the sake of our students. For the sake of our university. For *all* our sakes.

Sincerely,

David Dudley
Chair, Department of Literature and Philosophy