



ADMINISTRATORS AND ACADEMIC VALUES

David Garfinkle

In the last few years we have all been happy to see the increased prominence of the Oakland University athletic programs. While in the past many people had difficulty distinguishing us from Oakland Community College, now we are known throughout Michigan and are even known past the borders of our state. (e.g. last year my uncle in New York said “is that *your* school at the NCAA??!” and on returning from a conference near Calgary and answering “Oakland University” in response to the “where do you teach?” question of the immigration official, I was surprised to see that he had heard of the place). Since we are an academic institution, this naturally leads to the question: why don’t our academic programs have a similar prominence? While some of the blame for this must lie with us faculty, and some with our students, it seems to me that part of the answer has to do with our administrators, and for the purposes of this essay I will concentrate on that part. Briefly, my contention is that our administrators tend to lack what for want of a better phrase I will call “academic values.”

What are academic values? Essentially, they consist of seeing a university as a community of scholars and a marketplace for ideas, rather than simply a school for older children. That people outside of academe don’t understand academic values is not surprising. We see this all the time in newspaper articles wondering why professors don’t spend as much time in the

classroom as high school teachers, or why we waste our time and the taxpayers' money by taking sabbatical leaves. Not to mention the endless questions from friends, relatives, and acquaintances to the effect of "well if you aren't teaching classes during the summer then what exactly *are* you doing?" Briefly, the answer to these questions is that we faculty are devoted to (some would say obsessed with) the subjects that we study and that because of this we feel compelled both to add to the store of knowledge in our subjects and to impart this store of knowledge to others. In other words, we're not just teachers: we are scholars and teachers; and we feel that both parts of the job are important.

That newspaper reporters don't understand academic values is not so bad because reporters don't run universities. However, if university administrators don't promote academic values, this can be harmful to the university's enterprise. In the abstract it is easy to see how this danger might arise: our board of trustees consists of non-academics, people appointed by the governor, mostly from the business community. There is no particular reason why business people would be expected to promote academic values. But the board appoints the president; and though the president is a professor, a board drawn from the business community and appointed because of some political connection to the governor is likely to be more comfortable with someone who shares world view and modes of thought of the business and political communities. Thus there is a danger of getting a university president who is not imbued with academic values. But the president appoints the provost and the deans, who in turn appoint a whole host of other administrators. And at every appointment there is potentially the same tendency to appoint those who share one's values and world view. The likely result is then an administration that as a whole is much less interested in the academic mission of the university than is the faculty.

Since so much of a university's governance depends on its board, it is surprising that so little attention is paid to the way in which university boards are chosen. In Michigan, the boards

of the three better known universities, University of Michigan, Michigan State University, and Wayne State University, are elected by the voters, while the boards of the lesser known state universities are appointed by the governor. There may be an element of causation here: that is, it is possible that the people's elected representatives provide better university leadership than friends of the governor. Thus it might be worthwhile for the state of Michigan to change its system and give us an elected board too. Unfortunately, the governor has no motivation to give up one of her perks, and the legislature has no interest in providing us with better leadership: when I mentioned this issue to a state legislator, she said, "If you want a better board, get a job at a better university." Thus we are stuck with whatever board the governor gives us, whatever president that board chooses, and whatever administration that president selects.

Nonetheless, a danger "in the abstract" is not a real danger. There remains the question of whether the Oakland University administration does in fact undercut academic values. I contend that it does and will illustrate this contention with a discussion of three parts of our recent history: the golf course episode, the bureaucracy of assessment, and the "reform" of general education. I should say right at the start that this essay makes no pretensions of finished scholarship. There is a field, the sociology of organizations that could be brought to bear on these questions. However that field is about as far from mine (theoretical physics) as one can get. Instead, this essay is an outpouring of opinions and perceptions based on 15 years experience here as a professor, member of various committees, department chair, and union official. In the manner of Larry Summers I aim to stir things up (well maybe not quite as much as he did) and invite those with the expertise and inclination to perform a thorough analysis of these issues.

In 1998 the administration decided that the Oakland University campus needed a second golf course. The university already had the Katke-Cousins golf course; but the administrators wanted one more: the R&S Sharf golf course. One might

wonder what an academic institution needs with even one golf course, let alone two. Indeed since, as any economist will tell you, both land and the money to develop it are scarce resources, one might wonder whether in an academic institution both the land and the money could have been put to better use.

The money could be used to buy books for the library, build new classrooms, renovate existing classrooms; buy laboratory supplies and equipment, or hire new faculty, just to name a few possible uses that might seem more natural for an academic institution. In addition to uses for the money, there are other possible uses for the land. It was already in use for biological research; any number of buildings for various purposes could have been built on it; or it could have been left undeveloped for the purposes of conservation and “green space.”

However, this mysterious decision seems more natural when one thinks of an administration emphasizing business values over academic values: Golf is a part of the lifestyle of the business community and the political community. Golf is big in Michigan. Furthermore the golf course is named for a member of the OU board of trustees. Of course one could argue that the golf course is not a way of spending resources, but rather a way of generating new revenues from the fees charged for its use. However, as far as I am aware that argument does not hold water, and the “lack of academic values” explanation seems more likely. Even if the golf course is an effective generator of revenue, and that is open to doubt, it is still in effect selling off university assets to raise money. This may be good business for a common business; but it lies at crossed purposes with an academic mission.

Given its contentious nature, one might have expected a lively debate, prior to the decision, on the pros and cons of building a golf course. However, no such prior debate took place. Instead the administration presented the new golf course as a *fait accompli*: any “debate” took place after the fact and was completely moot. This violates the most basic principles of shared governance: the right of faculty to participate in

decisions relevant to the academic mission of the university. Despite its name, “shared governance” does not mean that faculty have the right to make the decisions along with the administration. Rather shared governance is the mere right for one’s opinion to be heard through representative bodies, like the University Senate and the Assemblies of the College and the professional schools, before the decision is made. This right is part of the faculty contract as well as of the Constitution of the University Senate. The Senate has specific committees (e.g. the Budget Review Committee, Campus Development & Environment Committee, and Planning Review Committee) under whose purview the review prior to this sort of decision falls.

Faced with the furor that greeted their decision and their arrogant dispensing with shared governance, the administration reacted in a way that is now too familiar: First they stated that the decision was theirs and that they had no need to consult anyone. Then they issued a letter to the effect that they hadn’t meant to avoid the process of shared governance, but that the decision was made and would not be reversed and that they promised that in the future they would go through the normal process of consultation.

While the golf course was a single episode, assessment is an ongoing process.

In principle the notion of assessment is a reasonable one: it is our job as faculty to educate the students. But the job is done piecemeal with each professor taking on the classes assigned to him and grading the students in those classes. It would be nice to get some information on the “big picture.” What do the students know when they leave here? What do they retain of the material that they are taught? The fact that a student can recall something for a final exam does not mean that he or she will recall it at graduation, perhaps several semesters later. And some classes do not have cumulative final exams, so it is not even clear that at the end of the semester the student still retains knowledge obtained at the beginning of the semester. Furthermore even within a department there are

so many different choices of courses that it is not clear what a major in that department knows and understands at graduation. “How good a job are we doing?” is arguably not merely something that would be nice for us faculty to know, but something that the students, their parents, and the taxpayers of Michigan have a right to know. It is the need to provide this sort of accountability that gives rise to our assessment activities.

Or is it? All too often in politics, a problem calls forth not a solution but an ineffective activity that merely pays lip service to the need for a solution. Such is the case with assessment at Oakland University. As a new assistant professor at OU, I was assigned to be the physics department’s person in charge of assessment. I went to an assessment conference where there was a presentation by a member of the North Central Association (the body that accredits OU). He said that universities were required to make assessment plans, but that North Central purposely was taking no position whatsoever on what those plans should be. (A good hallmark of lip service there: you can do whatever you like as long as you do something and as long as you call it assessment).

I went to a university wide meeting of departmental assessment people. There the administrator in charge of assessment gave a presentation talking about assessment activities, which are, she said, ways of assessing student learning. “Oh,” I said, “like homework and exams?” “No,” she said, “homework and exams do not assess student learning.” At this point I thought, “how is this person an expert on assessment and why have they hired her?” I also thought, “if it really is the official university position that homework and exams do not measure student learning then on what basis do we assign student grades? Maybe we should give all the students their money back since their grades are assigned on the basis of something that doesn’t really measure student learning.”

But of course it was simply another example of lip service. In order to have the trappings of accountability, the university had to have a director of assessment and that director had to say something. Whether or not she actually believed the things

she was saying was immaterial. I was also instructed by the university assessment committee on how to prepare my department's assessment plan: the plan had to have three columns. In the first column would be a series of quotes from the Oakland University mission statement. For each entry in the first column, the second column would contain a department specific implementation of that quote and the third column would mention the corresponding assessment tool. Only the format mattered, so I drew up a plan in the requisite format and it was approved and became the official physics department assessment plan.

You may be amused by this story. After all, it is a cliché, (e.g. recently seen in the movie *Office Space*), that in an organization much time is wasted on meaningless activity. However, there are two things about assessment at OU that make it especially frustrating. One is the enthusiasm with which the administration embraces this nonsense: head of the assessment committee becomes a stepping stone to associate dean; the administration introduces an assessment award at the faculty recognition lunch to go along with the awards for scholarship and for teaching. The other is that assessment is a whole new class of activity that the university has only recently engaged in. By making an office in charge of assessment (now euphemistically titled the "office of institutional research" which makes it sound like they are seriously doing something useful) and staffing it with administrators, the university is wasting more money on useless activity than before. And by assigning faculty to do assessment activities, the administration is wasting more faculty time than before. Both time and money are scarce resources, and a university that wastes its scarce resources in this way does so at the expense of its useful activities. What faculty hires must we forgo because they are hiring these useless administrators? What scholarly project will you be unable to complete because you are wasting time on these useless activities? What new useless activities will they dream up for you to do next year? What about the year after that? An administration that cared about the academic mission of its university would

worry about this; but for an administration without a strong commitment to academic values, there is nothing to worry about.

While assessment is an ongoing task, the “reform” of general education was a flurry of activity. All Oakland University students are required to take certain introductory courses in various areas. The courses that can be taken to satisfy this requirement are styled “general education” courses. A few years ago the administration decided that the entire general education process would be overhauled and they appointed two task forces to decide how this would be done. What was the rationale for this effort? The administration claimed that it was in response to a report from the North Central Association. However, this explanation seems unlikely: the report had simply noted that the aims of our general education program were unclear and had suggested that they be clarified. Furthermore, the administration has a long history of ignoring those recommendations of North Central that it does not like: several years ago North Central noted that our library was inadequate and suggested spending more money on books. Has the administration responded by fixing the problem? Of course not. That would require spending real money and doing something of substance rather than form. Sure enough, in each report North Central notes that the library is still inadequate and the administration is still not spending enough on books.

So why did the administration decide to overhaul general education? Each high level administrator, on taking office, likes to plan tasks to be accomplished, and the more sweeping they sound the better. When Lou Esposito became provost, the task he chose was the reform of general education. Esposito is no longer provost, but as Shakespeare pointed out, “The evil that men do lives after them”, and so it was with Lou’s reform of general education. Once the administration has decided to do something, they don’t change their mind. Thus the overhaul of general education took on a life of its own.

One difficulty in reforming general education is that there are actually two different outlooks on what general edu-

cation is about: these can be termed “distribution requirements” and “core curriculum.” The idea behind distribution requirements is one of well roundedness. If a student is studying say computer programming, then no matter how talented a computer programmer he is, we don’t want him to take only computer programming courses in college. He should also take courses in the humanities, the social sciences, the physical sciences, etc. The easiest way to implement distribution requirements is not to have any specific general education courses at all; but to divide the subject matter of the university into areas and to have the students take a specified number of courses from each area. This is the method that was used when I went to college, and it seems to me both simpler than and superior to the method that we use here. In contrast, the idea of the core curriculum is that there are certain things that *all* educated people should know. One then has a set of courses, the core curriculum, in which these things are taught. Each student is then required to take all the courses in the core curriculum. The tricky part of designing a core curriculum is deciding what to include in it. Usually there is a course titled something like “Western Civilization” but going beyond that requires a great deal of thought and even more fighting. Thus, to reform general education one must begin by deciding what outlook to adopt, distribution requirements, the core curriculum, or some well thought out and well articulated alternative to these.

Another difficulty with reforming general education has to do with entrenched interests. For many departments, the credit hours delivered in general education courses make up a substantial fraction of the total credit hours. Since requests for new faculty hires are granted in part based on credit hours delivered, this means that each department has a vested interest in keeping its existing general education courses as general education courses under any new system. Thus successful general education reform must articulate clear criteria for what is and is not a general education course. These criteria must then be impartially applied, usually against heavy resistance, to weed

out those existing general education courses that do not satisfy the new criteria.

So did the general education task forces get the job done? Did they articulate a clear vision of general education? Did they implement that vision in a set of clear criteria? Did they then apply those criteria to produce a set of approved general education courses substantially different and substantially better than the set that had been there under the old system? Of course not, to all of the above. The general education task forces produced a set of forms. For each course that a department wanted approved as a general education course, the department was required to fill out the appropriate forms. The forms were then submitted to the general education committee. Provided that the forms were filled out in the appropriate way, down to the last bureaucratic dotted i and crossed t, the course would be approved. In other words, almost nothing of substance was changed; but a great deal of time and effort was wasted in the process.

While there are many specific things about the process of general education “reform” that could be addressed, in the interest of brevity I will concentrate on two: the laboratory component of natural science courses, and the use of task forces. One idea of the general education task forces was that all natural science courses should have a laboratory component. On the face of it, this seems like a reasonable reform: experiments are an essential component of science, and the teaching laboratory allows the students to have direct experience with experiments rather than simply being told about them in the lecture hall. The difficulty is that laboratories require laboratory equipment and supplies, and these cost money. Since general education courses have high enrollment, the amount of money that would need to be spent in giving them a laboratory component would be substantial. The science departments would certainly not be able to cover such an expense from their existing budgets. In order to make this new requirement work, the administration would have to supply the needed funding.

Would they be willing to do so in a time of tightened state and university budgets? At the time we chairs of science departments pointed out this concern to the general education task forces. Their response was that funding was not their concern. They had decided that all natural science general education courses would be required to have a laboratory component and would so recommend in their report. Whether the administration chose to come up with the necessary money was entirely up to the administration. The science departments were thus left with the (unlikely) hope of having the ability to offer laboratories in all general education courses (if the administration provided the funds) and the (more likely) fear of having to drop certain general education courses due to lack of adequate funding for the necessary equipment.

So which came to pass, the hope or the fear? As it turns out, neither one: the administration does require that natural science general education courses have a “laboratory component” but a laboratory component can be whatever we say it is: the graphing of a table of provided data, visiting a website that simulates an experiment, etc. All that was needed was to file a form with the general education committee stating that the course had a laboratory component and giving a description of what that component was. In the depths of our fear, we had forgotten something important: it is not that the OU administration always makes the worst possible choice; instead they make the choice that has the least possible substance.

The issue of the general education task forces is related to that of the lack of consultation on the golf course in that they both have to do with shared governance. While task forces have faculty as well as administrators, all their members are hand picked by the administration. Jean-Paul Sartre pointed out that choosing *whom* to get advice from is often a cover for choosing *what* advice to receive. In this way one produces the illusion of asking for advice while one’s mind is already made up. Sartre called this sort of activity “bad faith.” While resembling a consultative body, a task force is actually a large echo chamber in which the administration hears only their own

opinions. What is disturbing is that it seems that there is a trend for more and more issues to be given to task forces rather than say to the relevant Senate committee. In this way, shared governance is eroded and the administration descends ever further into bad faith.

Nothing that I have said so far precludes the possibility of any given administrator having academic values. However, it does mean that any such administrator will have difficulty retaining his job and applying his values to his administrative decisions. It also means that any claims by Oakland University administrators to have academic values should be regarded with skepticism and subjected to scrutiny. This applies in particular to recent activities that the administration has engaged in with regard to teaching load and scholarship. The traditional teaching load at OU varies from department to department in recognition of the fact that different departments have different expectations for the amount of time that their faculty are to spend on scholarship. The administration has recently subjected this traditional teaching load to scrutiny, talked about changing it, and for some individual faculty have changed it. When asked about the rationale for this activity, the administration replies either that they are merely gathering information, or that they are doing this to improve scholarship. Like the case of general education science courses, this situation leads to both hope and fear.

Variable teaching loads could indeed be a powerful tool for improving scholarship at OU. Lowering the teaching load of our best and most productive scholars would indeed result in more top quality scholarship being produced here. Being able to promise certain new hires lower teaching loads than most faculty in their departments might be a way to lure star faculty who would otherwise be beyond our reach. Thus the (unlikely) hope is that the administration might indeed be in the process of improving scholarship here. The more palpable fear is twofold: First, the ability of the administration to increase the teaching load of any faculty member is tantamount to the ability to arbitrarily and capriciously inflict pain on any

faculty member that they choose to hurt. Second, there is the possibility that the administration might try to increase everyone's teaching load. Since there is always a tradeoff between teaching load and time available for scholarship, such a wholesale teaching load increase could complete our slide into scholarly mediocrity; putting the kibosh forever on any hope of academic quality here at OU. At this point, the evidence seems to point more in the direction of the fear than the hope, since while the administration makes the appropriate pro-scholarship noises, at the time of the writing of this essay (May '06) they have only increased teaching loads: no-one's teaching load has been lowered.

While these fears have made teaching load an issue for bargaining in the new faculty contract (and may make it a part of that contract as you read this) it is worth pointing out that the old (2003–2006) contract already provides a certain amount of protection against the wholesale raising of teaching loads. While the old contract does not specifically address teaching load, it does say that the administration must maintain a student-faculty ratio of 20.7 to 1. Thus, when more students are taught, more faculty must be hired to teach them. Therefore the administration cannot get more “teaching bang” from its “faculty salary buck” by raising teaching load. It is likely that we are already over this ratio. The only reason that I cannot say for sure is that the administration, despite its obligation to provide the relevant information to the faculty union months ago, has not at the time of the writing of this essay done so. While this may be simple laziness or incompetence on their part, it is just as likely that not providing the information is a ploy to delay their contractual obligation to hire more faculty.

In fact it seems likely to me that neither the hopes nor fears will come to pass. Based on their track record, I see not one scintilla of evidence to support the notion that the administration is actually engaged in improving scholarship at OU. However, given even their contractual obligations under the 2003–2006 faculty contract, there is little more that the ad-

ministration is likely to do in the way of destroying scholarship by raising teaching loads. This is scant comfort to those whose teaching loads have already been raised; but then scant comfort is all that I have to offer.

What then is a professor at Oakland University to do in the face of an administration with weak academic values? The best advice seems to be that of Voltaire: "one must cultivate one's own garden." We must do our teaching and research regardless of the qualities of the administrators who claim to lead us. We cannot change the administration: they will always be a hindrance rather than a help in the academic mission of the university. However, we can accomplish that academic mission despite their hindrance. Here we have an advantage over many other lines of work. Despite the talk about leadership coming from our administration, professors are a generally autonomous, self-motivated, self-disciplined bunch with little need to be led, except perhaps by example.

In cultivating our own gardens, what we do is not very different from what is done by our colleagues at better places. Nonetheless, it is good to remind ourselves and others that the Emperor has no clothes. We should do so often and in detail. Even at that, such reminders will be only a whisper compared to the din of self-congratulatory nonsense in which this place is bathed. As a small consolation, we have the pride that comes from overcoming extra obstacles. It is sometimes said that Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did; only she did it backwards and in high heels. We face similar difficulties here. But if we had an administration with strong academic values, just think of what we could accomplish.