

Report to the Board of Trustees *Saint Martin's University*

Faculty President – Dr. Ian Werrett
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Discoveries from the Past

Ten years ago, during the 2013/14 academic year, I served my first term as Faculty President. When I think back upon that time, I remember feeling nervous and completely unprepared for what was to come. As one of the junior members of the faculty, I was surrounded by many seasoned veterans and each of them seemed to have incredibly strong opinions about what we should be doing as a faculty, a university, and a community.

One of the long-standing challenges at that time was the faculty's decision not to serve on the Board of Trustee committees. Several years before my tenure as Faculty President, my colleagues had opted to step down from serving on Board committees as a form of protest. The rationale behind that decision was an overwhelming sense that there was little to no transparency on how the university was being managed and that faculty were being prevented from having any meaningful role in the governance of the school.

In meeting after meeting, the first and only agenda item for the Senate was faculty representation on the Board. In hindsight, I probably allowed that conversation to continue longer than I should have, but there were strong arguments on both sides, and I felt it was important for us to hear from as many people as possible. During one of our meetings, a senator from Engineering, who has long since left Saint Martin's, asked if there was anything stopping us from holding a vote. Shortly thereafter, the Senate narrowly approved a motion to rejoin the committees of the Board.

During the full meeting of the Board in May of 2014, former Provost Molly Smith and I were given a standing ovation for our collective efforts in overhauling the Faculty Handbook and convincing the faculty to reengage with the Board. At the time, I was pleased with the result and with the kindness of the Board in recognizing our efforts. I mean who doesn't like to be praised for resolving a difficult situation? But as I look back on those events, and compare them to where we are now, I cannot help but wonder if that praise and my self-satisfaction were a bit premature.

Discovering Faculty Attitudes

On numerous occasions, I have heard members of the Board asking why it is that faculty seem to be so angry and difficult to work with. Some have been put off by the faculty's frequently aggressive and demanding tone. Others have taken issue the endless stream of criticism that seems to come from our side of the house. And, if I'm being honest, the Board is probably right to be confused and frustrated. Faculty can be difficult to work with, and our tone can be incredibly acidic, but this is not simply a case of disgruntled employees being difficult for the sake of being difficult.

There are numerous factors behind the attitudes of the faculty, some valid - some not, but so far as I can tell, there are three issues driving the concerns of the faculty: (1) institutional memory/experience; (2) academic training; and (3) the faculty's role in creating our central product.

Many of the faculty have been at Saint Martin's for a long time and some of those individuals are actively involved in faculty governance. In my case, I came to Saint Martin's as an undergraduate in 1994 and I taught my first class as a full-time professor in the spring of 2006. During my time as a member of the

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faculty, we have had seven Presidents, eight Provosts, and six CAS deans, not to mention dozens of VPs, CFOs, CIOs, and Facilities Managers. Turnover at the administrative level is not unique in higher education, but we do seem to have experienced more than our fair share, particularly in the weeks and months after the retirement of Dr. Heynderickx. And with each new hire, those of us with deep institutional memory and experience have been called upon to search, onboard, and support new administrators. These experiences have only served to increase the sense ownership many faculty feel when it comes to our role in maintaining the continuity and stability of the university.

A second issue driving the attitudes of the faculty is our extensive training and experience as academics. Not only do a majority of the faculty have terminal degrees from some of the most prestigious universities in the world, but our training has enabled us to analyze and interpret complex collections of data in such wide-ranging fields as Astrophysics, Systematic Theology, Economics, and Mechanical Engineering. Some faculty have owned their own businesses and worked for major corporations, while others have experience teaching and serving at universities in North America and abroad. What's more, many of us actively keep up with the latest trends and issues facing Higher Education and we are in constant dialog with our friends and colleagues at other institutions. That said, when faculty are sidelined or left out of important discussions about the governance of the university, it makes them feel like their experiences, professional training, and potential value to the conversation is either being underappreciated, overlooked, and/or intentionally ignored.

The third issue driving faculty attitudes is their role as the sole creators and providers of the university's main product – education. It goes without saying that the university sells other things, such as living accommodations and parking passes, but these are secondary to, and in support of, our main product. Not only does this make the faculty a major stakeholder in the university, but when you combine this with the aforementioned issues, it seems incomprehensible to some of the faculty that we would be excluded from any conversation regarding university governance. It goes without saying that faculty cannot, and should not, be involved in every decision at the university, but I hope the observations above shed some light on why it is that faculty think, act, and speak the way we do.

The Undiscovered Country

Although I played a part in convincing the faculty to rejoin the Board committees back in 2014, the truth of the matter is that I did nothing at all to heal the relationship between the faculty and the Board. And, so far as I can tell, nobody else did anything either. In the intervening decade, the rift between the administration, faculty, and Board seems to have grown wider and in those moments when our community should be leaning on one another for support and assistance, such as when a president abruptly resigns, we end up talking at one another and causing even more damage to an already strained relationship.

As we move towards hiring an Interim President and initiating a national search for a permanent President, I would like to propose that the faculty and the Board take intentional and aggressive steps to heal our long-suffering relationship. It is my hope that this report will act as a modest first step in this process and that the faculty and Board will commit themselves to listening to and learning from one another whenever possible and appropriate. For my part, I pledge to do what I can as Faculty President to engender a spirit of transparency and collegiality as we embark upon a year of change, growth, and discovery.

Respectfully submitted by Dr. Ian Werrett, September 15, 2023