

Remarks to the SFA Faculty Senate

David Alders
September 13, 2017

Thank you, Dr. Solmonson. I appreciate your invitation to address the Faculty Senate today, and I want to take advantage of the occasion to speak briefly on behalf of the entire board and also to bring to you some personal reflections and observations that have been neither approved nor even vetted by that board. I will endeavor to make those distinctions clear as we go.

First, I certainly do represent the board in expressing to you our deep and sincere appreciation for the manifest diligence and commitment that you show in teaching and mentoring the young men and women who come to this university and entrust to us their resources of time and tuition. The purpose of our institution is chiefly to teach, to instruct young people, to provide, as our vision statement reads, “transformational learning experiences” that will prepare our students to contribute to society as competent members of a workforce and conscientious leaders of communities. As opposed to universities that tend to isolate their professoriate from undergraduate students, SFA gives its students ready access to its outstanding and accomplished faculty, and that impresses and inspires our students and gives them confidence that their degrees from SFA are meaningful and valuable.

We on the Board understand that the heartbeat of this university is what happens in its classrooms and laboratories and recital halls as you interact with young people, transforming their view of what they can learn and accomplish as human beings. Thank you for what you do here, for the time you invest in developing curriculum and lesson plans and lectures and presentations and exams, for the attention you give to grading and evaluating your students’ work, for the time you spend in conference with students who may need remedial instruction or with those students whose appetite for learning and guidance is insatiable. Thank you for overseeing and directing research projects and discovery opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students. Thank you for representing our institution at academic and industry conferences, for your participation in faculty recruitment and hiring and promotion. Thank you for your interest in our local community and for your leadership here, in representing your college and department in the Faculty Senate. You are the essential cogs in the wheel that makes SFA prosper and advance. And this university will only progress to the extent that you drive it forward through your excellence in the classroom in inspiring and instructing the young people who come here as teenagers and leave here as adults, transformed in many ways, but chiefly through your collective labors. I know that my fellow regents share in my expression of gratitude today.

Now, with regard to my own observations as one member of the Board of Regents, in some respects I wish that I could bring to you today glad tidings of great joy: that the continued success and future growth of our university are virtually guaranteed and will be accomplished by continuing to do the same things in the same ways that we’ve done for decades. I can’t report that, unfortunately, so I want to discuss with you for a few minutes a rather controversial topic, and I’m referring of course to climate change. And the ecosystem in which this climate change has occurred and even now is occurring is American higher education. American higher ed. is a different world than that in which most of us matriculated, and if we don’t understand and come to grips with these changes in our climatic conditions and operating environment, we at institutions like SFA are, to change metaphors now, going to be J. C. Penney, or worse, Sears in an Amazon world, or your local newspaper in a Facebook and Craig’s List world, or the U.S. Postal Service in a FedEx, email, .pdf, 3-D printing world. You can pick your own metaphor of extinct or endangered business dinosaurs in the information age. I could quote you today the statistics that prove the increased market share of e-commerce in the retail trade, or of streaming media in the news and entertainment industry or the increased market share of on-line colleges in the higher ed. marketplace. We all are very aware that these institutions and technologies pose a growing competitive threat, a threat that will overtake all those who stand still or rest on laurels.

I am not telling you anything that you don’t know and haven’t read a lot about, but the fact is that we are, very broadly speaking, in the information delivery business. We may instinctively recoil from applying a business model to higher

education, but the brutal and inescapable fact remains that ours is not the only avenue by which potential consumers of information may satisfy their wants and needs. In our traditional campus setting, we have the opportunity to deliver information more effectively and instill it in our students much more deeply than massive open online courses or online universities are able to instill information, but to ignore the fact that today's students and potential students can and do think very differently about interacting with others through information technology and about pursuing a college education is to put our heads in the sand and consign ourselves to declining market share and, ultimately, irrelevance. We no more have a monopoly on delivering our product, through clicks or bricks, than Cason-Monk Hardware downtown had on supplying ladders or light bulbs or lawn sprinklers. I need not remind you that Cason-Monk is out of business or that Amazon's value on the stock market is already more than twice that of mighty Wal-Mart. I should note that yesterday's *WSJ* brought this headline: *Investors Right to Fear Kroger's Future*. This headline of what is happening even in the grocery business, is the result of the same information age forces which produced this sentence from a May 24, 2017, article at InsideHigherEd.com, "The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center ... found an overall national decline of 1.5 percent for this spring semester compared to a year ago. (Last year's decline was 1.3 percent.)"

Thankfully, we live in a free economy, where the customer is king and can make his or her own choices based on individual and highly subjective cost-benefit analyses. Our customers operate very comfortably and efficiently in the digital world, and as the world grows increasingly connected through information technology, the competition we face will only intensify. Smart institutions of higher education, whether virtual or campus-based, understand this, and they are doing everything in their power to innovate, to identify new opportunities and fill the gaps in their own academic offerings. Our toughest competitors do not engage in lengthy, multi-year review processes for developing new programs and courses and curricula or for implementing new technologies. Our competition is vigorously responding to a dynamic and constantly changing marketplace, a marketplace that is not impressed that we have been here for 94 years.

Because of the changes wrought by the ubiquity and power of today's information technology, we in higher education also exist and compete in a world that moves at the speed of now, a world in which costs are constrained and even drastically reduced by economies of scale, by using existing resources to do more and better for bigger and broader communities of consumers. Whether we will exist in this world is not our choice; it is a secular climatic shift, and our existing levees will not protect us from its floodwaters.

I am here today, though, to focus not on ominous storm clouds but on the rays of light that you represent. If we are going to be relevant and attractive to potential college students of today, and especially those of tomorrow, we must be responsive and nimble and creative and, yes, entrepreneurial. Our vision of ourselves and of what we can be must be elevated to a new level. The academic opportunities and educational experiences we offer must be truly transformational, opportunities and experiences that offer what a Harvard MOOC or a Liberty University on-line degree cannot offer and of a quality that our peer brick and ivy institutions will not offer:

- direct interaction and collaboration with engaged and competent and caring faculty,
- leadership and life skills training that produces graduates known throughout our region and state as hard working and ethical and collegial,
- academic programs that are cutting edge and relevant and responsive to the needs of a dynamic marketplace,
- technology that is accessible and consistent with current industry standards,
- internship and job placement opportunities in attractive workplaces throughout Texas that arise from a deep and well-nurtured network of friends and contacts in public and private enterprises, and
- a civil and respectful campus culture that embraces each student as a valued member of the Lumberjack family.

If we accomplish these things, all of which are included in the aspirational Vision Statement of the Strategic Plan that many of you and others on this campus formulated and embraced in 2015, then I have no doubt that we will see meaningful and sustained enrollment growth and a rise in our retention and graduation rates and an expansion of our resources, even to the point that we can achieve our aim to bring faculty compensation to a level that is on par with our

peer institutions in this state. But that target, like every other aspirational goal listed in our Vision Statement, is in peril if we all, from President to Dean to Professor to Graduate Assistant, do not embrace our collective and individual roles and opportunities to make the SFA educational experience excellent in every respect. All of us must have an ownership focus and attitude.

The food service staff matters, the UPD matters, Student Affairs matters, the grounds and maintenance and custodial staff all matter, even the administration matters, but in regard to making the student experience at SFA truly exceptional, no one matters like you, our faculty. If you fail to embrace the vision of making SFA the best overall undergraduate student experience in Texas, then no other group can make up that deficit. I truly believe that our university's quality reputation rests on your past efforts, and I have confidence that you are here because you are inspired by the opportunities you have every day to inspire others, to show young men and women what it means to be a lifelong learner, to show them how to give and contribute and lead lives that are meaningful and consequential. This is what has and will continue to set us apart, this focus on our customers, our students, the future leaders of this community and region and state.

If I asked you now to identify in your minds your favorite teacher throughout the whole of your educational experience, I know that each of you would have a name and a face in mind. It's there now, is it not? How did that teacher or professor achieve that distinction, that place of honor in your memory? Having been blessed with such a teacher, it is our obligation, is it not, to endeavor to have that same impact on those who sit in our classrooms and laboratories and offices every semester?

Finally, I want to emphasize my belief that what will drive SFA toward greater success and continuous institutional improvement is a systemic embrace of a culture that focuses on always doing what is truly in the best interests of our students. I am not asserting that we should cater to their whims or mollycoddle those who refuse to engage. I mean that if we truly exist to serve the purpose of preparing and nurturing and enlightening young men and women, and doing so at a price that is perceived as a valid value proposition, high school students will continue to aspire to be Lumberjacks. We can fill file cabinets and hard drives all over campus with strategies to move us toward enrollment growth or other measures of success, but as Peter Drucker is alleged to have said, "Culture eats strategy for breakfast." No amount of strategizing can overcome cultural deficiencies. We all must take ownership and accept responsibility as creators and custodians of culture in our respective spheres.

I am completely confident that my fellow members of the Board of Regents are committed to excellence in this educational enterprise we know as Stephen F. Austin State University. We are working with our administration to deliver on SFA's promise, knowing all the while that you are the key, the true authors and drivers of transformative student experiences. Together, let us help mold young leaders who are capable and high achieving and justifiably proud to be Lumberjacks, whom this entire state will take notice of and admire and say, "What we need are more young men and women of this quality and character, and we know we can find them at SFA."

Thank you for what you do for our students.