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Faculty Representative to the Board of Trustees Report

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April 2018 Report
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Summary:

As this is my last time formally addressing the Board, I thought it would be helpful to highlight some key emphasis areas during my term as Faculty Representative to the Board. In looking back over my time as Representative, several themes have emerged that I would like to reiterate in this report. These include protecting the “Clemson Experience”, seeing inclusion in the Tiger Paw, using the Association of American Universities (AAU) guidelines as metrics towards a culture of scholarship, and the use of the principles of marginal gains to push for a better Clemson.

The Importance of Maintaining the Clemson Experience

If I were to name the top attribute of the University, it would be the “Clemson Experience”. In talking to students and alumni, this is often described as that one faculty member that they developed a special bond with and helped mentor and prepare them for life after Clemson. Therefore, one of the most important roles the faculty have is working with students as an advisor and mentor. This is much more than helping a student navigate with which classes to enroll. The mentor is there to provide inspiration to the student who is feeling discouraged, guidance for the those looking for assistance in applying to an internship or co-op, or are there to be someone welcoming to talk to in times of need. Here is where the Clemson faculty drive this “Clemson Experience”. It is the student-faculty bond that makes Clemson special. This is something we have historically done extremely well and need to preserve going forward.

Preserving the “Clemson Experience” should be a top priority for the University and can be achieved by following the guidelines of the student enrollment plan and hiring additional faculty as we continue to raise the level of expectations for the faculty. Currently the student to faculty ratio is 16.3 (using the US News and World Report 2017 methodology). One could make the argument that we need to maintain this level to ensure quality to our students. However, several factors suggest we might want to strive towards a lower ratio. For example, the needs of students are requiring more time from faculty than ever before. In addition, the commitments in research and service are limiting faculty time. Therefore, a more complete evaluation of faculty work-load needs to be performed to ensure that we are best meeting the priorities of the University.

Using the Tiger Paw as a Symbol as Inclusive Excellence

The Tiger Paw is one of the most recognized symbols of the University. However, few know the origins and the importance of its 30-degree tilt. I would like to encourage all of those who wear the tiger paw to remember why it points to 1:00. By wearing the Clemson Tiger Paw, you are telling the world that you are open and welcoming to all. It is your duty to remember this each time you put on the paw. As we tell the Clemson story, having the Tiger Paw as a symbol of inclusion needs to be central to our branding.

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Use the Association of American Universities (AAU) Membership Principles as Key Metrics

Over the past several years, Clemson has been focused on the metrics described by the US News and World report. In close examination these metrics are focused on primarily undergraduate intensive activities, rather than the activities of a modern university. Therefore, as Clemson's vision of its identity as the University transitions, we need to better examine the metrics we hold ourselves. After all, it is this self-reflection that will drive the decisions that best serve our betterment.

In looking at additional metrics, there are several options available. For example, one could take a global prospective and see where Clemson falls in the Times Higher Education World University Rankings (188th in the US and 601-800th in the world), the Academic Ranking of World Universities (601-700th), or the QS World University Rankings (701-750th), with each of these varying in its methodology and weighting. Nonetheless, there are several themes that emerge when one examines all of these ranking. These include peer assessment of academic reputation, scholastic output and citations, and faculty with international recognition.

These same themes are present in the indicators of a research-intensive university for membership to the AAU. As discussed in previous reports, these include externally funded research expenditures, membership in national academies, faculty with awards and fellowships, and citation of our scholastic output. All of these represent areas where Clemson could make significant improvements through small changes overtime (see below). These metrics align with the goals stated in the Research portion of the ClemsonForward plan. While proposal submissions and research expenditures are important metrics and are items most discussed at Board meetings, we need to also be monitoring and considering the outputs of the University scholarship. These grants support the scholarly activity between the faculty and students that is so vital in the "Clemson Experience." Moreover, it is through scholarship that we enhance our academic reputation.

Applying the Principles of Marginal Gains for a Better Clemson

So how else can we build a culture of scholarship across campus? The answer is not one or two sweeping changes but rather a long list of small changes. By applying the principles of marginal gains, we can instill a culture of continuous improvement within the organization. When all the members of the team realize they can personally improve, this focus on excellence becomes contagious.

Key to this strategy is investing in people, where the focus is making sure members have the right behavioral fit rather than the skill sets. Skill sets can be taught more easily than behavior within a culture. Also, we need to pass on a sense of ownership, allowing for creativity within a given role. With ownership comes accountability and responsibility to the rest of the team. Part of helping faculty build strong skill sets is being extremely clear of expectations and standards. We are an educational institution. We should be working together in a positive, healthy environment,

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where team members can give each other advice and feedback, and educate one another on ways we can all improve.

So where can we find marginal gains in the area of research and scholarship?

In seeking these small gains, one could look at many areas of our organization. Could we reduce the time required to submit a grant? What types of assistance would accelerate paper submission? Could we adjust workload so that a faculty's time is not spent filling out FAS or other systems that could be automatically populated? Could the administrative burden be better allocated to provide marginal improvements in the time of our leadership? Rather than being reactionary to "fire de jour", it would be much easier to pull from a pre-established plan for a crisis, than make up a response tied up in the moment. Could departmental workload to be better managed, thus providing more time for scholastic activities? How could we better engage with federal agencies to provide our faculty with enhanced chances of knowing and shaping federal solicitations? Could we create spaces (like a university club) where collaborative discussions among the faculty could take place while also reinforcing a culture of improvement through marginal gains?

These are some big questions that could have significant consequences on the future of the University. In considering these issues over the past few years, I am personally compelled to advocate for a group to cooperatively work on seeking and implementing these small changes that could have big results. Moreover, this team could develop strategies to instill the idea of continuous improvement across the University.

It has been an honor to serve the Board.

In one final note, it has been both an honor and a pleasure to work with each member of the Board of Trustees. Your dedication and passion for the University is incredible. I am hoping that we can continue the relationships formed to seek a better Clemson in the years forward.