

When the executive committee took office last spring we were very aware that this year would be critical if we were to establish a positive and constructive relationship with a new administration. It would be important if we were to stop the hemorrhaging of senior faculty; if we were to retain our best junior faculty, and if we were to recruit new faculty to replace the losses incurred over time. It would be critical if the university was to grow in a positive direction. It would be critical if we were to recover a sense of community – one of the great assets of this university, fostered over many years.

Last May the new President took residence in the Dome. It quickly became evident to the committee that while she was sympathetic to our concerns and our recent history, she was also clearly focused on the future rather than the past. She would hear those concerns and respond when she could – but it was also clear that she did not want to dwell on them.

As it unfolded our strategy for this year, a strategy in which you played a great role, had four main elements.

The first was to seek common ground with our new administration as quickly as possible – what values could we agree on? This proved to be relatively easy because the President has been very clear about her values and many of her early actions underscored that common ground could be established between the new administration and faculty.

Once we determined what critical values we shared, it became important to identify what opportunities for immediate action we could develop with the president in order to quickly establish a positive working relationship and a record of successful collaboration. How could we use what we had learned during the past five years of working through a difficult history of governance to advise the president well without seeming to be living in the past? In the opening days of the administration we worked closely with the president on a list of immediate actions that would communicate that faculty senate and administration were working collaboratively.

The second part of our strategy was a natural one – we needed to rebuild our own damaged faculty institutions – these included many aspects of the faculty handbook; some clarification of the constitution; immediate concerns regarding faculty welfare issues and particularly concerns regarding tenure, promotion and pre-tenure review.

The third element of our activity was to work with key members of the evolving administration to address institutional concerns that were immediate – the need to put together a search for a new Provost; the need to hire new Deans; the possibility of recovering the library and the graduate studies as deanships. In this the President proved sensitive and wise in her appointments, beginning with Interim Provost Middlebrooks and many others that followed. These appointments of faculty leaders widely respected by the university community sent a clear message that the President wanted to move forward – but she understood the importance of establishing trust.

The fourth element of our actions was to work closely with our faculty colleagues on the gulf coast, and particularly the Gulf Coast Faculty Council, to address issues of common concern. As we worked with our coast colleagues, I have been struck by the continuing difficulties of academic life on the coast even though things have improved greatly in the time since Katrina. And I have been humbled and made proud at the passion and endurance of those who remain on the coast faculty – an endurance that I am not sure I would possess under the adversity they have, and continue, to face. I believe that the future of USM as an institution is only as strong as the relationship between our campuses. That relationship means we must learn how to be a common university community even as we learn how to manage the very real fact that we exist in two different communities in South Mississippi. Our different communities shape our local aspirations, even as we may partner in our regional and national aspirations. It is important that as we work to create one university that we accept and allow each campus a degree of latitude in developing its own distinct identity that draws from its immediate environment. This will not be easy – but I believe it is critical to our institutional future.

These broad themes have informed much of the work we have done this year. I look forward to hearing our new president outline next year's goals.

We are here because of a long line of excellent faculty senate leadership. I believe that to have been the case in many years before my own participation in the senate under leaders like the late Art Kaul and the late Jesse Palmer; but I can specifically cite the contributions of Presidents Myron Henry, Bill Powell, and David Beckett, and their executive committees in their impact on our recent history. All three are faculty leaders to whom I personally am greatly indebted as examples of how important it is to elect the people with the right skills to match the times.

Our executive leaders for next year are ideally suited for their time. I have had the privilege to see Steve Oshrin in action – he is a calm, thoughtful, incredibly dedicated man who understands institutions and hierarchies; he knows how to research and build a case on facts and data; and he is committed to the university and the welfare of the faculty.

Stan Hauer has been a leader for many years in the university as an administrator and active member of the senior faculty on numerous committees; a gadfly; a man of wit, charm, and erudition whose care for detail and understanding that there are right ways to do things and wrong way to do things will serve the senate well. His moral compass is unerring.

I want to thank the executive committee for allowing me to use my strengths, and for quietly filling in my weaknesses as a leader with your support and your actions. I am keenly aware that there were numerous times when I dropped the ball – and you quietly picked it up and made things work. Thank you.

I want to give a special thanks to our colleague Amy Young, who has given more than any human being ought to give and at great cost personally and professionally in the last

five long years. Amy has often provided the conscience for our discussions and actions, and has always insisted that the loftiest ideas or the gaudiest actions are meaningless if the welfare of people are not at the core of what we do.

Finally I want to thank my fellow senators – you are spokespeople for those you represent. You are the gatekeepers for effective university governance in partnership with enlightened administrators. You are so many friends on so many committees across the campus . . . who are serving the university in ways visible and invisible. A list of thanks would be far too long but I want to especially recognize David Beckett for his leadership of the Handbook Committee; Cheryl Goggin for taking on the difficult and unfinished task of managing our elections; Cathie Price for our unfinished work on faculty awards; and Ray Scurfield of the Gulf Coast Faculty Council for his generous sharing of his time, his wisdom, and his trust.

Thanks to all of you for your service on behalf of your colleagues. It is invaluable – and while future senates may be less dramatic than in the recent past, the work of the senate will never be unimportant in making our university function well.

Thank you.

Remarks On Bobby Middlebrooks

Many on campus were elated when the President appointed Dr. Bobby Middlebrooks as Interim Provost. Bobby was and is one of us, a man whose life has been devoted to teaching students and to his research. Further, he is a man whose discipline enables him to understand the complexities of systems and the seeming chaos of the miracle of life – and how that chaos can, with time, patience, and rigor, become knowledge. He is plain spoken; knows his strengths; is not afraid to say what needs to be said; and maintains a healthy skepticism toward ideology or fixed ideas, tempered by a unique sense of humor. In short – the right person in the right position at the right time.

The Senate would like to recognize Interim Provost Bobby Middlebrooks for his distinguished service of over thirty years as faculty member, researcher, administrator and leader, and for this year of critical service on behalf of the university. So much could have gone wrong. That so much has gone right is not an accident to those of us who had front row seats, and Bobby is certainly the major factor other than the President, in helping to set a strong course in our progress to the future.

I personally want to thank Bobby from the heart for his work this year. At every turn I felt as though the Interim Provost and faculty were partners on so many projects. Even those projects on which we may have differed in detail, we did not differ in approaching the issues as problems to be solved by consultation and discussion leading to action.

Bobby, you set an example for all of us in all of the areas of faculty excellence: in teaching, in research, in service, and we wish to celebrate that. I am pleased that you return to the faculty and look forward to your continued contributions to our community.

President Stephen Judd
June 6, 2008