



State University of New York
College of Environmental Science and Forestry

College Wide Governance Meeting

February 10, 2016
Wednesday
12:45PM – 2:00 PM
Gateway Building A&B

AGENDA

- 1. Opening Remarks/Minutes/Announcements (Donaghy)**
- 2. Action Items**
 - a. Resolution “Bill of Particulars Regarding the Leadership of President Wheeler” (Castello, Kieber, View)**

Old Business

New Business

**Next College-Wide Meeting:
March 30, 2016 at 12:45 PM in Gateway A&B**

John D. Castello, David J. Kieber, and John E. View

Two years have passed since Dr. Wheeler was appointed as president of ESF. Since that time, his ability to lead ESF has been called into question on many fronts as detailed in this Bill of Particulars.

Failed Strategic Plan

From the outset of his presidency, Dr. Wheeler has failed to significantly engage the ESF faculty, professional staff, alumni, and students. He called for a new strategic plan with a shared vision and plan to propel us into the future as the go-to University for Environmental Science. Town hall meetings were convened, discussion groups were held with the President, written input was solicited, and transparency was echoed repeatedly by the President. However, with no vetting by the Faculty or staff, Dr. Wheeler and the Executive Committee developed four big questions on which to base the new strategic plan. Despite the lack of support for these questions, the campus fully engaged in the process. Four committees were formed to gather information and make reports. After many months of hard work by faculty, administrators, professional staff and students the reports were completed and submitted to the administration. The first draft of the Strategic Plan was distributed to the campus community in May, 2015. The May draft formed the centerpiece of the strategic plan discussion at the summer retreat of the cabinet with the president. That document was then modified by Dr. Wheeler, Dr. Luzadis and Chief of Staff Lichtenstein at a private meeting held at the AEC in early September, 2015. The second draft of the Strategic Plan that they produced was vetted in mid-September 2015 and found unacceptable by the faculty, students, and professional staff, as evidenced by a plethora of comments made at two town hall meetings held on campus. The main criticism was that most of the work done by the committees was discarded and the new Strategic Plan didn't fully acknowledge ESF's history, strengths, or the faculty and staff' vision for moving forward. The strategic plan also ignored our Charter by the State of New York, was devoid of the physical sciences, too narrowly focused, too generic, without a plan of action, and ignored much of the positive work currently being done at ESF to the point where many people saw no role for themselves in the plan.

Consequently, after more than a year and half of hard work by many faculty, staff, and students, the second draft of the Strategic Plan was scrapped and a College-wide committee was formed with the charge to generate a new strategic plan. This collective waste of time happened in large part because of the President's isolationist style, poor interpersonal skills and the inability to lead or take advice from key College constituencies.

Failure to Raise Funding on Behalf of the College

President Wheeler has not raised substantial external funding for the College, a significant aspect of his position description. At the same time he has jeopardized funding for existing programs, such as the Undergraduate Honors Program, by soliciting donations from the current donors to that program to support other projects. Fundraising is a primary duty for any academic president, but for ESF the need is urgent given the College's ongoing fiscal constraints.

Fiscal Mismanagement of Limited Financial Resources

Soon after his arrival at ESF, Dr. Wheeler stated that we were in a financial crisis and needed to create new revenue streams to take us out of this situation. Yet his excessive spending of State and College Foundation funds indicate poor fiscal responsibility. At a recent Academic Governance meeting we were told that ESF may experience a shortfall of approximately \$1.5 million dollars in our budget this year. However, approximately 33% of the estimated shortfall of \$1.5 million is due to new administrative salary costs that are a direct result of Dr. Wheeler's actions. Dr. Wheeler is paid approximately \$90,000 more than his predecessor. The former provost is still on the payroll at \$188,000. The interim provost received an \$86,000 salary increase upon her promotion, and the Chief of Staff, a new position created by the President, was hired over vacant faculty lines and paid an annual salary of \$128,000. Those amounts add up to \$492,000. When one adds his monthly Time Warner bill of \$284 on average the College pays for his home, the total amount is nearly \$500,000.

The chief executive of any college must travel to various events to promote the institution to a broad audience and communicate its needs. Yet, President Wheeler's expenditures are excessive given the fiscal shortfall the college faces. Use of State and College Foundation funds to pay for spousal travel is questionable perhaps even unethical; as are staying at boutique, ~\$500/night hotels when other College employees are required to stay within State per diem spending; spending ~\$2,000 to fly to a scientific meeting in Europe.

Problematic Relationship with ESF Board of Trustees

A conflict of interest exists between the President and Chair of the ESF Board of Trustees that has precipitated the resignation of one Board member. The Chair is a major shareholder of 3GiCNYIP, a company that opposes the siting of the proposed inland port of Syracuse in Jamesville, and is trying to locate the inland Port of Syracuse

in Manlius on land that 3GiCNYIP owns. President Wheeler, as ESF President, and a member of the CNY Economic Development Council can influence the siting decision. This situation creates a conflict of interest between the Chair of the ESF Board and Dr. Wheeler.

Other Examples of Poor leadership

As discussed above, two important examples of Dr. Wheeler's lack of leadership include the failure of his Strategic Plan, and his irresponsible spending, without regard for ESF's financial constraints, both of which represent a lack of leadership by example. Other examples illustrating his poor leadership include:

- Appointment of the current Interim Provost; Although the President informed most department heads in advance that he was making this specific appointment, most heads/chair expressed serious concerns about his choice, but he proceeded nevertheless.
- Hiring of a Chief of Staff (a new administrative position) while leaving key faculty and staff lines vacant. There also was no search process and the individual was hand-picked at the advice of the Chair of the ESF Board of Trustees. The lack of a search process does not mesh with the President's stated goals of enhancing biodiversity at the college as discussed with the students in a recent town hall meeting on biodiversity with the Baobab Society and the college community.
- The College's Physical Plant was down 14 custodial and trade positions when President Wheeler arrived in 2014. Since then, the Physical Plant has lost an additional six positions for a total of 20. Likewise numerous faculty positions and IT vacancies have been unfilled as part of Dr. Wheeler's hiring freeze. Yet, during this time administrative positions not only have been met, but have increased.
- Naming of a Roosevelt Biomimicry Center in Newcomb NY without input from the faculty including the Director of the Roosevelt Wild Life Station or the AEC staff.
- Since early summer 2015 the President has suggested that ESF should consider renaming the ESF Graduate Program, the Roosevelt Graduate School or something similar. Since that time, the Director of the SUNY ESF Roosevelt Wild Life Station and Chair of the Department of Environmental Biology have in writing and verbally urged the President to not use the Roosevelt name for this purpose but instead consider using it to name a Roosevelt Center for Conservation Science or similar name to encompass all of the teaching, research, and outreach activities related to conservation that is being done at ESF (not just EFB) and to provide the umbrella for what is already a very impressive faculty and student body working in this arena. Although the Roosevelt Foundation has given permission to use the Roosevelt name at ESF, they have not restricted the purpose of the name. They have also not given ESF any money to use the name,

regardless of purpose. Recently the President has asked for a recommendation from the ESF Graduate Council regarding his idea to use this name for ESF's Graduate School in this narrower sense, and one that doesn't seem like as strong a fit, given what the Roosevelt name stands for, which is the field of conservation. Using this name for a Center for Conservation would likely lead to more external funding than using it for the Graduate School.

- President Wheeler claims to value faculty, staff, and student input; however, it is rarely used when provided. Two examples:
 - A detailed Chemistry Faculty report was presented to the President in January 2015 outlining how the Chemistry Department could contribute to the future of ESF was ignored.
 - Suggestions by the Executive Committee of Academic Governance to improve on a draft of the President's visioning document were ignored.
- Superficial connection to the graduate and undergraduate students at ESF, as evidenced by student comments at a September town hall meeting that they do not know him since he seldom engages them on campus.
- Angering, disenfranchising, and alienating many faculty, staff, alumni, the College Foundation, and some members of the BOT through unilateral decision making and poor choices that further the President's agenda rather than promoting ESF's shared goals and vision.
- Dragged the College Foundation into wasting \$150,000 to defend itself with regard to environmental clean-up of the Masten House at the AEC. This could have been avoided by communicating directly with the College Foundation rather than over reacting to unsubstantiated claims.
- Creating a climate of fear on campus in terms of retaliation for speaking out against his agenda.
- Suppression of academic freedom by dictating what memberships a faculty member can and cannot hold, in addition to restricting their ability to apply for outside research grants.
- Portraying the campus as fearful of change when the very nature of ESF is about scholarship and research that leads to change.
- Embarrassing ESF at several public events: failure to participate at a forum to solicit donations from Honeywell; failure to engage alumni at a recent SAF meeting; inability to respond to an alumnus's question at recent EPA regional director forum, prompting the alumnus to publicly state he will no longer make financial contributions to the college.
- Ignoring repeated calls by some faculty for additional research space.

The above examples indicate that Dr. Wheeler does not work with his faculty, department chairs or professional staff in an effective and collegial manner that has the

best interest of all or the mission of the college in mind. The direction that Dr. Wheeler wishes to take ESF as evidenced by his failed version of the Strategic Plan and endorsement of a Biomimicry Center (as two examples) is not one that is embraced by the Faculty, Department Chairs, professional staff, and alumni at ESF. Because of the President's continued poor judgment and leadership several alumni have verbally stated that they will reduce their financial support to the college. One alum stated that he will withhold a nearly 1million dollar donation to ESF as long as Dr. Wheeler is the President of ESF.

Given this leadership void and lack of trust in President Wheeler, his interim provost and the Chief of Staff, the campus governance body requested and was granted permission by the SUNY Chancellor to bring in an outside firm to determine if the dysfunctionality in campus leadership at ESF could be fixed. This firm conducted initial interviews on campus and a long report that summarized the depth of the leadership problem was issued. This report was not made available to the campus and was not allowed to go public. Instead, a short one-half page, generic report was released to the campus community. Funding for the mediation process was discontinued by the SUNY Chancellor such that the process has broken down.

Conclusion

We believe that President Wheeler has not effectively led ESF, is not able to effectively lead ESF, nor does it seem that he has the ability to do what is necessary to correct this situation. Since arriving at ESF in January 2014, he has been detached from students, staff, and faculty. He simply doesn't seem interested in us, or the well being of the college, instead focusing on trying to build his own stature in academia. He does not listen nor does he seek out advice from his faculty, department chairs or professional staff in crucial matters, and he continues to make decisions in a vacuum.

Failure of university presidents to successfully lead academic institutions has a small number of general causes acting alone or in combination. Some of these causes have been grouped by Trachtenberg, et al.¹ as:

- Ethical lapses
- Dysfunctional dynamics with boards of trustees
- Poor interpersonal skills
- Inability to lead key constituencies

President Wheeler's problematic leadership tenure at ESF since January 2014 displays characteristics of all of the documented causalities mentioned above. The costs of failed Academic Presidencies can be substantial and often cannot be

recovered. Some examples are: erosion of public understanding and support for the institution, representation of bad investments by donors who supported the institution, dollar costs can be reflected in legal fees, severance pay, costs associated with the past and a new search, etc., depressed faculty, staff, and student morale, uncertainty about the institution's future by students, parents, board members, alumni, and donors may impact enrollment, retention, fundraising, and institutional loyalty. Dr. Wheeler's poor leadership causes us concern for the future of our college

President Wheeler's inability to lead ESF after two years, compels us to voice our lack of confidence in his leadership. We therefore request Academic Governance to call for a vote of no confidence in the leadership of President Wheeler.

J.D. Castello

Professor and Associate Chair of EFB

David J. Kieber

Professor and Associate Chair of Chemistry

John E. View

Director of Educational Opportunity Program

¹Trachtenberg, S.J., et al. 2013. Failed presidencies. The Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore.