

Speech to Academic Governance

October 18, 2016

President Quentin Wheeler

I know we are going through a confusing time, but I am very confident in the future. Nevertheless, I have some serious remarks to make. My experience at ESF convinces me that the vast majority of our community is professional, ethical, and fair. I am thus astounded by the unprofessional activity I have seen surrounding this effort for a vote of no confidence and the nearly two years of obstruction that led up to it.

For instance, seriously inaccurate and misleading information has been spread around campus, including by at least one chair, regarding the circumstances of Vice President Bob French's departure. I am extremely dismayed at this and I am at a disadvantage correcting the record because, as a personnel-related matter, there is little that I can say. What I can say with **absolute certainty** is that this chair knows very little about the relevant facts, not only about why the departure occurred, but also, the reasons behind how it occurred.

I endorse a collaborative leadership model that engages members of my executive cabinet in vigorous debate. Everyone has input. Every critical and alternative idea is welcomed. But, once the group reaches a consensus, the role of every member of the group is to implement, support, and advance the decisions that have been made. I can say that, categorically, every member of my executive cabinet has been encouraged and given many opportunities to demonstrate and earn the group's trust.

As I'm sure you know, a number of department chairs have made clear their disagreement with the direction in which I am leading the college. I have chaired three departments in my life, two at Cornell and one in London. In each case it was understood that I had two fundamental roles. First was to provide leadership and administrative oversight for my department. Second, and equally important, was to be part of the senior leadership of the institution as a whole, including the support and implementation of decisions made by my superiors. As chair, I also enjoyed special access and the ability to influence those decisions by bringing forth alternative ideas and suggestions to improve them. The chairs who signed the email to campus Friday have sought to undermine the directions I am moving the college while failing to offer constructive ideas or even engage in constructive dialog. It is easy to criticize, undermine, and tear down. It is much harder to be a leader, to develop effective ideas, and to build constructively.

We have reached a watershed moment in the history of the college. As exemplified in a list of accomplishments I distributed this morning, and available here, there is much evidence that we are on the right path to restore our financial foundations and to modernize ESF in ways that will make us more visible, competitive, and effective as a leader in the 21st century. It is in your hands to determine whether we, together, have the vision and courage to reinvent ESF for the new century or whether you want to retreat to the false security of the past. ESF may have seemed stable, but since 2008 state aid has been reduced by 20% or \$5 million annually. This change in support from the state destabilized our budget and had I not taken decisive measures we would have been unable to meet payroll by 2015. The world has changed and will continue to change, with or without us. We will take the best of the present with us into the future, but going back means an almost certain glide path to mediocrity, inadequate funding, and irrelevance.

I have been accused of not understanding or appreciating the history of the college. That is simply false. The great history of the college was a major factor attracting me to ESF. My hobby is woodworking in the 18th century style. I have restored two 19th century historic houses. And my career as a taxonomist has been grounded in scholarship that routinely involves mastering literature dating from 1758 and reconstructing evolutionary history. I love history. I value history. I honor history. History gives ESF credibility as a leader in chemistry, biology, engineering, forestry, environmental science, design, management, and sustainability. To build on that credibility, however, requires us to adapt to the challenges and circumstances of the 21st century.

Before you act on our future, ask yourself a few questions:

Do you want ESF to retreat to regional recognition and funding so limited that you must accept support and facilities that are at best good-enough?

Or do you, like me, want to see ESF achieve its full potential, to seek recognition and financial support on a national stage, and to settle for nothing short of national and international excellence?

Do you want the old-boy network conspiring in the shadows, spreading misinformation, and perpetuating a system that has historically excluded women and minorities and in which petty personal prejudices are acted on rather than respectful, professional conduct?

Or do you want a meritocracy, a diverse campus that welcomes everyone who shares our ethical values, our scientific passion, and a relentless commitment to create a better future?

How some chairs have treated Dr. Luzadis in her role as interim provost is beyond unprofessional; it is nothing short of shameful. If this is a standard that you as a community find acceptable, I want no part of it. From what I have learned of you, I suspect that you find this conduct as repugnant as I do. I believe that you are decent, that you want ESF to succeed, and that you do not believe anyone should be discriminated against because of their race, or gender, or personal grudges.

I have been fortunate to spend most of my career in world-class institutions. The behavior I am seeing by a group of chairs and some faculty is not befitting a leading institution. Everyone understands that the reputation of the institution is the lifeblood of attracting the best students and faculty, attracting diverse sources of revenue, and of having a major impact. The value of the institution is prized and enjoyed by every individual who, in turn, protects and enhances it, rather than damaging it as you are now invited to do.

The saboteurs at work over the past year or more have made progress much slower than it could have been by undermining my efforts and withholding their own. While the progress we have made is impressive, consider how much more could have been accomplished were everyone supporting the college's efforts and contributing constructive ideas, rather than undermining them. ESF belongs to us all: faculty, students, staff, and alumni. I have confidence in you, and your love of ESF, and I will respect the future that **you** want.

I came here because I believe ESF is uniquely positioned to be a national leader and contributor to science, the environment, and a sustainable future — things that have been lifelong passions for me. I have never settled for good enough in my career and I would never do that to such a grand institution as ESF. It deserves better than the actions of those seeking to hold it back. I will settle for nothing short of excellence. The changes we must make will be a great and exciting journey for ESF, but we must all be willing to put the success of ESF and our students first and to work together.

The fact is this: regardless of what people say about other colleges that have gone through this, a vote of no confidence will do damage to the reputation of ESF. It only compounds the stresses and challenges we currently face and unnecessarily slows progress — and it has no particular outcome. And a Vote of No confidence does nothing to permanently close the budget gap, strengthen our partnerships, or

attract new sources of revenue. It hurts us all. It is already hurting us as colleagues and friends and is driving us apart at a time when we need to come together.

I will continue to do the business of the College and to implement the vision and goals that were the basis of the presidential search and those articulated and approved by campus in the Vision 2020 bridging document. As anyone who works closely with me knows, I do not hold grudges, I am open to all points of view, and I am singularly focused on one thing: the success of ESF. I am everyone's president, I do not and will not play favorites, and I will continue to act with integrity and in what I truly believe to be the best interest of ESF in all cases.

I welcome constructive ideas from any and everyone. However, I ask for two things. I ask for whoever is serving as chair to do her or his job. Bring good ideas forward. Offer constructive advice. Share with me your faculty and student success stories so that I can trumpet them to the world. Trust that my administration is working for you, that we exist to create the campus on which you can pursue your individual interests and do your best in teaching, research, and scholarship. Know that a rising tide lifts all boats and that new ideas implemented to attract additional funds benefit everyone.

It is noteworthy that the group calling for a vote of no confidence has offered no alternative plan for closing the budget gap or advancing the College. Destruction without a design for the future is not a viable plan. I have shared just some of the evidence this morning of the progress we are making and I will continue to make such progress. It will go faster and more quickly, and be tailored to meet your individual needs, if you work with me. I intend to see ESF financially secure and a national leader in the environmental sciences and sustainability, however we together ultimately define them.

I challenge each and every one of you to engage in the exciting work of shaping ESF for success. It is hard work, but it is fun and deeply rewarding. I defend your right to do what you wish with a vote of no confidence, but ask yourself what you will achieve by adding one more obstacle in our path to the future. The world has changed. Your President has changed. The need for a successful ESF and a sustainable future have not. The choice is yours. As for me, I am going back to work building a bright future for the College. I hope you will join me. Thank you.