

A Timeline of Events Leading to a Vote of No Confidence

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I have served as ESF's Governance Executive Chair since 2010 and have been a member of the Governance Executive Committee since 2007. The relationships between the administration and Faculty Governance (now Academic Governance) throughout those years have been very cordial and collaborative and generally the campus community seemed happy with the ESF administration and the track the College was on. While there were some heated issues over tenure and promotion, and some other decisions, under the previous administration, the community weathered the differences and it was never suggested that the administration had undermined their confidence in the leadership. Most felt the administration knew and valued who they were and that the institution was moving in a positive direction.

In January of 2014, President Wheeler took over as President, replacing Cornelius Murphy, who had served as ESF President for thirteen years, 2000-2013. To ease the transition, Academic Governance prepared a detailed briefing book, invited the President to speak on several occasions, hosted Cambridge style lunches and several receptions to encourage and facilitate introductions.

In September of 2014, President Wheeler announced serious budgetary problems that required a different operating model than what we'd employed in the past. This announcement followed a mid-summer announcement of a hiring "chill", with no plans to allow faculty hires, professional staff, CSEA staff hires, and/or replacements except in exigent cases. Using this budget crisis as a launching point, the campus was thrust into a truncated visioning/strategic planning process. The President indicated that the current way of approaching funding and hiring was not tenable and was looking for new ideas to focus development campaigns.

In January 2015 the first rumblings of worry and dissatisfaction started to appear. Faculty and Professional Staff alike began to bring concerns about the current President and his seeming lack of knowledge and understanding of the primary mission and values of the College. Additionally there was a degree of frustration about the process being used to do strategic planning. Previous drafts of the strategic plan and the visioning questions being used to frame them were being called into question with respect to validity and the top down generation of the questions and ideas. At the time though, the number of people bringing me their concerns were sporadic and individual. I listened and filed the comments but did not feel the matter had critical mass requiring Academic Governance to take action.

In March, committees were convened to work on strategic planning and to create input for the next draft due at the beginning of May. Just before Spring Break the first flashpoint occurred. Friday afternoon before break the President announced that a College Chief of Staff had been hired. Not only was this a new administrative position but there was no formal search or input from anyone on campus. While the administration has stated that it values diversity, it made no attempt to use this new, and prominent, internal and external position to help remedy the campuses historic lack of diversity. It would have taken little effort to at least canvas the community for viable candidates. The Academic Governance Executive Committee was surprised, especially that a hire was made within the administrative ranks when the

general sense from Academic Council (the Provosts advisory council made up of departmental chairs, the Academic Governance Executive Chair, and Associate/Assistant Provosts of research and academics) was that we were in more need of faculty and not administrators. The number of people asking and inquiring about a vote of no confidence, having leveled off for a few months, resurged slightly but again it remained below the threshold for action.

In May, a draft of the visioning/strategic planning document (<http://www.esf.edu/strategicplan/missionvision.htm>) was produced from the committee work undertaken in March and this proved to be a second flashpoint. Many of the committee members were dismayed that their work was not accurately or at all represented in the draft. As a member of the undergraduate committee it was very frustrating, as we had an entire day of data gathering dedicated to it and so had lots of fresh ideas and vetted material that was collected. The message from administration was visioning committee reports would be included in the next draft and that the current document was just the start. Overall, there was an increased sense that the process was greatly off track and that without the traditional starting analysis of strengths, weakness, opportunities and threats (SWOT), there was no recognition of what the College already does well, a feeling that not every department and every program was represented, and a lack of understanding of the fundamental mission of the College.

June brought the third flashpoint, the change in Bruce Bongarten's position from Provost to a senior advisor (wherein he would still receive his full Provost salary until 2016) and the appointment of Interim Provost Luzadis. While the campus leadership (Academic Governance and Academic Council) understands that removing a Provost and appointing interim positions at the administrative level is under the purview of the President, according to the SUNY Board of Trustees, it should be done in consultation with the faculty. While the President met with the Academic Governance leader and the Department Chairs, those "consulted" felt the decision was already made and they were simply being asked to support his decision. Additionally, the number of people consulted were limited in number and there was no attempt made to garner campus-wide buy-in for the appointment. Finally, in the initial appointment conversations and announcement of the change, no mention was made of moving to a national search for another Provost. In fact, it was made clear to some that the interim position was intended to be a trial period for the appointee and should Dr. Luzadis do a good job, then she would be confirmed without a search. The primary explanation for not doing a National Search was the financial crisis.

Academic Governance was able to negotiate a national search that would commence once the strategic planning process was completed. A joint statement was issued in June that clarified the appointment as well as the plans for moving forward with a national search. Some were appeased, others were unsatisfied, but at the very least it generated a substantial amount of good will.

During the summer of 2015, the President, Interim Provost, Chief of Staff, and Academic Governance Leaders began a series of biweekly meetings. These meetings served as an opportunity for us to help mentor the President, to assist him with communication and to reinforce to him that he needed to find a way to gather the support and good will of the department chairs. With no deans at ESF, department chairs have a lot of power to influence the attitudes and cooperativity of their departments and both myself as Executive Chair and my AG senior officers were concerned about department chairs expressing dissatisfaction,

thus we emphasized at almost every meeting, that the President needed to get the chairs back on board.

At several biweekly meetings the composition of a strategic planning committee and the release of the next strategic plan were discussed. The administration offered five positions for Academic Governance to populate on the next iteration of the Strategic Planning Committee. It was agreed that to best represent constituents who would be effected by the strategic plan that there would be three faculty members and two professional staff members and that an election would be held at the beginning of the semester.

The release of the next strategic plan was targeted for mid-August and it was suggested that before it was widely released, the original committees that had contributed the majority of the work should review the draft. The suggestion was made so that the draft would not generate the same concerns and dissatisfaction associated with the May draft. The administration agreed, but unfortunately, the timeline became too compressed.

With the return of faculty to campus and the commencement of the fall semester, as Academic Governance Executive Chair, I found myself besieged by a steady flow of faculty and staff relaying their lack of confidence in the President's ability to lead the campus and to get us out of the financial issues we were facing. I would estimate that at least 3 – 4 people a day would spend an hour or more discussing this topic with me. Still, I felt that this was running under my threshold for action, although I could not ignore the intensity of the discussions, and I did bring it up at the biweekly meetings with the President, Interim Provost, and Chief of Staff.

The fourth flashpoint occurred on Monday, September 14th with the release of the 9/15 strategic plan draft. It was first released to Academic Council, then to the original visioning committees on Tuesday the 15th, with a working meeting planned on Wednesday the 16th, for the committees to get together and generate a response document. On Thursday the 17th, President Wheeler hosted a Strategic Plan Town Hall, not focused completely on the draft, but there was significant discussion of the draft document. Much of the discussion revolved around the top down nature of the original visioning questions that were used, the lack of SWOT, the direction of the draft away from our current strengths and the inability of many faculty members to see themselves reflected in the document. Additionally, many of the committees felt that their materials were not used, that their work was largely ignored, thrown out, or simply lost. The response to the draft was incredibly negative and the people present were outspoken and very emotional.

It was at this point, I realized I could no longer ignore the people visiting my office, which had picked up to a crisis level after the town hall meeting. Therefore on Friday September 18th, I canceled the regularly scheduled Academic Governance College-wide Meeting and held an open forum on 9/23. The Vice President's and Chief of Staff met with me the day before the meeting and we decided it would be best to hold this meeting free of the administration.

Despite my attempt to direct the conversation toward the draft strategic plan, the very first question that was thrown out was "do we have confidence in our President?" The rest of the meeting was captured in our notes and redacted but there were many passionate pleas from faculty about how drastically they felt the Strategic Plan had deviated from the core

mission of the institution. It was clear that a large majority of the campus felt that they were not represented by the plan and some stated that their life's work was rendered unimportant.

It was at this point that I consulted with the AG Executive Cabinet about what could be done and as a group we settled on asking Peter Knuepfer with University Faculty Senate to work through the Visitation procedures to help us understand if the situation was salvageable and to provide recommendations to move forward. Instead we moved to third party consultation and a slightly different process. The report of the consultants echoed what I'd heard throughout the year and I believe it accurately reflects the climate on campus. However, the small sample size and the perceived lack of further information gathering from the entire campus was not well received.

The campus right now is in a holding pattern and in fact the climate appears to be worsening as evidenced by a recent UUP meeting to discuss issues with SU negotiations, but which spiraled into an emotional discussion of upper administration salaries (contrasted with the structural deficit) and general dissatisfaction with administrative leadership. There is official indication now that a bill of particulars is ready to be moved and it is expected that it will come forward under new business on February 10, 2016.