

Comprehensive Presidential Review

A Report presented to

A Committee of the Board of Trustees of

Ohio University

January 23, 2009

Conducted by

Terry MacTaggart

Senior Fellow

Association of Governing Boards

Gouverner, c'est choisir.
Duc de Levis (1812)

Introduction

This report to the Board of Trustees of Ohio University presents my assessment of the leadership exercised by President Rod McDavis since coming to the University in 2004. This kind of evaluation requires comment on the University environment in which the President operates as well as the expectations of the Board of Trustees itself, since both are critical to presidential performance.

Following a summary, this report describes the purpose and the process of the evaluation. It then lists nine recurring themes that surfaced during the course of my interviews. After commenting on the relationships between presidential effectiveness and popularity, it recommends that the President, the Board and the academic community work together to address the serious financial challenges facing the state and this important university.

Summary

The essence of the current Ohio University drama is that President McDavis was hired by the institution's governing body to bring about change to an academic community that proved itself highly resistant to change. The intersection between this energetic new President and the plan for that change called Vision Ohio with an academic community that had been largely self-governing was nearly guaranteed to result in tensions. This drama has played out mainly at the Athens campus. The regional campuses have been less involved, with one regional campus faculty member confessing to being "mystified" by the conflict. It is true at Ohio University, as at other institutions where faculty express lack of confidence in their president, that personalities, special interests and agendas, and words misinterpreted contributed to the negative vote.

However, the underlying cause, I believe, was the introduction of a change oriented strategic planning process to an environment famously resistant to change.

In spite of these tensions, President McDavis is effectively pursuing a positive strategic agenda that promises to make this very fine University stronger still.

The discontent among a significant number of faculty members in Athens prompts two questions:

- Can a president who is unpopular in some quarters still be an effective leader?
- What should the President, the Board of Trustees and the academic community do now to work together to sustain this excellent university in the face of the most serious economic setbacks in recent memory?

These questions will be addressed later in this report.

Purposes of the Review

The Ohio University Board of Trustees's Policy for Annual and Comprehensive Presidential Performance Reviews outlines these purposes for the review:

- To solicit the informed perceptions of leaders of major internal and external stakeholder groups, as well as those of the president and the board;
- To involve one or more external advisors in the review process;
- To enable the president and the board to decide whether they have a basis for an extended commitment to one another; and
- To promote the success, progress and best interests of Ohio University and its mission.

The Board's policy also requires that a board review committee be established prior to the expiration of the president's contract, that the president submit a comprehensive self-assessment covering the years under review, and that the review committee present a substantive report to the Board and the president in executive session at the conclusion of the review. This comprehensive review follows these guidelines.

It should be noted that the policy states that while the review committee be established prior to the expiration of the president's contract, in my reading it does not require that the review itself be completed before a renewal of the contract. In fact, the Board renewed President McDavis' contract before this review began. As a consequence, in conversations with the many participants in this review, I said that this review was not a *summative* one that would bear on his contract renewal, but a *formative* one intended to help shape his presidency in the future. The recommendations for joint action at the end of this report grow out of this forward-looking approach.

Interview Process

From November 5 through the 12, 2008 I discussed the President's performance, the University environment, and the impact of trustee actions with approximately 85 persons individually, in small groups, face to face and over the phone. An interview schedule is available from the President's Office. With this large number of conversants and relatively short time, inevitably some interviews ended sooner than the interviewees and I might have liked. Still, I believe a consistent set of themes emerged around the President's leadership style and reactions to it.

Typical interviews followed these steps: I thanked my visitors for their time, promised that I would not link their comments and their names, noted the formative character of the conversation, and then sought their views. Often I would ask interviewees to help me understand how a President widely viewed as likeable, honest, experienced and a good communicator could at the same time acquire no confidence votes twice from sizeable numbers of faculty and students. During the course of the conversations, I asked some participants to identify the President's strengths as well as areas where he might improve. I also sought recommendations for action by the President and the Board to address campus concerns.

In my experience, this open-ended approach elicits the broadest range of candid responses, and avoids the problem of restricting answers to highly specific questions. Having said that, I periodically checked to ensure that, in aggregate, I received responses on key dimensions of presidential leadership: championing the academic enterprise; operational and strategic planning; sound fiscal management; positive relationships with faculty, staff and students; positive relationships with graduates, donors and supporters; political skill in working with the governor, legislators, and opinion leaders; and collaboration with fellow academic leaders in the state, country and internationally.

Recurring Themes

Several themes emerged in my many conversations. The most repeated are worth noting as they help explain the organizational dynamics of bringing change to an institution where change is stoutly resisted.

- *Personal appreciation.* There is immense personal liking for President McDavis both on the part of those who view him as the long overdue leader at Ohio University as well as many of his critics. Nearly all I spoke with noted his genuine appreciation of the University, his candor, a self-effacing dedication to hard work, interpersonal communication skills, and, well, pure likeability. Many were perplexed that such a fundamentally good person should have stirred up the opposition registered in the no confidence votes.
- *External praise.* Nearly all of the *external* stakeholders were very positive regarding his leadership abilities and accomplishments. They cited his credibility with his fellow university presidents who elected him as chair of their council, with the Chancellor who himself is leading a change agenda, with the Governor who is described as especially appreciative. Many of those from outside the University see the conflicts as a consequence of an academic community largely left to govern itself prior to this President's arrival.
- *Mixed internal views.* Reviews are more mixed from *internal* stakeholders—faculty, staff and students. Something like the law of thirds applies here—about a third of those I spoke with offered unqualified support for the President's leadership, a third provided a dispassionate, balanced appraisal, and the remainder were critical, a few extremely so.
- *Flashpoints.* Several faculty and staff—whatever their attitude toward the President's performance—mentioned certain flashpoints that served to convert latent discontent into no confidence votes and negative statements. The recent pay raise ignites the brightest spark. Why couldn't the Board have raised his pay by the same percentages as they have pledged to improve faculty compensation, several asked. Other commonly mentioned flashpoints included the addition of highly paid senior administrators, chronic

deficits in the athletics budget, and the perception that the athletics budget and Vision Ohio were “off the table” when it comes to budget cuts that other units endured.

- *“I work for the Board.”* Although the President does not recall making this statement in public or private at any time during his presidency, it has become part of the lore for many faculty members. In fact, university presidents report directly to boards of trustees or in university systems to an executive who in turn “works for the board.” Although the statement is apocryphal, several faculty members repeated it as evidence that the President did not appreciate his responsibility to also champion the academic enterprise or to play his role in educating laid trustees on academic priorities and values.
- *Ambiguous interpretations of shared governance.* There is little shared understanding of shared governance at Ohio University. Many of the faculty seem to feel that, consistent with the medieval idea of the university, they represent the core decision-making group at the institution. While few enshrine the faculty senate as their authoritative voice, at the same time they are not willing to yield great decision making power to the president, much less to the Board. Most Board members, by contrast, subscribe to a more hierarchical, (many faculty would say “corporate,”) orientation in which they are the ultimate authority responsible for the fiscal and strategic directions of the University.
- *Campus leadership.* Whenever a campus president reduces his or her presence on campus in order to make the case for the university with external audiences such as donors and political leaders, the danger arises of thinning lines of communication with the academic community. The plan to have the executive vice president and provost represent the president to the campus community has not worked effectively. Many faculty and staff members, and students, emphasized that as important as external relationships are, it is essential that the president maintain a strong presence with faculty, staff and students.
- *Life in the bubble.* A surprising number of people used the image of a “bubble” to characterize the Athens campus and the small town it dominates. They suggested that Ohio University was more insulated from external trends and changing realities compared with other campuses, especially those in large cities. One articulate, long time resident described the complex culture of the campus as part 1960s liberal, part rural Appalachian, part classic academic and part party school. He went on to say that this mix contributed to a University that highly prized faculty independence in the face of administrative efforts to set direction.
- *Vision Ohio: An Academic Plan for Ohio University.* Rod McDavis began his presidency with an unequivocal mandate from the Board to develop a clearer sense of direction for the University to be embodied in a strategic plan—a plan eventually labeled Vision Ohio. This mandate, standard practice for new presidents at many universities across the country, seems to have been a new experience for this academic community. The process of strategic planning included contributions from university constituencies, especially the faculty. The resulting plan, while not a radical departure from the values noted in earlier mission and goal statements, appears never to have enjoyed broad support. Several faculty members indicated that the plan attempted to convert the University into a research institution. They found this at odds with their perception of the University as the locus of excellence in undergraduate education, with a few selected and credible graduate programs. In spite of what was intended to be an inclusive process, many felt that the plan did not represent their academic priorities and values.

Recognizing these perceptions is important to any leadership agenda because they represent the cultural and political reality of the campus. Acknowledging their power to support or constrain presidential initiatives will be critical to communicating the positive agenda called for in the recommendations section of this report.

Leadership and Popularity

To be sure, President McDavis enjoys strong support from most external stakeholders, and from many internal to the academic community. It is also true that a number of faculty and some student are unhappy with the president's performance. Unconfirmed estimates are that about 25% of the faculty and 12% of the students voted a lack of confidence. But a look at his record of accomplishments suggests that criticism has not kept the President from exercising leadership.

What follows are important examples of accomplishments achieved by the President directly, or staff under his direction:

- Ohio University now has a complete, comprehensive and credible strategic plan that guides University policy and strategy.
- The University has identified a list of 10 aspirational peer institutions and is using appropriate indicators to measure progress in joining those peers. This evidence-based approach is a best practice for institutions that truly expect to achieve higher levels of excellence.
- Work is underway to strengthen the quality of undergraduate education, a special strength of Ohio University.
- Thanks to the work of the executive vice president and provost, the deans and many faculty, the already impressive retention rate from first to second year has risen from 78.5% to 80%.
- Over half of the Athens students are engaged in “learning communities”—another proven best practice for enhancing the quality of education, increasing student engagement and improving retention.
- Responses to crises—a well-publicized plagiarism case in one College and an information system security breach—were dealt with quickly and effectively.
- A reputation-building campaign measurably increased awareness of the University, improved its reputation for academic excellence, and diminished the image of the University as a party school.
- Since 2004, the number of students receiving nationally competitive awards has risen from 37 to 75.
- A comprehensive strategy to reduce student high risk drinking has cut the number of reported offenses by more than half, and garnered national recognition for effectiveness.
- The President has sustained and strengthened relationships with donors. The University received the two largest gifts in its history in 2006. Academic programs have been the beneficiaries of the President's very active fund raising efforts.
- A senior executive team of well-qualified and able administrators is now in place.
- The Urban Scholars Program and the Appalachian Scholars Program—both initiated and supported financially by the President and his wife--are helping to make the campus more diverse.
- The President has championed a five-year commitment to raise faculty salaries to the next higher quartile. One point two million dollars of supplemental increases have been allocated to faculty salaries each year in 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 for this purpose.

- The University has engaged in numerous initiatives designed to improve the quality of life in the region it serves.

One of the challenges facing a leader at an excellent institution like Ohio University is achieving improvements when the base is already high. In some ways, turning around a highly distressed school is easier than strengthening one that is fundamentally very sound. Yet this list of accomplishments, along with the comparative metrics, shows real progress in moving an already fine university toward a higher level of excellence. They support my view that President McDavis is an extremely able and effective leader who is pursuing the right objectives for Ohio University.

The Economic Crisis and the Future of Ohio University

The world wide economic crisis threatens to be especially devastating to business activity, employment, state revenues and allocations to colleges and universities in a manufacturing state like Ohio. By one estimate, over 1,000 Ohio firms supply components to the American automobile industry. Ohio's Governor has made strenuous efforts to shield higher education from the worst effects of the recession, but the continuing decline in economic activity no longer makes this level of support possible.

The universities most likely to emerge from the recession in the strongest position are those which pursue three related initiatives:

- Identify the core institutional strengths—a combination of academic programs, services to students, commitments to alumni and the larger community, and attention to the reputation for quality—that need to be preserved and what programs, services and processes can be reduced or eliminated. This strategic approach will serve the university much better in the long run than opportunistic cuts that damage long-term prospects.
- Reconsider the current business model, especially the resources devoted to largely managerial functions, with the goal of dramatically changing the ratio of educational to administrative costs and reducing the numbers of non-teaching positions. Be especially alert to expensive IT and other capital investments that bring major costs without essential benefits.
- The President will need to develop in concert with the campus community and other stakeholders a positive agenda for action to see the University through this perilous time. He will want to engage as the chief spokesperson in a broad, university-wide, on-going communications effort. The President has enjoyed great success in bringing new resources to the University from the donor community. As important as this fund and friend raising activity is, during this crisis the President needs to play a more active and visible role on campus in working with his faculty colleagues to sustain those programs and services that make Ohio University so worth preserving in the first place. Under the President's leadership, this work will require the active support of the Board and serious commitment from faculty and other academic leaders.

Conclusion

President McDavis is achieving some remarkable and measurable changes at the University. These range from a stronger reputation for quality, improvements in already solid student retention figures, increases in diversity, successes with external relations and fund raising, and

attracting a very well qualified senior administrative team. This array of accomplishments is impressive.

Many at the University and in the state of Ohio appreciate these accomplishments, as well as the President's engaging personality, his communications skills, his obvious and profound dedication to leading his alma mater, his commitment to diversity in all forms, and his success at bringing greater external funding to the University. Alumni, donors, system officials, and political leaders offer especially high praise for the changes he has brought about in an environment averse to change.

Yet it must also be said that many at the University and especially among the faculty are critical of his leadership style. This discontent was registered in repeated no confidence votes supported by about a quarter of the faculty and above ten percent of the students. The President enjoys champions among the faculty to be sure. But there are a substantial number of critics as well. This report has identified some of the seeds of this discontent.

Whether supportive of the President's leadership style and change agenda or not, the most important task facing all members of the Ohio University community now is to move beyond these disagreements and focus on working together to sustain excellence in the face of daunting economic challenges.