

Leadership in challenging times presentation, November 20, 2008

Richard R. Johnson, onetime chair, Department of history

I may be an historian by profession, but it's a little disconcerting to be called upon to talk to you as a *part* of history. I'm reminded of that recruiting poster, with that little child looking up and asking: Daddy what did you do in the great war?

But I've risen from my wheelchair and so I'll talk.

I should begin by stressing that I have, and am surely intended by the organizers of this session to have a different perspective on that time from Dean Hegyvary. She was more at the center of command, I stood in a different set of trenches. She can rightly speak more of strategy, I of tactics. Her view is diocesan, mine more parochial.

For although Robert Hutchins of the University of Chicago could once describe his institution as little more than a collection of departments connected by a central heating system, this (if ever true) was no longer true in the 1990's any more than it is true now.

Well-established depts. such as History certainly have body and momentum (and tenure) but they are parts of a larger whole, they also receive their resources and direction from the College and its deans

The chair is a link between different levels of governance in the University, appointed by the Dean, hopefully with his or her department's consent, but also charged with representing that department's needs and interests in carrying through its part in the University's educational mission. This can create conflicts in which I've known a chair to rally his or her unit with cries of how he or she is shielding the unit from the dreadful dean. But in my experience this is inaccurate--and, worse, counterproductive, more than a crime, a blunder. We are all in this crisis together.

So my first piece of advice for an incoming chair in challenging times would be to say—don't assume the administration is out to get you and yours—unless it turns out they are. This caveat reflects that fact that a central fact of the College's response to

the cutbacks of the early 90s was to consider the elimination or consolidation of several programs and departments.

I have in my hand the March 1993 scenario advanced by the then Dean (contemplating the loss of 117 FTE's) and offering cuts all round or the elimination of three complete Arts and Sciences units. The latter was the plan adopted, with the chairs of units not targeted at the time complicit in this plan. As many of you will remember, faculty committees considering such units as Applied Math, Slavic and Communications invested huge amounts of time, enormous amount of alarm and despondency were generated—and the eventual result was some consolidation, some loss of positions—but no abolition of units. I'm not sure that was worth the anguish and I would hope that we don't face or embrace that scenario this time. [then ca. 7% cut]

For the most part, however, I think we were able to keep within the Dean's scenario of what should be protected and advanced, which I put under the heading of Sustaining a mission and allocating resources, what you can do with what you have.

Part of that mission was sustaining the future of the department, namely the younger faculty. We were a rather senior unit, with relatively few untenured faculty, but we worked hard to protect and mentor those that we had—and all seven, save one who left for another position, came through—and are still with us today.

That's work for the chair—and for committees—but I think, in retrospect, that I spent more time sustaining what I deemed to be another important part of that mission, namely the department's strong culture of teaching.

This was partly at the level of grad education where we reshaped the program and grappled with an unprecedented number of applications—so from which we garnered very good students who we were able to place well in the academy (I myself taught, and still teach a mini-course for graduates on how to get a job).

But more importantly, we sought to sustain and expand our undergraduate offerings. And I say we, for part of a chair's task is to make such matters a joint enterprise.

I was fortunate to inherit a departmental culture in which all the senior faculty shared in teaching large, usually lower division lecture courses—this set an example (and eased the burden on junior faculty) So that we all had equal teaching loads, at all ranks, including the chair. And we had a lot of Teaching Awards to live up to.

Revising the curriculum is something that, like hanging, concentrates people's minds wonderfully: so we revised the undergraduate curriculum and strengthened the requirements of the major--with a program of junior seminars for all those beginning the major in addition to the one required at the senior level. We expanded our participation in what was then the evening degree program. We established a minor in history that soon became the most popular minor in the University.

But we also reached across departmental lines both through cross-listed courses and jointly appointed and adjunct faculty—we lent help and sometimes funding to smaller units to teach joint courses with us. We had enough recapture money from the faculty winning fellowships (as McArthurs, Guggenheims, NEHs) to bring in some lecturers and keep our small allotment of TAs to assist in big courses rather than asking them to substitute for faculty in taking on courses of their own.

So I think we earned points with desperate deans, by coming across as good citizens, finding room for more students in our classes with fewer resources.

This would bear fruit.

We were also fortunate in that our teaching on and off campus brought us into continuing contact with the community—as through Alumni Lectures, community lecturing, the Access program, and the Department's Visiting Committee.

This generated good will and generosity—we had more donors during these years than any other UW department with most of aid channeled into student fellowships but also lubricating departmental activities (and funding receptions for Access students).

And all this was helped and celebrated by what I would see as the most important means of sustaining mission, morale, and community in challenging times, namely what I term communicating success—

We put out annual departmental Newsletters, almost weekly memos (then on paper), on departmental business of course but also circulating news of fellowships won, books published, positions received by grad students, teaching awards, news of how our UG program was the most highly ranked in the University, and having colleagues serving (4 at once) as presidents of national historical organizations—I still have an inch thick file, even before going over to email. People, I believe, were able to feel that they were contributing to a joint enterprise, that they were members of a body, that we had a reputation they should live up to.

And all this proved to be positive in riding out the storm and positioning for the future, not an activity very congenial to historians more obsessed with the past. But we did concentrate our minds enough to consult together on a five-year plan, where we wanted to go in terms of filling vacated positions, what fields of study and teaching we wanted to expand or establish.

Eventually we among the few units allocated new resources--faculty positions and TAships--(tho not until '96) so as to cope with greater enrollments.

I don't want to pretend that through all this time we basked in sunlight whilst all around was gloom. We endured continued problems of low salaries and—especially—salary compression. But I think we busied ourselves in fruitful and cooperative ways, with my task as facilitating (and advertising) all that we did as a department

As I said my perspective is parochial and my advice piecemeal and tactical but it believe it contributed to a larger church. We survived.