State of College of Science

10/13/2010

We live in confusing times. It is tempting to use the old Charles Dickens phrase "It is The best of times and the worst of times"

We have just finished an unprecedented growth in faculty in response to Bob Gates's reinvestment plan and his mandate that A&M's enrollment should go from 45,000 to almost 50,000 in order to play our part in providing access to higher education for the ever growing demand in the state of Texas, especially among minorities.

In the past several years our T/TT faculty has grown from 210 to 280, almost exactly 1/3 growth.

This has allowed us to do many wonderful things, just a few examples being:

 1. Make up for losses from the previous 10-15 years.

 2. Replace some very important lost faculty, for example chemistry was able to replace Al Cotton and Ian Scott by Karen Wooley and Tadhg Begley, two remarkable midcareer stars.

 3. We were able to build a first rate astronomy program from almost scratch.

 4. We have hired Nobel Prize winners and National academy members.

 5. We have significantly Increase women and minorities.

 6. Our national visibility has risen significantly. For example in the first new US News rankings of PhD programs, Chemistry and Statistics maintained their very high levels (chemistry 8th public, stat only behind two publics) while our other three departments made significant advances.

Incidentally, the first new NRC rankings in 15 years just came out and I and many other people around the country are trying to digest them.

There are many other wonderful things that have happened. Again just a few

examples:

 1. Since last year's meeting the ILSB and Mitchell Buildings have been dedicated and occupied. Amazing facilities with great things happening in them

 2. Science PIs on several very large grants, for example the $25M KAUST grant led by math and stat with Jim Calvin as PI, an $18M NIH Nanomaterials grant with chemist Karen Wooley as one of two Co-PI's, and after years of trying, A&M has been awarded a $3.5M ADVANCE grant---a collaboration of five colleges to enhance the success of women in Science and Technology fields at all levels with PI Sherry Yennello, Professor of Chemistry and associate dean for faculty affairs in the college of science.

 3. In last year's whitepaper competition, science played a central role in at least 5 of the 8 selected research programs, and our departments will be provided special funds (both base funds and startup funds) to hire 6 or 7 high impact faculty over the next couple of years.

 4. We have many faculty playing national leadership roles in their professions, including being officers or editors, and on and on.

Everywhere I turn I see support and research staff, tenured and tenure track faculty, non tenure track faculty, and graduate assistants doing remarkable things in many cases far beyond the call of duty in order to make all this happen. The college and the university are deeply indebted to all.

But now we face two very large hurdles to our continuing success that we must work together to overcome.

The first of these is the fact that the state of Texas appears to have joined the many other states that are facing huge financial shortfalls.

For Fall of 2010 and 2011, we must take a combined 15% cut in our state funding.

Fortunately, the academic part of the university only had to take 2 of the first 5%, but currently there is no such relief for the next 10%, although the Voluntary Separation Program and the on-going reallocation of $21M should provide some relief.

The other hurdle we face is what appears to be a widespread negative view of higher education in general, and of research in particular. For example our board of regents seems convinced that we should be able to absorb these cuts without adding to the tuition and fee burden placed on the students despite all the ranking and other data that show how efficient we are and what a great value we are. The recent flawed "faculty accountability exercise" based on the Texas Public Policy Foundation's view of how higher education should be changed is an example of what we face. But we are not alone. Everything I read nationally and internationally makes it appear that research universities are under attack everywhere.

So what to do?

First we will do all we can to use the VSP, reallocation, and new ways to deliver instruction to minimize the damage on student instruction.

Unfortunately, it is inevitable that there will be some larger classes, and there will be less individual attention, but we must avoid the further cuts that would happen if we just lower the semester credit hours we deliver.

In terms of the view of higher education, we must all be tireless in getting the word out. I thought President Loftin's Convocation speech was absolutely outstanding. It spoke eloquently of the benefits of a research university, and it was the best description of the special character of the Texas A&M version of the research university (what Bob Gates always calls this "great American Institution") I have heard.

I have asked the communication people in my office and our department heads and associate deans to work together at assembling stories of not just all the wonderful research we are doing (we will continue that of course), but how our students being surrounded by all that we do makes them much better prepared to go out into the world. The recent Wall Street Journal article saying that we ranks second nationally in how attractive our graduates are to recruiters should carry the day, but I am convinced that a series of specific anecdotes about our students will help tremendously.

On a personal note, I would like to thank all of you who took the time to participate in my eight year review as dean. I will do my best over the next four years to help get us through this difficult time.

Thanks for all you do, thanks for all you will do, and thanks for your attention today.