

# SUMMARY OF THE ROUNDTABLE ON CAMPUS MORALE

NOVEMBER 4, 2000

## **PARTICIPANTS:**

Robert Altenkirch, Vice President for Research  
Sylvia Byrd, School of Human Sciences  
David Cole, Provost  
Lou D'Abramo, Department of Wildlife and Fisheries/**Facilitator**  
Walter Diehl, Department of Biological Sciences  
Joe Farris, Director, University Relations  
Brent Funderburk, Head, Department of Art  
Allen Greenwood, Department of Industrial Engineering  
Susan Hall, Library  
Keith Hopkins, Department of Curriculum and Instruction  
Gaddis Hunt, Interim Vice-President for Business Affairs  
Steve Klein, Head, Department of Psychology  
Ted Kohers, Department of Finance and Economics  
Charles Lee, Vice President for Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine  
Pearson Liddell, Department of Marketing, Quantitative Analysis and Business Law  
Rachel McCann, School of Architecture  
John Mylroie, Department of Geosciences  
Mack Portera, President  
Nancy Reichert, Department of Plant and Soil Science  
Janet Rafferty, Department of Sociology, Anthropology and Social Work  
Bob Rogers, Department of Animal and Dairy Sciences  
Roy Ruby, Vice President for Student Affairs  
Paul Thaxton, Department of Poultry Science

This summary of the issues that were discussed at the recent roundtable on campus morale is derived from my notes and my interpretations.

## **LOU D'ABRAMO'S OPENING REMARKS**

On behalf of the Faculty Senate, I welcome all participants today. This roundtable is sponsored by the Robert Holland Faculty Senate and hopefully it will serve as the foundation for many future roundtables designed to promote a frank exchange of ideas and feelings combined with a spirit of cooperation. I thank all of you for your time, interest, and your faith in the power of bringing people together for the good of all. Today there is no agenda and no goals or plans will be established. However, the dialogue will hopefully lead to positive action. I ask that communication with respect be the power that fuels this roundtable.

There will be some ground rules for today and they are as follows:

1. Once we begin there are no ranks, there are no titles, we are all on an equal level. The

- environment should not be fraught with an us versus them mentality.
2. Everyone will be honest, and candid and should not be reluctant to share feelings due to fear of retaliation. An atmosphere of comfort needs to be preserved.
  3. No one who leaves today should feel personally offended by the discussion.
  4. Nothing that is shared in this room today is subject to confidentiality.
  5. As facilitator, I reserve the right to suspend discussion of a particular topic if I believe that we have reached a point of limited returns.
  6. I ask the only one person at a time speak and I will recognize you by a show of your hand. I will try to preserve the sequence of speakers according to the sequence of the showing of hands to be recognized. I ask that no conversations should be occur while a participant has the floor.
  7. No specific endpoints will be developed. Hopefully, today's discussion will be based upon a mutual respect and cooperation whereby understanding and trust can be achieved. These are really the foundation of building and maintaining a strong morale within the campus community.

I view this roundtable that will address campus morale as extremely important. The source and contributors to low morale must be identified. Otherwise without a strong morale among faculty and administration alike, other critical issues on campus cannot be addressed effectively through collaborative efforts of administration and faculty. Roundtables can be the key to a better understanding of one another and can address issues that are critical to the triad mission of Mississippi State University. They provide the forum for what needs to be improved and what needs to be emphasized. Several faculty have already expressed to me their doubt concerning the value and effectiveness of the roundtable concept. Let's prove them wrong. We must work together, learn about our respective feelings and concerns, and move forward, especially during these difficult financial times.

#### **MACK PORTERA'S OPENING REMARKS**

President Portera made some opening remarks and emphasized the need for the discussion to be frank and open and that no faculty participant should have any fear of reprisal for remarks made during the roundtable. He thanked all participants for their effort and commitment. He stated that at the roundtable and outside the roundtable the campus mentality of "us versus them" is not conducive to the cooperative atmosphere that is needed to address issues and effect change where needed.

According to the provisions of the format of the roundtable, there was no agenda. Major items of discussion follow:

#### **GRADE CHANGES**

The first topic of discussion was grade changes. This arose from the allegation that grades are being changed in Allen Hall without the knowledge of the faculty. David Cole asked for names of the students relative to the alleged incident that was described in the comments received from a faculty member. This information was not made available. David Cole stated that no grades can be changed in the Provost's Office unless that is the decision resulting from a formal appeals process that is in place. The changing of grade of a student without the knowledge of the professor at the level of the Dean's Office is a possibility. However, this should not be done if the professor objects or without the knowledge

of the professor. Several professors stated that such action undermines the role of a professor in being in charge of evaluating student performance relative to the requirements of a course and has a detrimental effect on morale. Some faculty indicated a fear of a lawsuit if they held to their belief that a grade should be changed and questioned whether the University would provide the necessary legal protection if such an event were to occur. One faculty member indicated that liability insurance is available for faculty at nominal fees and that Mac Portera should look into this. Faculty need to feel that they will be entirely backed up by the administration. Faculty need to be consulted about all requests for grade changes. Changes should not be made without faculty input.

## **PROMOTION AND TENURE**

A significant amount of time was devoted to apparent inconsistencies relative to Promotion and Tenure policies and decisions. The faculty's morale and trust in the process have been adversely affected. David Cole provided a summary of the procedures used to evaluate applications for promotion and tenure. He stated that the general performances indices as outlined in the Faculty Handbook relative to promotion and tenure have not been modified in any way. David Cole also indicated that, contrary to the rumors around campus, service does count and that he considers it relative to the responsibilities and obligations that go with the appointment of a faculty member. David Cole stated that the questions concerning promotion and tenure are in most cases due to management problems at the mid-level of administration. Some deans and Promotion and Tenure Committees are not giving sufficient scrutiny to the applications and pass them upward to the Provost's office for denial rather than exercising their responsibility to turn down the applications themselves. Mac Portera stated that some administrators too quickly point the finger at the President and Provost as being culpable when in fact, they are protecting themselves and avoiding accountability for the problems that they have created. David Cole must serve as the gatekeeper where the final decision to agree or disagree with the decisions that have been made at the levels of the Department, Committee, and Dean.

The morale of the faculty has also been adversely affected by apparent changes in what constitutes excellent and satisfactory performance in the areas of teaching, reaching, and service. Inconsistencies abound and it was mentioned that faculty must also be accountable in determining just what is expected and also in being involved with the process of writing, clarifying, and amending Promotion and Tenure documents. Some faculty reported that requirements for promotion and tenure within a department have changed from year to year. Promotion and Tenure documents should detail specific indices of evaluating performance so that it is clear to the faculty member, the Promotion and Tenure Committee, the Department Head, the Dean, and the Provost as to what exactly are the requirements. This information is also critical to the judgement of an appeal that is heard by the University Promotion and Tenure leading to a recommendation to the Provost. Communication from the deans downwards with explicit and consistent requirements must be worked on. Faculty must have an input so that no surprises occur relative to expectations. Communication is the key.

## **ADVERSARIAL ATTITUDES OF FACULTY**

Mac Portera stated that one of the major morale problems for the administration is the adversarial attitude of some faculty towards administration. He wants the faculty and administration to work together and that strong effective communication is the essential component. He commented about the number of rumors that arise each day and gave the example of the rumor that he was going to announce his resignation at the last Faculty Senate meeting. Mac Portera wants to strengthen communication between the faculty and administration and suggested that a campus ombudsman may be the key to assisting

faculty who are not receiving the proper response or redress from mid-level administrators. His morale is diminished when he is confronted daily with rumors. Mac Portera also addressed one of the comments included in the packet of talking points that consisted of comments from faculty about the issue of campus morale. He was concerned about his being characterized as aloof and wanted to respond. He stated that he has been dedicated to what he established as his strategic plan when he became President. He acknowledged that a perception of aloofness may originate from his extensive immersion in the financial affairs of the University. He stated that financial problems abounded when he became President and he had to direct his attention to them immediately. Accordingly, other issues have not received the attention that they require.

### **NEW FACULTY POSITIONS**

Faculty indicated that outstanding faculty are being lost due to the paperwork associated with offering a position. By the time that the authorization is approved by a host of signatures so that a position can be offered to someone, he or she has already accepted a position at another university. David Cole stated that he has tried to streamline the process and that the time between request and authorization should be no more than a week. Faculty indicated that in some cases it has taken a month. Again, the loss of potentially outstanding colleagues due to the bureaucratic paperwork was emphasized. The lack of expeditious action seems to reside at the mid-administration level. The issue of overwhelming paperwork was brought forward and discussed.

### **MID-LEVEL ADMINISTRATION ARROGANCE**

This was another issue that was discussed relative to weakening the morale of faculty. The issue of deans and department heads ignoring the stated desires of faculty members was addressed. Decisions concerning the hiring of department heads against the wishes of the faculty were discussed. Faculty indicated that these actions are in violation of the spirit of the University Governance document and should not be tolerated. Faculty participants were adamant about the need to fire mid-level administrators who consistently defy the wishes of the faculty or who have consistently demonstrated incompetence relative to the smooth operation of the Department or School or College. There should be no tolerance for such individuals. They undermine the mission of Mississippi State University and the morale of the faculty. One faculty participant indicated that good faculty members are leaving MSU because they can no longer tolerate the incompetency of mid-level administration. Faculty participants encouraged Mac Portera and David Cole to fire these individuals who are recognized as having a consistently negative effect on the morale of both students and faculty. The morale of the faculty declines as these incompetent administrators are allowed to continue in their positions in spite of the chronic and serious transgressions. Mac Portera and David Cole agreed that they must address this issue.

### **TEACHING RESOURCES**

Several faculty provided their concerns about the quality of classrooms for teaching and how the lack of satisfactory resources for teaching causes a decline in morale. Mac Portera indicated that physical plant was essentially following the recommendations of a special faculty committee concerning classroom renovation for effective teaching. Gaddis Hunt indicated that if faculty are having any problems with the types of teaching resources (blackboards versus whiteboards, chairs, lighting, etc.), then he should be contacted. Concerns will be addressed as soon as possible. Changes, additions, etc. will be made upon appropriate request. If faculty are confronted with problems that affect the quality of

teaching, then they will be remedied.

### **THE SANDERSON CENTER-RESPONDING TO FACULTY NEEDS**

Requested mid-year budget reductions within the Office of Student Affairs led to the proposed reduction in the operation of the Sanderson Center. Initially this action was enacted without the input of the faculty. Faculty indicated that this was another example of not investigating the wishes and needs of the faculty before acting on something that has an impact on faculty. Resolution finally was achieved after faculty representatives were permitted to provide input on a issue that University administrators failed to recognize as important to the needs of faculty. Roy Ruby was complimented for his working with faculty to come to a mutually agreeable solution. This particular issue led to a more common concern about making sure that faculty needs are adequately addressed relative to University resources. One faculty participant stated that before action is taken, all administrators should ask the questions, “Will this affect faculty and how?”, “what do I need to do to ensure that faculty have had sufficient input”? The question of the poor state of health insurance coverage for employees of Mississippi State University was brought up. Mac Portera stated that he has tried to find a way out of the current situation whereby employees of the University could opt to go to another plan away for the collective state employees plan but this is not possible under the current statutes of the state of Mississippi.

### **MISSISSIPPI STATE UNIVERSITY AS A MAJOR RESEARCH INSTITUTION AMONG PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING**

Bob Altenkirch reviewed the progress of Mississippi State University relative to the increase in the number of research proposals and the increase in funded monies. He discussed the success rate of proposals and indicated that we have apparently reached a plateau. Some faculty participants indicated that the increased emphasis on obtaining more and more extramural research funds can have a detrimental effect on faculty morale. Some faculty do not want to take on additional graduate students due to the level of commitment that they want to provide to each student. Other faculty are already working 65 hour work weeks and do not have the time to add additional research commitments. Bob Altenkirch added that the possibility of post doctoral positions would help ease the research workload for a faculty member.

Other issues were discussed but the one prevailing need that was identified was communication. Only through communication will an atmosphere of trust develop. With a high level of trust, respect and a good morale naturally follow. I know that President Portera and the other administrators who attended were intent upon taking action to eliminate those conditions and actions that contribute to low morale. President Portera has recently stated to me that several steps will be taken to improve communication.

I found this roundtable to be an extremely effective vehicle of communication and I hope that such forums will continue in the future.

Respectfully submitted,

Louis R. D’Abramo, Ph.D.  
Vice Chair-Robert Holland Faculty Senate

11/10/00