Provost Tom Sullivan - Remarks

Provost’s Department Chairs/Directors Leadership Program
January 15, 2009
McNamara Alumni Center

Theme: Advancing a Culture of Excellence in a Time of Financial Stress

I welcome you today as department chairs, heads, center directors and associate deans.

Each of you are academic and University leaders by definition. And, now you are asked to lead during especially difficult economic times.

It is essential to keep in mind that although our times are financially challenging, we cannot diminish our intensity of purpose, as a university, as we look to the future. Our investments in great teaching and research must and will continue, as we promote academic excellence at each opportunity at the University.

We clearly are making progress as a University, and that progress is being noticed worldwide. Our faculty, since 2007, have been recognized internationally with: a Nobel Prize, the Wolf Prize, and the International Prize for Biology.

Since we commenced Strategic Planning in 2004, our annual research awards have increased by $150 million to $675 million in 2007, and we have increased faculty by a net increase of 112 (2005-2008).

We have new world-class interdisciplinary programs, including
1) The Institute on the Environment,
2) A new focus on Interdisciplinary Informatics,
3) A unique new system-wide arts, design, and humanities initiative,
4) Record undergraduate applications—at now over 30,000 for this year
5) A new Institute on Translational Neuroscience, and
6) Our best undergraduate student academic profile ever.
To borrow the words of president-elect Barack Obama from his magnificent Grant Park address on election night in Chicago:
"What we've already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."

I'd like to repeat that for each of you as leaders:

"What we've already achieved gives us hope for what we can and must achieve tomorrow."

"Can and must achieve"--I think that strikes just the right note--it's something that is possible and something so important that we must not fail.

So how do we move forward? Over the years we've compiled responses from chairs and faculty to the question:

_What makes for a great departmental chair or director or associate dean?_

Here are just some of the qualities mentioned:

- Be non-cloistered, get out and about, both physically (to other departments or centers or colleges) but intellectually too (who is doing new work here you should know about--what is happening at other universities nationally and internationally? Are there new partners you can enlist in your efforts?

- Learn to listen as attentively, accurately, and as actively as you can. Listening well is a much more complex process than simply hearing what the other says.

- Achieve a balance between being directive and seeking input. Consultation is important, but so is decisiveness.

- Set, in a myriad of ways, the highest of expectations--be constantly alert to the need for this. We all need to raise our aspirations and expectations for all of us as University leaders.
• Deal positively with setback, don't over-react. Perseverance is important!

• Don't be (or appear to be!) rushed. Don't let too many tasks or projects overload and overwhelm your longer term strategic thinking.

• Be relentlessly optimistic--hope matters. It really does. Especially in the tough days.

• Regularly ask others what they need--try to predict, too, what they might need and be prepared.

• Be a great leader, be someone who inspires confidence in others and in the University's future, especially in financially stressful times. Be someone who helps brings people together.

• Be honest, admit mistakes

On this last point, I am reminded of a wonderful quotation from the great jurist Judge Learned Hand: "The spirit of liberty is to be found in the notion that you might be wrong."

So, given that we each make mistakes how can we learn to avoid mistakes by relying on the power of broader and more diverse group thinking? How do we handle--and how do we appear to others to handle--disagreement or dissent? How open minded are we? How intellectually flexible? How nimble? How imaginative?

“Imagination.” That for me is what “leading” universities are all about, places and spaces of both “individual” and “collective imagination.” We all should dream what could be! We can't get there unless we have a healthy and creative imagination. As Einstein said, “Imagination is as important as knowledge.”
It is our University’s responsibility to be great discoverers—to imagine—to take leadership to the next level. We must as a university community commit steadfastly to resolve some of the most pressing and perplexing intellectual and social issues of our time. Each of you is helping us do just that.

To do this we must continue to fully engage our faculty and our students and our staff in multiple ways, encouraging them to contribute wisely and creatively. We must be the leaders of leaders.

I ask you at this especially difficult and challenging time to aim ever higher, to think about ways in which sometimes we can do more with less or do more by reconfiguring the existing way we do things.

Take opportunities now to change, to redirect, to redesign. When under better times, those opportunities might not be available. Now is the time to find even more “efficiencies.”

Your role as leaders includes helping the University to achieve an even deeper culture of “disciplined excellence.”

As “relentlessly optimistic” chairs, center directors, and associate deans, I hope each day we raise the bar of aspirations and expectations, as I noted earlier, to continue the momentum toward making our University one of “consequence” and “exceptionalism.”

Thank you for your leadership and your critical contributions to this great University.

Working together we can continue the enormous progress and momentum this great university has achieved.