

SEALSB Key Note Address  
11/14/2014

Good Afternoon.

Thank you, Nathaniel.

It was probably around 1990 at the SERBLA meeting in Greenville, SC. I had recently left my law partners in Oregon and was a new Assistant Professor of Legal Studies at the University of Georgia. I learned that my new senior colleagues often visited local campuses while attending professional meetings. They dragged me along on this particular trip to Robert Jones University. Peter Shedd, as I quickly came to learn was his habit, engaged several students in conversation about the

university and had plans to next find the student center to make sure that the college had a bowling alley. I don't think it was that he wanted to bowl – a bowling alley was simply a sign that a college devoted appropriate attention to student services. I remember thinking that I had made the best decision of my life – leave the private practice of law and grab the opportunity to work in the company of talented professors focused on understanding what best promotes student learning.

Recalling this old story as I prepared to speak with you today helped me select the topic for today's short digression - about 14 minutes to be exact.

Specifically, what led me to deviate so far from this passion for teaching? What

led me to go over to the dark side and pursue yet another career – a career in higher education administration? What are the rewards and the frustrations?

First let me observe that this was not truly a strategic choice. Following tenure, I formed a fascination with university governance. How do these myriad disciplines and student services coalesce to present a coherent educational environment? Do they ever, in fact, coalesce? How does the university survive and thrive in the face of the constant white noise of internal and external criticism? Are universities capable of responding quickly enough to the warp speed change in the external environment?

This fascination was fueled by the fact that it seemed that I was always chosen to serve on these committees. I was chosen, I suspect, simply because I was an available lawyer. Sound familiar? It had virtually nothing to do with my personal skills or interests. Instead, it was in significant part due to the fact that lawyers are accustomed to meeting deadlines, submitting written analytical reports and actually showing up at designated times and places.

It had even more to do with the fact that we, as lawyers, are intensely trained to identify the many issues arising out of a complex fact situation and painstakingly apply an accepted analytical framework to reach a conclusion about a solution to a murky and complex problem. That is

second nature to all of you. It is, in my opinion, the key attribute of a successful college or university president.

So I found myself immersed in teaching, research and increasingly demanding committee responsibilities. At this point, the call arrived from the University President's office. I immediately searched through my inbox to identify what I had done wrong or simply failed to do. I arrived at the President's Office. "Bob, I would like you to lead the university's reaffirmation of accreditation process." My response. "We're accredited?" I was, in fact, generally aware of AACSB accreditation, but had no knowledge about an institutional accreditation process.

The President went on to tell me that this lack of knowledge of the SACS accreditation process was not a detriment. In fact, he wanted someone unencumbered by pre-conceived notions concerning the process. He wanted someone who could quickly study the process, identify the literally thousands of moving parts, apply a recognized analytical framework and reach some honest conclusions about what was working and what needed to be repaired. He wanted a lawyer.

I was intrigued – yet I was deeply troubled about the impact this would have on the career of a then associate professor of legal studies. This leads me to my second basic point about lawyers in higher education administration. As

you will recall, my first point was that we are good at it by virtue of our training.

The second point is that it is a professionally risky endeavor. Few who go over to the dark side ever return. And it is not an area held in the highest regard by promotion and tenure committees.

Some who do cross over too early remain associate professors for life.

Yet as a wise person told me when I was making this choice, it is an area where a faculty member can make a major impact and from which deep satisfaction can be derived. I took the bait.

This led to a series of increasingly responsible administrative roles at the University of Georgia --- roles that, in many respects, I simply had no business

assuming. It gave me the opportunity to explore virtually every nook and cranny of an institution of higher education and meet hundreds of fascinating people each looking at the university from a unique perspective. It created for me a deep desire to lead a smaller institution – one where I could know the students, staff and faculty personally and strive to have a positive and long lasting impact on the institution.

This journey next led me to leave my role as a tenured, full professor at my beloved University of Georgia at age 62 to serve as the President of a moderate sized but growing access institution in an economically struggling section of rural East Georgia. If you head away from the nearby ocean for about an hour, you will



find East Georgia State College in Swainsboro (which, by the way, used to be called Paris, Georgia). We will have to wait for the film at 11 to learn whether the impact of this personal choice proves to be positive for the college community. However, after almost 3 years, I can report that it has been a deeply rewarding experience for both, my wife, Joyce and me.

The job has proven to be a literally addicting combination of day to day management details and big picture strategic thinking: day to day management of the innumerable moving parts of any institution of higher education, whether big or small – things like residence hall, food, athletics, branch campuses and so many more. Big picture

strategic thinking about surviving and thriving in an environment characterized by changing assumptions about how higher education is financed, how learning takes place and how degrees are earned. The moving parts at an institution like East Georgia are nearly the same as those at a major university. It's just that each part is smaller and there are less mechanics to service the parts.

It is, I think, worth noting that I have learned that the new external environment facing each and every one of our institutions is one that can no longer be met with stoic, passive resistance. It is characterized by dramatically lower levels of state funding as a share of the total budget, absence an any appetite for increasing tuition to fill

the bucket, burgeoning student debt, private for profit players, shockingly higher levels of federal oversight, disruptive technology forces, and demographic shifts which will soon produce a majority minority population seeking education at our institutions. Only the nimble will survive.

Should any of you at any time face a decision about moving into this fascinating realm, I would be more than pleased to talk with you one-on-one. I would first tell you about why you should not take the job. Should you persist; I would share with you the rest of the story.

Here's the Reader's Digest version:

- Its 24/7 and I mean that literally. I worked for more than a decade as a practicing lawyer. I never worked as hard then as I do now.
- Personal space and privacy fall somewhere between non-existent and limited.
- Upon accepting the position, you take full and immediate responsibility for the institution as you find it. Don't even try to protest that your predecessor created the situation you face.
- You must be willing to devote a significant amount of your time to raising private funds.

- It is intensely lonely. Daily, you face issues that you cannot share with others.
- It is highly political. You must understand internal politics and the political climate of your state and region; and you must participate actively in that process.
- It is, for those who are sharing life with a spouse or partner, a two-person job and only one gets a paycheck.

Should you be willing to accept these facts of life, the potential rewards are, in my opinion , well worth considering. A

quick story may serve best to make this point.

As you know well, one of the time-honored traditions of academia is the state of the college address. Just a couple of months ago, I had the chance to deliver my third state of the college address. Frankly, I find it amazing that a group would assemble at any time to hear me expound on the state of anything. What a privilege to be designated as the one who annually calls an academic community together to hear an analysis of the state of a treasured institution of higher education.

On this particular occasion, I was able to begin the morning by introducing the donors who had just made the decision to

fund the largest gift ever to our college. For a large institution a gift nearly \$1,000,000 is a common occurrence. For our college, it has the potential to be transformational.

Immediately following this announcement, I was then able to walk to the auditorium to deliver the state of the college address. I began that address by telling the audience about the successes of a few individual students. I began my state of the college address with this simple story, which captures for me why I do what I do now:

Ben is a recent East Georgia associates degree graduate currently attending the University of Georgia. Ben plans to earn a bachelors degree

in English and pursue graduate school.

I wrote Ben as I prepared my state of the college address and asked Ben, “What is your best memory of EGSC?”

Ben’s response:

“Just one? [At this point, I was getting worried!]

July 18, 2014 – the day I officially left East Georgia.

It was 5 pm on a Friday during summer semester, and everything was quiet. I said goodbye to all of the friends I had made while working in



the Presidential suite, walked through the beautiful rotunda, where I had often spent time reading, laughing with friends, and playing guitar, I passed the learning commons and library where I would go in-between classes to catch up with friends, headed out towards the stairway leading to the Humanities division, where I spent hours upon hours talking with, joking with, and being mentored by the incredible individuals who instilled in me a love for learning and a desire to pursue knowledge and wisdom ---people who were at one time merely teachers, yet I now proudly called friends. That one moment brought back all the amazing memories I had made in my two years at EGSC. And as I made it

to my vehicle and drove away, I remembered the words of A. A. Milne, “How lucky I am to have something that makes saying goodbye so hard.”

Simple yet very important stories like Ben’s are the reason I personally gave up what I believe is one of the best jobs in the world – teaching legal studies at the university level. I hope that there may be one among you who makes a similar choice. It is a job for which your training and experience have prepared you in a unique manner.

Thank you for this opportunity to spend a few minutes together.