

Faculty Council Meeting, January 17, 2020

Opening Comments

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I welcome you to the January meeting of the UNC Faculty Council. We're here to launch our discussions for the new year, which (like all years) will bring us both enduring and unexpected issues to consider; and the new year will bring us new opportunities. And this week we celebrate the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

Much has happened in the world since we last met in December, but the appointment of Kevin Guskiewicz as our permanent chancellor is definitely the most important recent event for our University community. I therefore want to begin this meeting by *congratulating Kevin* on behalf of the faculty and by stressing that this is an appointment for all of us to celebrate.

The appointment of a long-serving UNC faculty member to the chancellor's position is extremely valuable for us, because we are now assured of having a longtime colleague in this key leadership role. We definitely need a leader who understands our community, who shares our values and commitments as teachers and researchers, and who understands how the faculty at a public university serve students and other people across all of North Carolina—and far beyond.

In recent years, we've seen how political leaders and governing boards can swoop on to campuses to appoint chancellors or presidents who have virtually no knowledge of University life or the work that faculty do. Last year in South Carolina, for example, the governor and others decided that the University of South Carolina needed an Army general to bring leadership and order to that campus; and a long-serving Lieutenant General suddenly became the President.

Similarly, at the University of Iowa, state leaders decided to bring in a senior corporate executive whose career gave him outsider views of the meaning of a public research university; and similar patterns of outside leadership appointments have been common at other universities. Generals and Corporate executives have distinctive leadership skills, but they come from cultures that differ from Universities.

We have arrived in a very different situation, however, with a talented researcher, longtime colleague and experienced academic leader in the chancellor's office! As faculty colleagues, we have much to celebrate in Kevin's appointment; and I want to thank him for taking on this very challenging and important role. Thank you Chancellor Guskiewicz.

We know that our newly appointed chancellor has lots of energy and ambitious plans to advance our UNC work and mission. He has strongly affirmed the importance of our service to the state as the "University *for* North Carolina," and he has set out to strengthen our statewide mission through initiatives such as the faculty bus tour and statements in defense of academic freedom. He has also advanced the fundraising Campaign for Carolina and reached out to alumni around the country. And he has already been faced with challenging, disruptive actions by the Board of Governors—especially the misguided BOG settlement for Silent Sam.

But amid the many issues that have attracted Kevin's attention, he has continued to meet with faculty, students, and staff and to develop strategic plans for the future, some of which we'll discuss today. I want especially to emphasize two recently announced initiatives: (1) the Creation

of the “Commission on History, Race, and a Way Forward,” which will be led by our colleagues Jim Leloudis and Pat Parker, and (2) the launch of a new \$5 million “Build our Community Fund.”

Jim and Pat will tell us more about the History Commission later in this meeting, so I’ll simply note that the Commission will develop new historical research and curricular ideas that can contribute to an ethical reckoning with the history of our University from the earliest decades to the recent past. History is empowering, because knowledge of the past can give us insights into the best pathways toward the future.

“The Build Our Community Fund” will help support this initiative, and its purpose is to develop a stronger “welcoming community, where everyone feels emboldened to do their best work” in an “environment of inclusive excellence.” This ambitious goal will require lots of faculty and staff work as well as the \$5 million that the chancellor has now committed.

Much of this plan, including the Commission on History, emerged before the announcement of the BOG’s Silent Sam Settlement in late November; but the BOG’s actions gave a new urgency and significance to these initiatives. As we all know, our campus-wide response to the BOG’s decision to make our University give almost \$2.6 million to the Sons of Confederate Veterans has been far-reaching, angry, thoughtful, and ongoing.

In addition to the Faculty Council’s Condemnation in our Resolution on Dec. 6, more than 30 different departments, academic centers, and other faculty groups have issued strong critical statements. We’ve collected these statements and posted them on the website of the Office of Faculty Governance—where you can find the whole collection in a single pdf document.

I also sent all of these statements to UNC System president Bill Roper and to the Chair of the BOG, Randy Ramsay. I wanted them to see how our University community views this settlement as a violation of our core commitment to the search for accurate knowledge and as an appalling transfer of funds to an organization that defends the historic institutions and legacies of white supremacy in our state. I also asked the President and BOG chair if they would like to respond to these statements, but so far they have not responded.

President Roper has noted, however, that ongoing litigation prevents him from commenting; and we know that various legal challenges are still under court review. I’ve talked with colleagues who understand the law much better than I do, and some think that there may still be court rulings that alter the current settlement or the plans for trustee management. But we can’t know what will happen in the court appeals, and meanwhile we have to find our own way forward.

Some members of the Faculty Executive Committee have described the current problem of faculty morale as a kind of depression that often emerges in abusive relationships. When people feel powerless to alter their situation or when circumstances feel like they can’t be changed, people fall into low morale or into a feeling of helpless depression; and BOG actions have clearly affected faculty morale.

But we have to recognize that our situation is by no means unusual or beyond hope; we are in a very typical historical situation; and this is why we now need history and the humanities to help us move forward. Karl Marx famously wrote in the 1850s that “*People make their own history, but they do not... make it under circumstances they choose, but under already existing*

circumstances... transmitted from the past.” Even those who deeply dislike Marx’s other ideas, may agree that this statement summarizes our own relation to history. This is also the historical reality of 2020, because we must now make our own history, though not under conditions we have chosen for ourselves. We have to find ways to change our history.

So for another perspective on our situation I want finally to note the ideas of the U of Chicago philosopher Martha Nussbaum, who visited our campus about three years ago to discuss her book, *Anger and Forgiveness*. Nussbaum discussed the role of anger in public and private life; and she stressed how anger rightly emerges when a terrible crime is committed or when people face enduring injustices and abuses. The evil or injustice has already taken place, and this fact cannot be changed; no present or future action can make the past action different. But the anger about this past injustice must be expressed and transformed through some kind of future action.

Nussbaum described what she called three kinds of *Anger Action*. The first is simply “payback anger” which seeks revenge; a kind of “eye for an eye, and tooth for a tooth”; this may briefly make people feel better, but revenge does not alter the situation or lead to a different and better future. And it’s not usually possible for people in weaker or more vulnerable positions.

Nussbaum described the second “anger reaction” as “status reduction” actions, which seek to humiliate or punish the offending persons or groups by reducing their social position or freedom: this takes its most typical form in the imprisonment of people who have committed crimes or in other actions such as firing people or trying to get control of their money through legal actions.

The actions of “Payback Anger” or “Status Reduction Anger” may bring some passing satisfaction, but they don’t change the enduring situation or the structures that created and sustained the injustices. At UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, we can’t really reduce the institutional status of the BOG, though many of our statements have tried to assert a kind of BOG “status reduction” by claiming that its leaders do not understand the University’s mission as well as we do.

Nussbaum herself proposed actions that grow out of what she called “Transition Anger,” and she found notable examples of this kind of action in the lifelong social justice campaigns of Nelson Mandela and Martin Luther King, Jr., whom we honor this week.

Like other forms of anger, “Transition Anger” recognizes that evils and injustices have taken place and that anger is fully justified—even though the past can’t be changed. But “transitional anger” turns toward the future, looking for ways to alter the historical situations and structures that fostered the injustices; anger thus *pivots* toward future action. Transitional anger uses honest knowledge about the past as a foundation for transforming the legacies of social injustice.

Like all important philosophical and historical work, Nussbaum’s views provoke debate and disagreements, but I think the concept of “transition anger” may give us a way to define where we stand today as a University Community. We are angry about the injustice of the BOG’s Silent Sam settlement, but this settlement itself is all the more disturbing because it carries forward and rewards a legacy of racist injustices in our state and university.

But how do we use the anger and pain of recent weeks to help us pivot toward the future? How are we building new goals and new structures that will transform the future history of this University? How can we build a stronger community, how can we honestly confront our own institutional history, and how can we implement strategic plans that strengthen our desire to be the “University for North Carolina?”

This is the framework for today’s Faculty Council Meeting: How do we use our expertise and “transitional anger” to carry us forward through transitional and transformational actions? Like basketball players as well as philosophers and historians, we need to have strong ideas and clear strategies for a vibrant *pivot position*.

And I now want to make a simpler pivot by asking Chancellor Guskiewicz to share his evolving ideas about recent and transitional actions; and he’ll join with Bob Blouin to discuss the implementation of the new strategic plan before we come back to the “Commission on History, Race and A Way Forward.”