

Chair of the Faculty Mimi Chapman Faculty Council remarks

January 15, 2021

The hardest element of being chair of the faculty has been figuring out what to say to you when we convene like this. My temptation is to “rally the troops,” find something to say that will inspire and motivate. Of course, I know that would be a fool’s errand in the current situation. My next “go to” is reflection, to give voice to what many of us might be feeling. But after so many months of living with uncertainty and with the reality that almost every time I come before you there is at least one new crisis to add to our list of concerns, the path of reflecting our collective emotional state also seems hollow.

What then to say when the nation’s capital has been ransacked by domestic terrorists? When actions to hold the leaders of that movement, at the highest levels, to account, appear to have stagnated? How to understand a botched vaccine roll out as a new Corona virus variant is poised to be the dominant strain in this country? I so wish I could tell you happy new year and mean it. Of course, we are not the first in human history to wonder if wars would be won, if our families will escape violence, whether attitudes and policies will change, whether plagues will end. It is our turn to live looking through events we thought we stuff of the distant past or futuristic science fiction.

When I came into this position, I was thrown into these crises and I cannot honestly tell you that I had some sort of grand strategy to deal with it. I did not. What happened is that through good fortune, necessity, and what I’ll call an educated intuition, I found others in leadership that were trying to navigate these waters just like I was. Shayna, Reeves, Ryan were among them. And as we’ve gotten to know one another and begun to think together about our campus and challenges we encounter, we are shifting our campus culture to one that recognizes that if someone doesn’t have a voice, no one has voice. That is a slogan I’m sure I have stated and believed for some time. But now I feel it in very different way.

Last night, I was at the monthly meeting of faculty chairs from all of the UNC system campuses. The first topic was to talk about how involved chairs had been in the spring planning. These are always interesting conversations because my experiences are put into perspective when compared with what is happening elsewhere. As we talked, my contribution to the conversation was about how we have been able to be influential with our administrators because the Employee Forum, Student Government, and Faculty Governance have been working together in an unusually close way. This joint meeting, we are holding today, only the second in the history of the University, speaks to that collaborative spirit.

They say that culture eats strategy for breakfast in organizations and I believe that strongly. Good strategy is only meaningful within a healthy inclusive culture. As an institution, I have no illusions that we are where we need and want to be. But the pandemic’s ability to lay bare political division, racism both personal and systemic, and a heightened need for honest, responsive, and transparent communication, is forcing us to be better. I never thought I’d be referencing Arnold Schwarzenegger, but in his viral video that many of you probably saw this week, he spoke about how a sword gets stronger through extremes. As an institution, I believe we are getting stronger even as we, individually and collectively, are so, so tired. I am grateful to Shayna and to Reeves and Ryan for being partners in this journey, to our Chancellor and Provost for their dedication to getting us through this crisis, and to all of you for participating in our gathering today and all of our campus conversations.

Before we begin, please note that we will be taking time for questions in the block on the agenda. We'll have time for questions at the end also. If you are participating by live stream, please put questions in poll everywhere and Shayna and I will bring them into the conversation.

We have a lot to talk about and I'd like to begin with our Chancellor.