Report of the Faculty Senate Special Committee on Administrative Service, December 30th 2004

Introduction

The Faculty Senate Special Committee on Administrative Service was formed in the spring of 2004, at the request of the Faculty Senate Executive Committee. It’s charge was to consider the question of how we at LSU might consistently secure “excellent service and leadership” in administrative performance, at all levels, from department Chairs/Heads up to the University President. Issues to be discussed included (but were not limited to) the methods by which good administrators could be identified (from inside or outside the organization), aspects of successful administrative style, appropriate length of service, commensurate compensation and incentives, and recommendations, or proposals of guiding principles, to assist in the recruitment of administrative leaders.

The committee included a diverse group of faculty: A Professor of Psychology (the Chair), a Professor of Electrical and Computer Engineering, a Professor of Information Systems and Decision Science, a Professor (and Associate Dean) of Music, a Professor of English, a Professor of Pathobiological Sciences in the School of Veterinary Medicine, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy and Religious Studies, and an Assistant Professor of Biological and Agricultural Engineering. There were 3 women and 5 men.

The committee met 3 times, in April, May and September of 2004. Between the last 2 meetings, a majority of the committee had an opportunity to meet with the outgoing Chancellor of LSU, Mark Emmert, and elicit the viewpoint of one of the university’s most successful administrative leaders. Discussions among the committee members at these meetings revealed a diversity of opinion, and led to the decision that the final report should be composed of a Preamble, summarizing common points of view, followed by separate contributions from each individual.

Preamble: What characteristics define a good administrator?

The most frequently mentioned quality for (academic) administrative leadership was the ability to “enable the faculty to do its work.” The talents required to accomplish this goal generally fell into one of 2 categories: Communication / Interpersonal skills, and Management / Fiscal expertise.

Communication / Interpersonal Attributes

The ability to communicate with all constituent groups, students, staff, alumni, community leaders, and other administrators, as well as faculty, in an effort to build consensus, was considered a necessary attribute. Not only must leaders be able to convey their ideas to a broad audience, they also need to know when to be quiet and listen to these other parties. Because of the increased complexity of running a modern university, a good administrator needs to be able to learn from others, to be approachable, to ensure that information moves in both directions and does not consist of one-way ‘broadcasts.’ It is important that faculty feel comfortable informing administrators about what is going on. However, this does not mean that a good administrator must be practiced at making ‘small talk.’ Although useful, it is not crucial for a successful administrator to be socially adept and gregarious. The goal of communication should be transparency, that is, to tell the community what’s going on and why. At the same time, a leader is expected to lead, not to convey every detail, but to be forthright in telling us what we need to know.
With regard to personal attributes, a good administrator must have integrity; they should also be flexible, adaptable to changing scenarios, and comfortable with ambiguity, that is, the lack of closure in dealing with problems. A strong ego and high energy is essential to withstand the constant criticism.

Management / Fiscal Expertise

The days of the ‘occasional’ administrator are gone; these jobs require full-time effort. One problem in finding good administrators is that there is minimal training available. Too often the job responsibilities are not sufficiently described, and those who are interested do not always have natural talent. There needs to be more thought about where our future administrators are coming from and how to recognize such individuals. Prior success as an academic researcher or scholar does not necessarily predict administrative excellence. While some intrinsic interest in the position is desirable, especially since financial incentives might not always be great, the job should not be accepted just for the sake of having power, or for building a personal resume. The individual should be an advocate for, and respect the autonomy of, the unit. They should have a vision of where the unit needs to go, including an appreciation of the relevant peer groups, which would prevent setting goals that are impossible to achieve. One approach would be to put possible candidates into lower level administrative positions, to see if they are capable and interested in these functions. Because it’s not known if someone will be good or not until they have been in the situation, we should initiate short-term ‘trials.’ In any event, we need to plan more for the future by looking more actively for prospective administrative talent.

On the one hand, there is a perception, at LSU, that there is a proliferation of administrators, that the university is ‘top-heavy,’ for example, with a ‘vast matrix’ of ‘Vice-Chancellors,’ who block access to the Provost and become barriers to new ideas, perhaps because they have been out of academia too long and no longer understand the issues. On the other hand, it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince individuals to accept administrative appointments, particularly at the level of department Chair because the job is so onerous; the workload is too great, there is too much useless paperwork (although some of that burden may be imposed from outside the institution) and administrators must still maintain their research program, which is a full-time job in itself. Perhaps this burden could be relieved by sharing such functions, e.g. by adding a ‘business administrator’ or a ‘Vice-Chair.’

Lack of resources is an endemic problem. Too often the upper administration micromanages and imposes reviews and evaluations on the department, then does not have the funds to support the proposed improvements. Even when promises are made, they may not be kept when an administrator leaves, making long-range planning difficult. Upper-level administrators in particular are also business managers, and the Chancellor’s ‘extra-academic’ responsibilities in fund raising, are becoming increasingly important.

Finally, a common theme, more important than any particular style or personality, was that an administrative leader should know the academy and the culture in which they are operating. They need to have a vision of the outcome of their efforts, and to focus on the task of accomplishing the goal of the organization.
The Faculty Senate Executive Committee directed the Faculty Senate Special Committee on Administrative Service to suggest ways to “deal with the issues and problems that surround this subject.” The only administrative positions mentioned in the directive were “chairs/deans/heads.” Our task seemed all-encompassing and multifaceted.

During meetings of the special committee, much of the discussion focused on issues relating to the recent Chancellor search and the pervading attitude that faculty had little influence or even input into that decision. Discussions were generally fruitful and enlightening though they rarely resulted in any concrete decisions or suggestions about how the various processes on campus for administrative selection and retention could be altered, due largely to the myriad and varied practices regarding administrative appointments from unit to unit. It quickly became apparent that some units are perceived as achieving a high level of administrative function while others are perceived as falling short in some manner.

Some people have suggested that where administrative function is deemed successful, perhaps it is the method of administrative selection or term of appointment which influences that success; and where administrative function is found to be unsuccessful, then it is the method that is flawed. This would appear to call for an assessment of the various methods used to appoint and retain administrators and to adopt those methods that lead to successful administration. Such a study, in my opinion, is likely to show that it is the person – the administrator – not the method of appointment, who achieves what is perceived as successful leadership of any entity, not just in academia, but in the corporate/business arena as well.

With that premise in mind, a question arises about the potential for acquiring the skills and abilities that will help one become a successful administrator. Several important skills and abilities are necessary for one to be a successful academic administrator: 1) personal integrity, 2) an ability to develop and articulate a vision for the unit, 3) commitment to the unit or entity to be administered, 4) an ability to communicate effectively at many levels, 5) an ability to gain and maintain mutual respect, 6) organizational skills, including the ability to set priorities, and 7) an ability to lead or manage.

Personal integrity involves a sense of trust both by the administrator in staff and faculty as well as, reversibly by the staff and faculty for the administrator. The administrator must uphold integral values that convey honesty, fair and unbiased judgments, and a respect for the rules and regulations set forth by the institution. Honesty may involve imparting difficult information to members of the unit and such cases require a dose of compassion. Judgments must be made with as much information as possible and upon consideration of many and varied factors relating to the scenario requiring a decision. Respect for the rules may involve questioning those rules when they hamper the progress of the unit.

Vision requires an ability to conceive of attainable short- and long-term goals that will enhance the unit’s strengths. In one meeting, this committee met with then-Chancellor Emmert who stated that one of the most important qualities for a good administrator was the ability to “have a vision of what the outcome” would be. This implies that there is a plan or a goal to which the unit aspires. The administrator must be able to envision a path for the unit based on input from all members of the entity, influenced by knowledge of past successes and failures. Once the vision has been conceived, the administrator must be able to recognize when stated goals are appropriate and when the direction should be changed based on continuing involvement with all aspects of the unit. Even more important, the
administrator must be able to arrive at a consensus vision: one that enhances the entire unit and encompasses and rewards all those who contribute to the unit’s success. Then, the vision must be put into practice, that is, observable action must propel the unit along the envisioned path.

Commitment or loyalty to the unit is important to move the unit forward. This requires a complete understanding of the governed entity, including all facets of its operation. Knowing the inner-workings of the unit and the contributions of each member of the staff and faculty will contribute to the overall understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of the unit, thereby allowing the administrator to come to well-informed decisions about the direction of the unit. Commitment involves a willingness to do whatever it takes to move the unit forward along the path toward the stated goals.

An ability to communicate involves the language, social, and personal skills to both speak effectively and listen objectively to the ideas, concerns, and perspectives of others, including faculty, staff, students, and other administrators, both senior to and junior to the administrator under discussion. In most units in today’s academic environment this also will include members of the public not associated with academia who provide services, funding, grants, materials, etc. Effective communication should be organized, succinct, prompt, and ongoing. Additionally, the administrator must be open and responsive to communication from those mentioned above. Communication should not merely impart ideas or information, but involve discussion of processes, planning, or goals among those affected by related decisions.

Effective administrators should earn the respect of the unit’s members. This remains one of the greatest challenges for many administrators. Administrative tasks are often time-intensive leaving little opportunity for continued academic contribution, but many faculties expect an administrator to be outstanding in his/her field of expertise and to maintain visibility in that field. Finding the time to allow for professional contributions or teaching in their field even at a nominal level is important for administrators to consider. Conversely, the administrator should exhibit respect for the members of the unit. Having an understanding of the duties and accomplishments of each member of the unit will contribute to the administrator’s ability to show respect for the contributions of each member.

In most administrative offices the level of activity is extremely high requiring attention to a variety of important issues, concerns, and events. An ability to effectively organize and prioritize tasks is crucial. Setting priorities for accomplishing the multiple tasks and goals at hand is crucial. Effective time management skills are essential; and equally important is the willingness to work hard to successfully complete the tasks at hand. This often involves identification of individuals best suited to accomplish particular tasks, thereby allowing the administrator to delegate responsibilities appropriately, and implies the willingness to trust that those tasks will be effectively completed. Overseeing their effective completion is a delicate balance between micromanaging and allowing others to succeed or fail. When they fail, the administrator must still see the tasks to a successful end, which will involve assessing the product and, at times, reassigning the task.

Finally, the administrator should demonstrate an ability to lead the unit toward the envisioned goals to a successful end. This may involve providing the impetus for all entities within the unit to work toward the consensus vision and inspiring all to contribute meaningfully to this goal. It will likely also involve accepting and successfully dealing with those whose vision is different from the consensus vision or completely lacking. Leading with the skills highlighted above, demonstrating an ability to make difficult but well-informed decisions, and then carrying out those decisions are among the most important requirements for successful administration. Compassion, integrity, communication, and respect for members of the unit will contribute to the administrator’s ability to effectively work toward the unit’s goals, one hopes, with the cooperation and assistance of all the entities involved.
How current administrators may maintain or improve effectiveness by staying in touch

Suggestions from Steven Hall

As mentioned, an administrative leader should know the academy and have a vision while focusing on supporting the university in that mission. In many ways, from the faculty perspective, the best administrator is one who quietly removes barriers to productivity without getting in the way of creativity in the university environment. This implies that administrators are well aware of current practice, barriers to success and have some sense of vision of the future possibilities for the university. Of course, when selecting potential administrators, seeking such knowledge and skills is sensible. However, this part of the document is intended not only as an attempt to describe some of the characteristics to look for in a search for an administrator, but also as a series of suggestions for ways in which current or incoming administrators may be more effective. In order to do this, focus should be maintained on the three areas of scholarly endeavor: teaching, research and service. Current administrators should try to maintain their work in each of these areas.

For example, occasional teaching activities can help the administrator stay in touch with the challenges teaching faculty and staff deal with, and keep abreast of what current students need and want. Suggested ways to maintain knowledge of current teaching issues include:

a) Teaching courses occasionally (at least every other year);
b) Sitting on graduate committees;
c) Staying in touch with the department(s) as well as with other academic institutions;
d) Staying in touch with employers, graduate and professional schools;
e) Taking time to talk with students at graduate and undergraduate levels;
f) Keeping in touch with faculty and staff needs from a teaching perspective.

Staying at least nominally involved in research, can also help administrators recognize some of the difficulties that research faculty, staff and students deal with. In this way, the best administrators can appreciate current challenges, attempt to minimize unnecessary roadblocks and allow faculty to maintain and improve their excellence in research. Research activities in which administrators should at least occasionally participate include:

a) Submitting grant proposals, usually with other faculty and staff;
b) Recruiting, hiring and maintaining excellent faculty, staff and students;
c) Advising graduate students;
d) Writing and editing peer reviewed works in their academic field;
e) Staying in touch with other universities
f) Maintaining contact with research oriented private and public entities such as agriculture, business, the environment, government, industry and research.

Occasional service, in addition, or related to administrative duties, that extend beyond our university can help maintain the perspective of faculty and students, as well as client organizations or individuals. This should include service

a) On regional, national and international organizations, including:
   a. Review boards,
   b. Editorial boards,
   c. Professional organizations;
   as well as
b) Staying in touch with both providers and users of resources for and from the university.
c) Remembering that administrators, like faculty, are here to serve others.
In each of these traditional areas, some activity, however modest, should be maintained both to model this work, but perhaps more importantly, to share in the challenges that the administrator may be in a better position to improve. At the same time, continuing to develop the skills to do this work includes some skills that may overlap but may not completely generalize to traditional faculty work, including:

a. Speaking
b. Communicating (written, spoken, etc.)
c. Listening
d. Researching, teaching
e. Management.

This work can be done by actually taking courses, but also by simply being aware and being encouraged to continue to learn and practice these skills that are even more important as an administrator.

Finally, while maintaining and enhancing this awareness of needs and challenges at the university, and among the university’s client groups such as students, industry, and, for land grants, the people and the environment of the region and world, staying in touch with relevant providers of services, resources such as legislators, government, NGO, industrial, alumni and others is essential to be able to provide the resources needed for faculty, staff and students to do an excellent job in their professions. Implied here is significant lobbying on behalf of the university with the knowledge gleaned from teaching, research and service; and the reduction of barriers to success such as excessive control, micromanagement, lack of critical resources and other factors that can lead to low morale, limited skills and lack of productivity.

The long and the short is that many administrators (and many professors) have not had training (formal or informal) in some of these fields. Ironically, while most have researched, taught, and served academically, this area can falter in times of busy administrative duties. However, staying in touch with these aspects with some action in each field at least once every two years is essential to maintaining a good functional awareness of current practice in the university. At the same time, finding ways to delegate to the many capable individuals on campus and continue to find ways to increase resources while reducing wasted effort is essential to a successful administrator and ultimately to a great university.
Most of my career has been spent in the laboratory, where I did not have much reason to consider the administrative performance of my Chair or Dean, let alone the Provost or Chancellor. As long as my research and teaching were satisfactory, and I made some service contribution to the profession and my department, I took it for granted that I didn’t have to worry about university-wide policies and procedures. That function was the responsibility of my (first) Chair, who once stated that the main purpose of his job was to “protect” the faculty, especially the new faculty, from too many bureaucratic burdens.

Unfortunately, that initial experience was not to be the norm. When I accepted a new position in a different institution, I was not so lucky. For several years I endured an oppressive, dysfunctional environment in which it was difficult to thrive. During that time I began to appreciate the significance of administrative quality, and the toxic effects of administrative incompetence. It seemed to me that the damage produced by “bad” administration could be devastating to a department or unit. The long-term consequences, not just in terms of morale, but also economically, when faculty cannot be recruited or retained because of inept leadership, are incalculable. Seeing such developments, I became much more interested in the nature of bureaucratic authority, why it seems to be so difficult to find good leadership, and why poor administrators appear to flourish.

I have read a few books on the subject, but not extensively. For the most part, they describe the nature of administrative functions, the skills, talents and knowledge that would be recommended for a competent administrator. I’ve talked to a few individuals who have gained reputations as examples of “good” administrators. But, so far, I haven’t found the answer to the problem of how to define, and most important, get rid of, incompetent administrators. Many faculty members argue for policies that allow regular evaluations of their department, college and other university administrators. Much discussion involves the type of questions that should be asked on such surveys, and how to ensure confidentiality so that negative reviews don’t elicit retribution. What remain obscure, however, are the criteria for the decision to remove an administrator. Outside of obvious financial malfeasance, criminal behavior, or other immoral activity, what constitutes the threshold for a change of leadership – outside of the administrator him/herself making the decision to leave because of a better situation, retirement or illness? What if some faculty members don’t respond to the evaluation request? Does that mean they are satisfied or disaffected? What if some respondents submit a negative evaluation? How many “bad reviews” does it take to trigger a re-assessment of the administrator’s performance? At this point, I haven’t found a satisfactory solution to this problem, except to appreciate how important it is that “good” administrators be appointed in the first place.

Which raises the question of how that should be done. In discussing the topic of administrative performance with colleagues, especially while I was serving in the Faculty Senate, the one complaint I heard the most concerned the process by which administrators were chosen. Too often, (most commonly when hiring “upper” administrators) the procedure was considered to be a sham. Faculty members came to believe that there was never any intention of mounting an authentic search, and that the outcome was a foregone conclusion, in that the administration hired the person they had in mind all along. In many, but not all, cases, this turned out to be the “internal” candidate, rather than one of the applicants from outside the institution.

I don’t know how often this criticism is justified. But the complaint reminds me of a principle, called “Clinical Equipoise,” (often attributed to a 1987 article by the biomedical ethicist, Benjamin Freedman) that has been proposed as a guide to the ethical conduct of clinical trials in medicine.
According to this principle, in order for a clinical trial to be considered ethical, there must be genuine uncertainty about the merits of the respective treatments under investigation. A “collective state of doubt” must exist among the experts, as to the best therapeutic option. Only in such situations is it ethical to justify the random assignment of patients to each of the experimental conditions. Only when the investigator has no “treatment preference” is it moral to conduct the trial. If there is reason to believe that one of the treatments is better than the others, it is considered unethical to enroll patients in the less effective arm of the protocol.

It has been argued that, this ideal is not really sustainable during the course of a typical clinical trial, because “collective doubt waxes and wanes” as new information becomes available and experts modify their opinions. Nevertheless, every effort should be made to adhere to this standard, because it is unethical to waste the resources of the human beings who agree to participate. In other words, it is immoral to squander the time and energy of individuals who enroll in a study if there is reason to believe that one outcome is a foregone conclusion.

Although the consequences of a clinical trial may be more medically significant than the decision of an administrative search committee, the moral point is similar. If there is no real uncertainty about the outcome of the process, it is unethical to waste the time of those individuals who have supposedly been recruited to evaluate the choices and make the recommendations. Even if this situation does not occur very often, the long-term consequences in regard to loss of faith and lack of trust between faculty and administration, can make even a good administrators’ tenure much more difficult than it might otherwise have been. More frequent examples of this lack of “equipoise,” occur when faculty committees are offered the opportunity to develop policy proposals, as examples of “shared governance,” with the implicit expectation of administrative implementation. Too often, faculty members conclude that their engagement in such policy development is wasted because administrators do not appear to make a good faith effort to follow the recommended procedures.

As in clinical situations, it may be unrealistic to believe that all administrative decisions can be made without some degree of bias. But, also like clinical situations, serious consideration should be given to the perspective of individuals who have sacrificed their time and effort for the greater good. If that contribution is wasted it will not matter how good the new administrator, or policy, may be. The potential will never be realized and the fallout, in distrust and resentment, may jeopardize even the most well-intentioned program. As in other aspects of life, it may be better not to ask the question if you are not prepared to accept the answer.

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Celebrities in the Theater of Paperwork: Improving Administrative Performance through the Reform of Administrative Style

Prepared as a Chapter in a Report by the Faculty Senate Committee on Administrative Service by

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ABSTRACT: This chapter analyzes the cultural, historical, psychological, and aesthetic foundations of administrative behavior and administrative abuses in the typical modern state university. Section I presents a vignette from a typical administrative project as a window on the more general distortions of university administrative culture. Section II offers an additional reflection on the psychological origins of bad administrative style. Section III offers a brief but revealing analysis of the historical origins of contemporary LSU administrative behavior. Section IV considers efforts by university administrations to claim a proprietary relation to power through mystification of its sources and the development of a cult of celebrity. Section V examines the devastating effects of a particular administrative addiction to secrecy, especially to a paradoxical “grandiose” secrecy. Section VI reviews the complicity of faculty administrative bodies in administrative ambition and calls for extensive reforms in the Faculty Senate and similar bodies. Section VII exposes the monopolization of communications by university administrative oligarchies and points up its inconsistency with the development of a productive faculty. Section VIII inventories the causes and probabilities of corruption within university administrations. Section IX concludes the report with a call for the systematic intensification of variation, dissent, and reform.

I: An Opening Act

The scene: a late summer morning and the opening of the autumn semester at a great university. Inside a spaceship shaped arena, at a “convocation” intended to introduce students to the intellectual life by discussing the social significance of Macdonald Quarter Pounders, the dais is commanded by a diminutive pastel-clad damsel who almost disappears behind the podium. At once mildly parental and administratively parental, this pale but powerful figure sends a mixed message of feminine modesty, feminist enthusiasm, male ambition, and masculinist domination.
Overhead, a gigantic video screen like those featured in actor Richard Burton’s cinema version of George Orwell’s *1984* flashes an alternating mix of ovations for university policies and startling factoids about the digestion of biggie-sized french fries. In the galleries and loges, annoyed but obedient professors quietly crack wry jokes. Meanwhile, a representative of “student government” who also conveniently insures a politically pleasing ethnic mix on an otherwise all-white stage attempts to rally students into a kind of collegiate-patriotic frenzy concerning “student governance,” even as the pastel-clad mistress-of-ceremonies scolds independently-minded students for wandering out of the arena before queuing up into color-coded battalions, per the original, more picturesque “recessional” plan. Alas, those plans had already been disrupted by a cold-grey-appareled dais-sitter whom one might call “the High Chieftain.” Some thirty minutes earlier, and despite frequent participation in focus groups about getting students committed to intellectual life, this “High Chieftain” had languidly strolled out of the hall in direct view of thousands of onlookers. During his early egress, the High Chieftain was accompanied by an identically appareled female aide-de-camp carrying a blood-red patent-leather purse whose demeanor and apparel sent at best a mixed message about women’s advancement and about the alleged importance of the “convocation.”

Is the foregoing (a) one of the long-lost scenes from a pageant-film directed by Leni Riefenstahl, (b) a study for a dark comedy about the intellectual Mafia, or (c) a real-life scene at a great university?

II: More on the Drama, or, A Playbill

Those who answered “c” to the preceding question would be correct, although those who chose other answers might well deserve what pedagogues call “partial credit.” Although the moral, economic, philosophical, pedagogical, and sociological implications of such a scene are easy enough to ascertain, what is less obvious but probably more important is the question of style. A scene like the foregoing, admittedly, has a certain style, but, then, so does the giant piano-shaped swimming pool on the legendary Liberace’s Las Vegas estate; “style” may not be admirable, recommendable, or otherwise good. Like the Liberace pool, the foregoing vignette displays a style that might be described as *administrative abstraction*, the origin of which is the isolation of its practitioners in a closed, oligarchic society of privileged bureaucrats who have forgotten about or miscalculated its reception among streetwise audience members. The chief characteristics of this style are a kind of heartless vanity verging on callous absurdity and a resistance to that most dangerous of literary forms, the *question*. Such scenes and all that they imply are by no means limited to any one great university, but their replication in institutions nationwide exposes their status as part of a large and very unoriginal—even anti-intellectual—administrative mono-culture.

III: A Historical Moment: The Administrative Culture Didn’t Create Itself

In order to consider how any great university might go about improving its stock of administrative personnel, a modicum of knowledge about the origins of administrative culture is required, lest, as the old saying goes, “those who don’t know the past find themselves doomed to
repeat it.” The impression given by the glossy flyers and slick television advertisements that emerge from the ministry of propaganda at any great university try to convince the public (and donors) that the activities of university “leadership” are relentlessly new and innovative. A review of the origins of Louisiana administrative style in the Bourbon dynasty, surely one of the most autocratic ever to achieve hegemony in Europe if not the world, suggests that a love of innovation is unlikely in any local administrative regime, whether that of the state university or that of the pothole repair department. Louisiana’s old regime, of course, fell upon hard times following the American Civil War, when a new layer of administrative culture—sometimes unfavorably designated “carpetbagger” culture—was superimposed over the extant dynastic system. The conflict created by the “war between the states” remains visible today on a campus strewn with plaques commemorating the achievements of various Union generals and in a faculty eager to recruit teachers and students from extra-southern schools and regions but somewhat less eager to admit that LSU began its modern era as a Union garrison. Whatever one thinks of the various parties to America’s internecine strife, LSU arose on a foundation of colonialism and occupation, a foundation that, in tandem with the preceding royalist culture, is unlikely to promote a collaborative, faculty-friendly approach to university governance.

IV: The Myth of Special Expertise, Or, The Emperor Needs Culture if not New Clothes

A monarchical or imperial society like that undergirding our great university typically derives its legitimacy from elusive, abstract, or even supernatural sources, whether ancestors of great merit or the special privilege of divine right or the more modern virtue of “visibility” [in the news or in the public eye] The highly-paid antepenultimate chancellor, for example, was hailed by one System supervisor as “an administrative superstar,” while that chancellor’s predecessor had been declared by the then-System-President as “a great statesman of American education,” as if from some other, nobler time and space somewhere between the eras of Charlemagne and Benjamin Franklin. In the appointment of the current chancellor, this kind of mystification took on crude economic form, in the claim that, if he were not hired immediately and without deliberation, he would get away and make more money elsewhere, perhaps from leprechauns guarding a hidden pot of gold, as if he were charmed with a special money-drawing charisma.

If a great university is to encourage the development of better future administrators, it is this myth of a special anointing—that there are some persons who have a mystical mastery of a secret talent—that must be debunked, if only because the myth implies that administrative skills are (a) unteachable and therefore unattainable by ordinary professors and (b) proprietary to a special charismatic class of criticism-exempt persons. Not only is such a myth used to justify the granting of salaries and perquisites that are perceived as unfair and demoralizing by most faculty members, but the self-deluding state of mind that it induces leads to the corruption to style, to the kinds of scenes recounted in the opening section of this commentary and to poor role-modeling for students as well as a bad impressions on the public. Such a myth is contrary to the alleged purpose of a university, which is not only the education but cultivation of wise, participating citizens who can distinguish between faulty and admirable style—between merit and imposture.

The issue of costuming that has been raised at several junctures in this commentary is then not without serious and tangible import. In the LSU administration, it is not so much the
case that “the Emperor has no clothes” as that “the Emperor has poor taste in clothes and needs new ones.” The standard uniform of an LSU administrator—for men: khaki pants, a pastel Oxford shirt, a repp tie, a blue blazer, and an LSU pin; for women: a dark pant-suit or conservative skirt, a pale out-of-focus slightly ruffled blouse, and an unconstructed jacket, again surmounted by the obligatory LSU pin—sends the message that conventionality and anonymity to the point of invisibility is what the administrative regime desires. It is, of course, not so much the attire but its standardization that sends to both faculty and students the message that conformity, obedience, and ambitious dullness are the surest means to advancement.

V: To Watch or Not to Watch: Or, Is an Audience Expected?

The apparently superficial matter of **style** provides unexpectedly deep insights into the contradictions and complications that have led to the present concern with the future of the administration and the cultivation of administrators. Equally revealing with an inquiry into administrative style is an inquiry into administrative attitudes toward its **audience**. On the one hand, the concern with superficialities, whether style of dress or grandiose convocations, suggests that administrators at all levels want to be seen, and to be seen doing remarkable things. On the other hand, the danger of being seen is that of being discovered—a fear that reveals itself in the instantly identifiable, quasi-camouflage attire of administrators. The result of this contradiction—between hunger for applause and fear of observation—is what might be called **grandiose secrecy**: attempts by ambitious persons within administrative oligarchies to use the secret side of spectacular deeds to prove their possession of unusual, secret powers and thereby to establish themselves as members of the Brahminical caste of “administrative superstars.” Practitioners of grandiose secrecy want everyone to see that they have done very powerful deeds off-screen so as to prove their possession of mysterious powers not available to common clods.

Numerous examples of this grandiose secrecy can be found in the recent history of our **great university**. Most recently, the high-speed, winter-recess appointment of a chancellor has been used to show the public and to warn the faculty that certain concealed powers within the administration are capable of doing big things in unperceived ways (as a magician dazzles an audience by convincing the audience that it cannot see how a trick is done). Appropriation of the right to consume alcoholic beverages within Tiger Stadium to a class of wealthy philanthropists tells the public that an elite class of bureaucrats can quietly control magical beverages. The emergence of a secret budget—quasi-private foundations that influence the economy of the University without much in the way of public accountability—puts an economic spin on grandiose secrecy. The unilateral establishment of “feel good” departments such as those of “diversity” or (even more voodoo-like) “wellness,” which came into existence as if by legerdemain but which aim to placate designated groups in the public audience, are especially expensive manifestations of grandiose secrecy. Often the effect of grandiose secrecy on its audience is more ridiculous than grandiose, as was the case several years ago when a mysteriously generated public letter lamenting drug use among collegiate youth was endorsed by administrative persons widely known to have participated enthusiastically in late-twentieth-century drug culture.

What unites these examples of grandiose secrecy—all of which have backfired, whether in the media backlash against the non-observance of procedures for appointing chancellors or in the quiet laughter of jaded faculty members—is a profoundly anti-intellectual desire to control
what are ultimately imaginary spectators, a wished-for audience of clever academic persons who nevertheless offer no resistance to administrative excesses. This desire to manage the audience for administrative grandiosity runs counter to the desire to recruit faculty of national standing and independent, creative minds. Measures to control the cult of grandiose secrecy and to shed sunshine on the dark recesses of administrative finagling are of the utmost importance if a great university wishes to achieve prominence in the mind of a real, rather than imaginary, public.

VI: Revising the Audience as a Step toward Revising the Drama

The ancient Indian drama critic Bharata observes that the audience is more responsible than the author for the making of a drama. Without an intelligent, receptive, and engaged audience, Bharata warns, theatrical experiences cannot occur. Imagining a drama is different than realizing it, for realization always involves the participation of audience members. The first step toward the rehabilitation of administrative culture might then be a change in the character of audience culture. Numerous critics of the American academy—among them renowned columnist Thomas Sowell—have noted that the present system of “faculty governance” has proven ineffective and cliquish and has therefore encouraged administrations to grab increasing amounts of power. The typical faculty senate, a unicameral “legislature” comprised of (sometimes) elected representatives from diverse colleges and departments, tends to pit conflicting interests against one another in such a way that they cancel one another out. The result is the elimination of meaningful opposition to or even sounding boards for administrative undertakings. The average faculty senate in an American university increases the power of administrations; it corrals and contains diverging interests and creates the appearance of faculty participation but in fact neutralizes faculty input by shifting the emphasis from faculty concerns to interdepartmental and intercollegiate competition. A first step toward taming the central administration of a great university would be a thorough revision of the system of “faculty governance” in such a way that both dissent and specifically faculty interests may be heard.

There are many ways that such a revision might be accomplished. First, service on the faculty governing board, whether a “senate” or some successor to it, might be by rotation or lottery rather than by election. The present system, in which senators are elected from colleges and departments, encourages the selection of moderate, acquiescent, busybody, politically correct, or otherwise “compromise” candidates. It excludes persons who offer original ideas but who would never be elected by nervous “units” or cowardly professors. An Athenian-style system, in which service was both mandatory and random, would insure that diverging views made their way to the senate floor. Second, a general ban on the presence of intimidating administrators (such as the Provost) at senate meetings would encourage more frank discussions. Third, and more generally, the introduction into tenure and promotion regulations of extra credit for the expression of dissenting views—rather than for “collegiality,” which is widely understood to be a synonym for “obedience”—would do a great deal to reduce the atmosphere of fear and intimidation that blocks disagreement with central administrations. Fourth, the faculty should look for methods to increase its joint bargaining power, whether through collective bargaining or binding arbitration or in the most extreme case unionization so that the administration may receive flying tomatoes as well as sycophantic applause from its faculty audience.
It should also be remembered that the college and department models of faculty senate representation tend to reflect rather than to indict the administration and its regulatory apparatus. Many departments at any great university pretend to democracy but, increasingly, expect unanimous votes, mindless enthusiasm, and full compliance from faculty members. Randomization of faculty senate service would therefore be the first step to the restraining of administrative growth. Such lottery-style service would bypass departmental confines and would be the first step to reducing the excessive numbers of layers in the administrative hierarchy (which stretch from associate chairs, through chairs, through deans, and on into the greater heaven of the self-styled “upper” administration).

VII: The Book Version: Getting it On the Record

One great convenience that an imagined rather than real or reactive audience provides to an administration is the thought that embarrassing details might not be remembered. The trouble with imagining an audience, however, is that the dream of an audience leads to greater ambitions, to the hope that a perpetual audience will be secured through enduring accomplishments and even a written historical record. As anyone knows who has made even a preliminary study of history or literature, such records tend to go into circulation and prove hard to control, even for would-be dictators. Improving and enhancing administrative culture would include an improvement in the maintenance and publication of the “record” of administrators so that the faculty audience might freely decide whether to clap or hiss. The Third Earl of Shaftesbury observed that the various forms of public opinion—ranging from cautious editorial letters to rollicking satire—is a “natural lapidary” in which errors are eroded and skills polished. For Shaftesbury, the rough-and-tumble of criticism eroded away blunders and “excrescences.” The lack of such a public-opinion lapidary, a lack created by a dearth of information, is a serious deficit in the process by which future academic administrators are cultivated.

The first and best step toward an improved administration would therefore be the opening of the means of communication so as to allow faculty responses to administrative undertakings. Presently, the upper administration monopolizes an e-mail “Broadcast System” that delivers edicts as if from Sinai’s slopes and that allows no reply or response—a degree of exclusivity not even enjoyed by the President of the United States, who, after all, must allow responses to his radio, State of the Union, and other addresses. Worse, the administration publishes a variety of periodicals—LSU Today, the LSU alumni magazine, assorted bulletins and glossy pamphlets from various “units,” i.e., mid- to upper-level administrators—that present a relentlessly glamorous picture of LSU and its administration but that in fact allow less in the way of responses than the did the Afghan Taliban. Most recently, for example, both the alumni magazine and LSU Today presented the hotly controverted selection of the new chancellor as a work of unanimous and enthusiastic acclaim, a distortion of the facts that directly contravened the truth-producing mission of the University as well as a smug defiance of the faculty who had worked so hard to insure the hearing of alternate voices. An administration that is sealed behind a veritable Kremlin wall of such propaganda is sure to become ingrown and distorted in its perceptions and is quick to become a medium for that least productive of academic figures, the university sycophant.

As a second measure toward the re-establishing of perspective within the administration, the university should consider publishing a list of formidable administrative errors or perhaps
even erecting a monument to administrative blunders—as it were, a “Stela of Error.” Such blunders are not hard to find—one thinks of the conversion of the LSU Union Tiger Lair into a junk food plateau, the deployment of up-linked satellite learning systems for locations where there are no downlinks, the snapping of the Parade Ground flagpole when ambition led to the raising of the world’s largest American flag during the onset of Hurricane Andrew, the call to expand Tiger Stadium to deal with the crowds drawn by Coach Curley Hallman, the announcements by various past chancellors that Plato was an English author or that Louisiana oaks might be found in Wyoming, and so forth. Owing to their magnificence, such blunders merit posting in public venues, as morally instructive reminders of the limits of human accomplishment. Indeed, it would not be unwise to replace the next vacant administrative place with a Shakespearean-style fool, whose duty would be to remind university administrators of their errors as well as their achievements. Perhaps it would also be wise to require all administrators above a specified rank to appear weekly in the quadrangle to receive the open complaints of the people, as was so effectively done during the age of stocks and pillories.

VIII: Ventilating the Air of Corruption

Possibly the greatest obstacle to the recruitment of competent future administrators is the air of corruption that presently surrounds university administrations. An air, of course, is not always a reality, yet, whatever the truth regarding the moral status of the administrations of great universities may be, the behavior of administrative personnel sends a chilling signal to virtuous persons eager to do good work for their institutions.

This suggestion of corruption takes many forms. First, there is the method for recruiting administrators. The suggestion of corruption initially arises in the use of expensive “headhunter” agencies such as Heidrick and Struggles, to find administrator candidates. The incumbent administrators who hire such firms have a way of later being patronized—nominated for juicy jobs—by those same firms that they hire. Worse, such firms create the impression that there is a secret class of insiders who are always solicited for applications and that therefore applying for an administrative position is a waste of time. Another way that the suggestion of corruption arises is through the outsourcing of concessions such that they slip beyond faculty control or even consideration, as often occurs when monopolistic chains are called upon to operate bookstores or food service outlets, usually at the expense of former local operators. Such outsourcing gives the strong impression that, one way or another, favors will find their way back to the administrator who effected the concession deal. Still a third way that corruption occurs is through the promiscuous distribution and inflationary use of titles. One wit in this university has remarked that, by the year 2025, everyone, even janitors, will carry the title “Vice-Chancellor for X, Y, or Z.” By applying such titles to persons with comparatively little policy-making power, universities attempt to co-opt dissent, to lead minor officials to believe themselves part of a Brahminical regime and thereby discourage dissent. This situation is worsened by the complete absence, in most universities, of any kind of faculty representation, whether by an ombudsperson or a collective bargaining agent or a union. Faculty members come to believe that the only way to procure advancement or safety is to curry favor with the administrative powers, which, in turn, leads to a downtown in public criticism, which, in turn, leads to deterioration if not corruption within administrative circles. Given the present system, in which several tiers of compartmentalized administrators control both salaries and research funds, it is difficult to see
how criticism and thereby improvement of the administration will ever occur short of the instituting of some kind of whistle-blower protection statutes.

IX: A Coda, Or, Back to the Beginning

By way of conclusion, let us return to the scene that opened this report. During the University convocation there described, one of the faculty members in the audience delivered a pungent critique: “[this is all very nice but] what you’ve got to understand is that LSU is an unfriendly place.” What this faculty commentator was suggesting is at the root of all the foregoing observations: to wit, that many great universities have made so great an emotional investment in a cult of imaginary administrative expertise that they have ended up institutionalizing not only a contempt for mainline faculty members, but for learning itself. Administration is regarded as the highest good; persons in faculty status are reduced, in the minds of many in power, to proletarians. The result is an uncongenial atmosphere in which upper administrations, which are often comprised of persons with only minimal academic credentials, attempt to advance their own careers by taking indirect credit for the achievements of scholars (e.g., “in my university we publish 15,000 research papers per year”), all the while creating an atmosphere of uncertainty or even hostility toward the faculty. Recent attacks on tenure and the routine preferring of faculty persecution to faculty retention are only the most visible manifestations of this hostile mentality. Paradoxically, the hostile atmosphere that hangs heavy over many great universities not only inhibits the doing of research but also puts off good-hearted colleagues who would like to make an administrative contribution but who are loath to engage in such dubious, damaging, or ridiculous practices as the aforementioned. Great universities should consider whether the behavior encouraged by administrative salaries and privileges is at all consonant with the encouraging of research or with the cultivation of talents or of intellectual inventiveness among the most productive, research- and teaching-loving faculty members.

If the administration of a great university is to improve—if admirable new administrators are to be recruited—what such university administrations need to do in the first instance is (a) get off their respective high horses and (b) take every possible measure to promote criticism, deviation, and even eccentricity among inventive faculty members. What now exists in most institutions is a highly conformist and trenchantly unimaginative oligarchy that expresses itself in Mandarin contempt of persons doing the more productive business of science and scholarship. Perhaps the most effective way to promote good administration would be to downplay its importance so that the doing of administrative service became an object of interest and philanthropy rather than of lustful ambition.