



Representing Wayne State Faculty and Academic Staff

# NEWSBRIEFS

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## Whither Wayne? The Board of Governors Will Have to Decide

By Charles J. Parrish,  
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We are approaching a crossroads at Wayne State University, and the Board of Governors will have to decide which way to turn. President Jay Noren points in one direction, steering the university towards an expansionist future with ever rising tuition in a top-down environment run by the President's office.

The alternative favored by most knowledgeable faculty and academic staff begins with a realistic vision of the dire economic straits we face. It is a vision that recognizes the need to keep tuition as affordable as possible while enlisting the support of all sectors of the University, especially those that are represented through our structures of shared, collegial governance, in the protection of our core academic activities.

### Steering Wayne State Through the Economic Storms

Members of the university's Board of Governors (BOG) are serious people who try valiantly to set policy for an institution in which they have no first-hand experience as faculty, academic staff, or administrators. They struggle to

make sound judgments about what is best for the institution. They are paid nothing for their efforts, but they give vast amounts of their time to the University.

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The present challenge for members of the Board of Governors is how to get President Jay Noren to focus on the real-world problems faced by this university. Above all, this means abandoning his extravagant, time-consuming, and unrealistic plan to not only add 200 faculty to the WSU payroll in the midst of Michigan's economic collapse, but to do so by increasing tuition as much as 15% a year for the next five years.

Would we like to have 200 more faculty members teaching and doing research in our university? Of course we would! But, in our present situation what is needed is a defensive plan that focuses on the preservation of our core academic activities in the perilous economic times that we face in the next several years.

So far, such a preservation plan has not been on the presidential agenda in any of the recent BOG meetings. Instead, we were treated to a farcical

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display by Governor Eugene Driker in the most recent Board meeting.

### **Governor Driker's Attack**

The following description of what happened at the BOG's December 9<sup>th</sup> meeting is based on my recollection of the unexpected events that occurred during that gathering.

For Governor Driker, it all began with the November, 2009 AAUP-AFT *Newsbriefs* article in which I analyzed President Jay Noren's failure to make realistic plans for the economic problems we face, at the same time that he was pushing Provost Nancy Barrett out of the office in which she has served with distinction for seven years. Umbrage was on full display when Governor Driker took a point of personal privilege and read a prepared statement that accused me of committing various crimes and misdemeanors.

As best I can recall (since I was not, and have not, been provided with the written statement), Governor Driker complained principally about the reference in *Newsbriefs* to President Noren acting in the manner that Mussolini might have adopted had he been a university president. He called this defamatory and slanderous and then launched into a listing of my various other faults. (If he had consulted a little more widely he might have expanded the list and improved its accuracy).

In addition to defamation and slander (he meant libel, since it was written), Governor Driker accused me of violating the decorum that a teacher of students should display. He apparently assumes that a good teacher should not say harsh things about university presidents, even when true.

The Chair of the Board, Richard Bernstein, noted that Governor Driker had chosen to deliver

his attack on me in the Academic Affairs Committee meeting and not in the previous meeting of the Budget and Finance Committee of which I was a member and where I could have responded. Under the rules of the BOG, no one who has not applied 72 hours before a meeting has the right to address the BOG or its committees. Governor Bernstein asked that the Board waive this rule and allow me (since I had remained in the audience for the later committee meeting) to respond at that time to Governor Driker. It was noted

by Governor Paul Massaron that this was a breach of the rules and that it was setting a new precedent that the BOG might regret in the future.

Professor Anca Vlasopolos, representing the Academic Senate as a member of the committee, intervened and pointed out the fallacy of equating public debate with a classroom situation. She made a strong statement on freedom of speech, the need for open and vigorous debate, and academic freedom. Governor Massaron associated himself with her statement with approval.

***“President Noren...holds that his personal appointees better represent the faculty than the Senate members elected by their peers.”***

At this point, I was invited to speak. I advanced the proposition that President Noren could take strong criticism. He has been around the block when it comes to controversy. I alluded, although not explicitly, to his having to endure some pretty strong language during the conflicts at the Texas A&M Medical School when he was given a vote of no confidence as dean by the faculty and subsequently resigned. I didn't think that he needs Governor Driker to protect him from sharp criticism.

### **It Is What It Is: Top Down**

In my response to Governor Driker I addressed his comments about the reference to Mussolini. A certain literary license is often taken in vigorous argument, but I had used the reference advisedly. As a graduate student in political theory I long ago read Mussolini, and I find that his top-down approach to governing organizations was similar in

philosophy to that of President Noren. Governor Driker's implicit demand—that we must respect authority whether or not that authority has earned it—is consistent with this view.

If I had been given time to prepare a statement I would have added that, although the Mussolini reference was provocative, President Noren is already deep into a fight of his own making with the Academic Senate over its role in academic governance. He has appointed his own committees to parallel those of the Senate Budget and Research committees, and he holds that his personal appointees better represent the faculty than the Senate members elected by their peers. He has openly disparaged the elected leadership of the Senate. He feels free to personally decide who is “really” representative of the faculty; thus the relevance of the reference to a dictator who once stated, “Democracy is beautiful in theory, but in practice it is a fallacy.”

In girding his loins for an assault on the faculty, President Noren has stated his intention to appoint several committees to deal with faculty workload and post-tenure review. I have been told that he has asked various people for names of candidates to serve on these committees. The President told me in a private meeting that the faculty “are not teaching to the maximum,” and he has said so publicly. I told him that the loads were set in a traditional and professionally accepted manner and that any changes had to conform to the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

He then suggested that he and I sign a letter to the faculty asking them to volunteer to teach more. He has since asked for a report on teaching loads, obviously with a view towards increasing them. Whether this committee or the one on post-tenure review have been appointed is unknown at this point.

As I continued my response to Governor Driker, I pointed out that if I had committed defamation or slander, there was an appropriate legal recourse for resolving that issue.

### Whither Wayne?

As I pointed out to the Board, it is a serious problem that President Noren has focused much of his energy, and that of his Cabinet members and many other administrators, on a Strategic Planning project that contemplates raising the tuition of WSU students by at least 11% for each of the next five years. The latest “scenario” presented to the Academic Senate last week posits a 15% rise per annum for five years.

President Noren promptly denied that any such proposal had been made. His denial should come as a surprise to any member of the Senate who saw the 15% figure on a slide in the presentation of the Budget Director to the December 2<sup>nd</sup> meeting of the Academic Senate, a meeting at

which the President was in attendance. Later, Mr. Kohrman told me that what he showed was not a proposal, but only a “scenario.” Clearly it was a scenario that he and the President devoutly wish to see enacted.

My view, one that I did not develop extensively in my oral response to the BOG, is that we should try to be more realistic and develop plans that are politically feasible and that would allow us to operate within the resources that are likely to be available to the University. Under President Noren's direction, administrators have invested thousands of work hours in developing extravagant plans to add 200 faculty positions and take over as much as possible of the Detroit School curriculum, among other things.

***“Ironically, after having pushed the Provost out, the President has had to endure the plaudits that she has since received from faculty groups. She got a standing ovation from the Senate on December 2<sup>nd</sup>.”***

The purpose for all this activity is to push BOG members to support the high-tuition policy favored by President Noren and his supporters (Governor Driker and those who work directly for the President). It defies logic that they are proposing to fund a major expansion program in the midst of Michigan's economic depression. A majority of BOG members are very sensitive to what a high-tuition policy will mean to our students and, I suspect, they will be far more prudent than President Noren and Governor Driker want them to be.

### Where We Are, or Aren't

Ironically, after having pushed the Provost out, the President has had to endure the plaudits that she has since received from faculty groups. She got a standing ovation from the Senate on December 2<sup>nd</sup>. The College of Education faculty members subsequently met with the President and the Provost, and Provost Barrett also got a spontaneous standing ovation from them. One Education faculty member, apparently unaware of the circumstances of her resignation, asked President Noren to try to convince her to stay on.

Now that the Provost's days in this administration are numbered, President Noren is left with senior officials who are unwilling to tell him that his policies are bootless. The result is that so far there is no plan to protect the core academic values of the University in the coming economic crisis.

The lack of a sensible preservation plan is the problem, not whether or not I am rude to the President. As far as I can see, the BOG has not yet worked out how to get President Noren to abandon his fantasies of expansion and to offer the University a way to help us to live collaboratively within our shrinking means. As the situation worsens and the cuts come, they are likely to be poorly planned, untargeted and across the board, primarily on the academic side, and applied without a coherent and defensible philosophy on which to base them.

Governor Driker and the President are avoiding the real issues and trying to make this a personal conflict over my alleged bad manners. This diverts us from the serious matters that are being discussed, both here, in the previous *Newsbriefs* article, and across the campus. We are all deeply concerned about Wayne State's future. It's about time we addressed it promptly and responsibly.

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