

Swan Song

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by Dean Saitta, Department of Anthropology

Serving as senate president for the last two years has been an honor and a privilege. My respect for past presidents has increased exponentially. I can think of no higher calling in university service than to advocate, agitate, and aggravate on behalf of faculty. Such activity is especially important in a time when the faculty's franchise is under siege from myriad external and internal threats including [loony legislators](#), [nutty administrators](#), [clueless opinionators](#), [overzealous assessors](#), [activist trustees](#), [this guy](#), and others. The position of senate president should be one that's coveted and actively competed for. Emeritus Law Dean Ed Dauer had it exactly right in an email message he sent to me after we settled some viewpoint differences about my controversial use of the DU faculty listserv to [petition](#) on behalf of a now-dismissed tenured full professor at CU Boulder: "it [the senate presidency] is an important post as well as a distinguished one." The fact that we usually have to beg, cajole, and specially plead for presidential candidates suggests that the position has lost some standing that we need to reclaim. We should all thank Michael Levine-Clark for volunteering to serve, with the unanimous support of the senate, for the next couple of years.

In the last two years we've tried to advance the faculty's cause by sponsoring new programming to highlight our work (like last quarter's highly successful [IDEA Lunch](#)), hosting a nationally-prominent scholar to speak to issues around university governance, academic freedom, and liberal education ([Michael Berube](#)), working to promote faculty scholarship, involving the senate a bit more in all-campus events such as the Diversity Summit, helping to trigger [general education review](#), lobbying for better analysis of a [tuition exchange](#) benefit for faculty and staff; pushing for transparency of unit-level promotion and tenure [policies](#), and writing a Faculty Grievance Policy that is more user-friendly for colleagues having issues in the workplace. I took personal satisfaction in this year's re-affirmation by [UPAC](#) of the [university's vision statement](#) because, as a few people will remember and a former Provost will confirm, the "great private university dedicated to the public good" formulation is one that I proposed during the 2001 UPAC planning process as a way to unite Dan Ritchie's "great private university in Denver" idea with then-emerging (and now well-established) strengths in service learning, leadership training, and community-based research.

My greatest satisfactions as senate president, however, were experienced outside the formal contexts and processes of university governance. They were in the one-on-ones with individual faculty members about professional concerns, personal dilemmas, and general existential anxieties. It has been quite rewarding to serve as mentor, counselor and, more often, sympathetic listener. Our revival of the campus [AAUP chapter](#) was certainly motivated, in part, by what we heard in the one-on-ones with individual faculty. These faculty are in multiple academic units. One academic dean suggested to me that AAUP chapters and faculty grievance policies are not what we're about; they're "not

DU.” The AAUP thing is not just about DU. It’s about connecting to other campuses and bigger issues. It’s in that broader context and set of relationships that new learning occurs; specifically, learning about common governance problems and different approaches to their solution.

I know for sure that our AAUP chapter site has been a source of [useful information](#) for faculty dealing with governance issues in the trenches. Some of these faculty have been around for a while. There seems to be a sense among some folks on campus that the university is looking to ratchet up academic quality and reputation by investing more in new and future faculty rather than in those who were here during the lean, rebuilding years. Just the other day I heard, to nods of agreement from faculty, administrators, and trustees, that we should always look to hire faculty who are better than those we already have. This position is perplexing to me, because I think it depends on what the definition of “better” is. In my twenty years at DU I’ve seen some mighty fine faculty come and go, and not always of their own volition. The close involvements of the last two years suggest to me that there are more than a few old-timers in the fold that we’d be hard pressed to top in any round of current or future faculty hiring.

My biggest disappointment as senate president was also my biggest hope. That would be the faculty’s response to this here blog, which was intended to promote open, continuous, and free-wheeling conversation about the big issues of academic life that affect us nationally and locally. I’m not sure what explains the lack of commentary on items posted in the blog, but for me it reflects a huge irony. Although we’ve embraced an institutional vision that’s about strengthening and expanding our interaction with external communities, we don’t seem to have much interest in strengthening and expanding interaction among ourselves (and across our disciplinary cultures) outside of regularly-scheduled meetings, conferences, and events. The AHSS faculty listserv showed some promise right after September 11, 2001, but discussion soon collapsed under the weight of partisan passions about the causes and implications of that particular event. We certainly lost a “teaching moment” (or some such thing) there, and we’ve never really recovered. Today the AHSS listserv is for information only, please. The *Faculty Forum* offers an alternative for faculty in AHSS and elsewhere who, in the best tradition of the creative American academy, would like to push the envelope—and the buttons—a bit.

Certainly, there are risks associated with public expression of personal opinions in even the friendliest marketplace of ideas. Another explanation of *Forum* non-use could be the reputation of your soon-to-be ex-president and *Forum* publisher, who it seems can’t say much in official contexts these days without eliciting eye-rolls (“There he goes again...”), stony silences, and the occasional private rebuke. This goes with the territory of shared governance, but it’s also the best indicator that it’s time to move on. Whoever set a two year term limit for the senate president knew what they were doing. My hitch has certainly been time well-spent, and I’d do it over again if given the choice. It’s Michael’s time now, and I wish him every success.