

# CONVERSATION

Newsletter of the Learning Outcomes Council

## What It Is That We Do

by Deborah Paes  
de Barros, Faculty,  
Learning Outcomes  
Council

Most educators do not consider the notion of learning a novel idea, despite any public or political rhetoric to the contrary. Like Chaucer's famous student cleric—"gladly would he learn and gladly teach"—we recognize that teaching and learning enjoy a reciprocal relationship and must, in fact, be organically linked. Yet, increasingly during the past decade, pundits inform us that the "paradigm has shifted" and that we must consider—and more significantly—tabulate the "data" that demonstrate actual "student learning." Such comments are immensely annoying, made more so because too often slogans that simply degrade teaching accompany the propaganda. Self-proclaimed proponents of the so-called new, "learning-centered" educational system blithely inform us that we ought to stop being "the sage on the stage"—the teacher—and become instead a "learning facilitator"—a cog in the larger, business-

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## What Motivates a Student?

Jack Mawhinney,  
Student, Learning  
Outcomes Council

A college education was regarded as an important accomplishment in my family, motivated by my mother's disappointment at being denied the opportunity for an education beyond high school. From early childhood I was reminded by my mother that I must go to college, that I must take the academic curriculum in high school, and that I must find a way to pay for that education. Her enthusiasm for learning and the books she brought into our home excited in me such anticipation I could hardly wait to experience college.

My middle and high school education took place in the Los Angeles system. The emphasis on memorization of facts, mathematical theorems, historical events, names of kings and dates of wars; the absence of explanation of cause and effect, the boredom of teachers, and the malaise of students left me disillusioned and disappointed. I wanted engagement

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## OUTCOMES (with a Capital "O")

Brent Gowen, Faculty,  
Learning Outcomes  
Council

We professionals in higher education are being told that the public is worried about its investment in our students, in us, and in our institutions. Speaking on this subject last summer, John Boehner, the Republican who heads the House of Representatives committee on Education and the Workforce, and Buck McKeon, chair of the panel's subcommittee on Higher Education, reported "a growing disconnect between the priorities of the [educational] lobbying community and those of parents, students, and taxpayers, who are increasingly concerned about the condition of American higher education." The pair added, "Serious questions [are being raised] about the quality of the return parents, students, and taxpayers are receiving on their huge investment." The public, say its spokespeople, pays for higher education but apparently is not sure what it is getting for that money—a curious claim considering that the loudest critics, like Reps. Boehner and McKeon, are in fact college educated themselves and so should know the nature and significance of the college experience. What do we provide students? Engagements with the best that has been thought, spoken, written, recorded, represented, and simulated about the cosmos and humans'

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## Learning Outcomes Council calendar of events

Day	Time	Place	Event
Thursday, March 17	2 – 3 p.m.	SU19b	Learning Outcomes PD Forum
Friday, April 1	Noon – 1 p.m.,	SU19b	Learning Outcomes PD Forum
Thursday, April 7	2 – 3:30 p.m.	SU18	Learning Outcomes Council meeting
Thursday, April 14	5 – 6 p.m.	Room 601	Escondido Center PD Forum
Thursday, April 21	2 – 3 p.m.	SU19b	Learning Outcomes PD Forum
Thursday, May 5	2 – 3:30 p.m.	SU18	Learning Outcomes Council meeting
Friday, May 6	Noon – 1 p.m.	SU19b	Learning Outcomes PD Forum
Thursday, May 12	Happy Hour	Off Campus	Party On! Pedagogy

## **Interview with Professor Heidi Phelps, Philosophy**

### **You said that you began in the health care field. Why did you leave that field to become a philosopher?**

I graduated with an MS in occupational therapy. At that time, there were many changes within the health care field that were implemented to save money. One of the results was that either the patient suffered, or the therapist had to use “creative documentation” to be compensated for services provided. There was a basic ethical problem with the system. I began to understand that there was a more basic problem than just with health care documentation and compensation. Many people in general, including health care administrators, make rules that affect the rest of us not based on ethics but on what is financially advantageous. This is not a problem unique to health care. It is a problem throughout our society. With this realization, I decided that while providing health care is an important role in our society, caring for the mental and ethical lives of others was what I was passionate about. To teach people how to determine the best way to live, how to become flourishing individuals, how to find answers to the most significant questions humans encounter, became very important to me, and the result was that I became a philosopher.

### **Where did you get your education?**

My MS in occupational therapy is from D’Youville College in Buffalo, NY, and my MA in philosophy is from the Talbot School of Theology, Biola University in La Mirada.

### **Which problems in philosophy most interest you?**

I am most interested in the basic questions of ethics, which turn out to

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## **Interview with Professor Judy Eckhart, Nursing**

### **How did you get into teaching? What was your educational and career path?**

I worked in various hospitals for 13 years but continually injured my lower back. I finally had to get off the floor, so went back to school for more education. I had planned on getting into hospital/nursing administration, but when I finished school there were no admin jobs ... so I switched over to education. I’ve been real lucky since I loved floor nursing and I have loved teaching, as well.

### **Nursing is subject to a special accrediting commission, right? How does that accrediting process work?**

The Board of Registered Nursing (BRN) is a mandatory accreditation. We are also accredited by the National League for Nursing Accrediting Commission (NLNAC), which is an elective accreditation. In an attempt to be brief, the major difference between the two is in their focus. The BRN identifies what must be taught based upon the Nurse Practice Act. NLNAC examines how the material is taught, for example, how many units are allowed for graduation from the nursing program.

### **Nursing already has an Outcomes rubric in place, doesn’t it? How did you arrive at this rubric?**

The NLNAC identified outcomes that each school had to specifically define and then decide how to measure. The general outcomes have changed over time but the original ones included critical thinking, communication ability, nursing interventions, completion rates, employment rates, program satisfaction,

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## **Notes from the Senate '04 –'05: A Big Picture Perspective**

Katie Townsend-Merino,  
Faculty Senate  
President

It has been an exhausting and exciting 04–05 year for all of Palomar College. Many faculty, in many ways, have been slowly climbing—one foot in front of the other, not always being able to see the summit—what has felt like an enormous mountain for several years in an effort to regain the lost spirit and heart of our fine institution.

### **We may have finally reached the summit.**

We have elected a new board that has pledged to work with the faculty, staff, and students of this college community toward the best interests of this college, toward the good of the whole. We have a new President who brings with him the promise of open communication and a commitment to the shared governance

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driven learning machine. As we race from class to office hours, to a desk crowded with student essays, we cannot miss the deep irony of accusations so typically made by those who assiduously avoid the classroom.

Still, despite the fact that the relationship between teaching and learning would seem to be self-evident, we find ourselves now obliged to explain and ascertain the intellectual “outcomes” we seek. In today’s particular (and perhaps peculiar) culture we can no longer insist upon the most seemingly obvious point: that education benefits students. We must justify what we teach, how we teach and why we teach and further explain how we know that we are really teaching anyway. We inhabit a brave, new pedagogical world, besieged on all sides with calls for “accountability.” The Accrediting Commission for the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC) requires that Palomar College “develop processes for measuring student learning outcomes” (Accreditation Team Report, June 2003). The California State Legislature has already voted into law AB1417, a law that requires the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges to develop and mandate “statewide educational outcome priorities.” And, as if such administrative and legislative pressure were not sufficient, even popular culture conspires. This season the allegedly left-leaning television program, *The West Wing*, follows an election race wherein both party candidates embrace educational reform and the more liberal nominee defines his platform with a call for the end of tenure, for merit pay, a longer school year and, of course, data-driven accountability. As Julius Caesar said at the Rubicon, “the die is cast” (or

like R.E.M. reported prematurely from the 90s, “it’s the end of the world as we know it”).

But the new world need not be entirely bleak. For we can, in fact, answer these calls for accountability and assessment because we do, clearly, assess our students. Individual teachers describe with ease, both formally and informally, their students’ mastery of concepts and skills. The institution tracks our students, noting their success in transfer and vocational programs, validating—accounting for, if you will—the effectiveness of our teaching. We already do what needs to be done; we simply need now to comprehensively describe some of the educational process. Rather than radically change how we function in our classrooms, we need to better explain that long regarded relationship between teaching and learning. From my point of view, our response to assessment ought not to be so much a change in intellectual habit as an enhanced development in our public relations. People—WASC, politicians, the public, as well as those who regularly opine against the “failure of the educational system”—must come to understand what we do.

Much of the discussion this year in the college’s Learning Outcomes Council addresses the point that we already do assessment, we already authenticate our students’ learning, that we already celebrate education and that we have really always held ourselves accountable. A new rapport has emerged in the Council, for we understand that we can address the new accreditation standards thematically (rather than simply numerically), that authentic assessment must develop on an individual and departmental level,

and that the most revealing and frankly comprehensive educational profiles appear in constant, open and sometimes even vexed conversation.

WASC stipulates that dialogue is the first theme examined in a thematic assessment, a promising sign. As we engage in conversations about teaching, learning, students, professors and how we think about our profession, we establish, enable and evaluate the entire educational project. Discourse defines our approach to assessment.

Many of us resist this cultural call for accountability, but it falls upon us nonetheless. It is imperative, then, that we be the ones who establish priorities, by individual department and by individual course. We must control the methodology of assessment, making certain to resist any reductive mechanisms for evaluation. We must be pragmatic, finding ways to speak to each other and then to the larger community about what it is that we do.

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#### What Motivates a Student?

by Jack Mawhinney, Student

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with my teachers. I couldn’t wait for the intellectual environment of college.

Among a variety of jobs, twenty months in the army, attendance at two colleges and two universities, it took me ten years to get a Master’s Degree. The intellectual atmosphere wasn’t as vivid as I imagined it to be, but it generated a permanent hunger for a broader knowledge of science, history, philosophy, art, and music.

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and other beings’ places within it. Motivations and strategies for considering and understanding human experience in general and their own experience in particular. Education and training in specific fields that they may pursue jobs or careers in. Reasons to feel ashamed if they behave cruelly toward others with no provocation other than prejudice. And, maybe most importantly, the impetus to continue learning, to continue asking “Why?” “How so?” and “So what?” We give students what they can get nowhere else in the society.

Nevertheless, the questions come—in words disinterred from the old industrial economy. Is student learning being “produced”? How are students “improved” by the educational experience? What “value” has been “added” to them? According to its spokespeople, the public no longer accepts grades and degrees as indicators of students’ achievements. These traditional markers are now considered unreliable “proxies” for knowledge and skills. Instead, its spokespeople say, the public is calling for educators to deliver new measures of students’ achievement. Rather than indicating in academese what students earn, the public wants us to describe in plain language what students can do—especially what they can do for the public. The public is no longer interested in hearing that a student earned “A” grades in accounting, composition, and history and then consulting course outlines of record if it wants a more specific account of what those “A” grades mean; instead this public wants to be told—in a direct way, unmediated by transcript notations—that the student can, for instance, balance a spreadsheet, write reports

free of grammar and punctuation errors, and analyze current events with respect to historical trends. More broadly, its spokespeople say the public wants to see a list of “Core Knowledge and Skills” that students acquire during their college experience. In short, the public wants to be presented “Student Learning Outcomes” in a language accessible to students, parents, taxpayers, and legislators alike. (Educators have always been concerned with students’ learning outcomes; I will capitalize the term when referring to outcomes in the sense stipulated by the current “movement.”)

A Learning Outcome is a behavior that a student can demonstrate upon completing a course or a degree program. A Learning Outcome can also be something that a student knows upon completing that course or degree program, but the Outcome counts more if the student can demonstrate this knowledge in some observable, measurable way—in short, an assessable way. (Never mind that not all knowledge can be manifested in ways that are observable and measurable.) The promoters of Outcomes say that there is room in the process for subjective assessment—for the professor, for instance, to note that in her or his estimation the student has become more, say, aesthetically receptive, but clearly in the Outcomes arena objective proof is valued over subjective impression. Its spokespeople say that the public wants us to use the language of Learning Outcomes to describe and discuss how students are changed by the college experience—a reasonable request. It also wants us to continually assess how well we’re doing with producing Learning Outcomes that we have established based on the public’s needs—a less than reasonable request.

When we educators point out to the public that even if it no longer accepts grades and degrees as signifiers, accreditation

commissions exist to ensure that colleges are educating students and shaping them into productive members of society, its spokespeople announce that the public is also suspicious of accreditation, deeply concerned about the effectiveness of the process as a guarantor of student learning. Some politicians have even called for abolishing the commissions. The commissions have responded by embracing the spirit of Learning Outcomes assessment and making it central to the accreditation process. The accreditation commissions want Learning Outcomes assessment to be at the core of all of the college’s activities. Professors’ assessment of student learning is only the beginning. Professors must also assess themselves with respect to how well their students achieve the projected outcomes. Then the institution must assess the professors, the courses they are teaching, the program that includes the course, the division that includes the program, the very school, its counselors, groundskeepers, librarians, telephone operators—all with respect to established Learning Outcomes. Everyone from the cafeteria cashier to the Vice President of Student Affairs needs to be concerned with Learning Outcomes.

On the surface it would seem that the accreditation commissions have foisted many questions upon us and are insisting that we change how we educate students. But we already have answers to most, if not all, of these questions and really don’t have to change much, if anything, about how we proceed in order to meet accreditation standards. We have always been concerned with student learning and have traditional and proven means of assessing it. Generally, we have confidence in the grades we give and consider them reliable markers. We know what grades mean and can readily explain to anyone interested just how and why

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they do indicate degrees of attainment of knowledge and skills. They are in fact learning outcomes measures. We can explain our students' achievements by pointing to course outlines of record, major programs, and degree programs; to their meetings with counselors; to their facility with procuring grants and loans; to their artistic and athletic achievements; to the forums they host for public discussion of pressing matters. We can also point to their successes with taking tests, writing essays, building furniture, giving speeches, using the library, utilizing the college's online services, refraining from smoking, and so on. So the task, as it appears to me, is not to change what we're doing (unless our self-examination prompts us to do so for authentic reasons) in order to satisfy accreditation, but to arrive at a language that will speak for us and to accreditation—and thus to legislators, citizens, students, and parents. This language will describe the knowledge and skills our students acquire by means of their educational experiences. In sum, I understand Learning Outcomes not as a new educational “paradigm” (forgive us) that we must embrace but as a language we will establish and adopt—a language that adequately describes what our students and we are doing well.

The proponents of Learning Outcomes assume that all of this assessment will

bring about positive changes that will lead to better learning among the students. (A conference our council attended last fall was titled “Assuring Improvement in Student Learning” [emphasis mine].) It may. Surely much good will follow from all educators of the institution speaking among themselves about the nature and implications of assessing students and comparing philosophies and practices. Some educators will even decide to make changes in their approaches to students in an attempt to bring about improvements. (Of course, not all changes intended as improvements bring the desired results.) But this emphasis on Learning Outcomes is not simply innocent and open-faced. This movement is based on assumptions and values that need to be examined—assessed, if you will.

For instance, in this new formulation the responsibility for producing desirable outcomes falls not upon the students but upon us, the educators. We readily accept responsibility for the elements of the educational process that we actually have power over—our own performances as professors, academic department assistants, deans, lab technicians, and budget analysts. But, in the end, we cannot be responsible for students' learning outcomes. What students ultimately do with the experiences and opportunities we provide them is, of course, in their

power only and thus is finally their own responsibility. It would be disrespectful to students and disingenuous to suggest otherwise. None of the consequences of the Outcomes movement are meaningful unless we learn how to take into account students' subjectivities. In the Outcomes equation how do we solve for this variable: Often students don't want to learn or aren't ready to learn what we want to teach them? This reluctance does not mean that students are dull or lazy. It simply means that students have their own desires for what they want to learn at this point in their lives, and often their desires don't match ours. How do we solve for the variable of the students' private lives that inevitably impinge upon their public educations—the stresses and distractions of relationships, work, vices, and habits? To date, I do not find an emphasis on students' power and responsibility in the Outcomes literature. Typically in this literature students are considered not variables but constants . . . until we add value to them.

We may find that the most meaningful results of this Learning Outcomes emphasis will be a refined capacity for delineating how much of the educational process is in the educators' power and how much is in the students' power. If we achieve as much, we will have much improved the discussion of higher education in this country. 

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### What Motivates a Student?

by Jack Mawhinney, Student

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That hunger was largely satisfied for the next forty-five years by reading in my free time, away from a career testifying in Federal and State courts in the capacity of an expert in real estate valuation. A significant lack in my education was the absence of knowledge of literature and an appreciation of good writing. I was very much aware that

I knew little or nothing of the great authors of history and the cultures of their time. As I approached retirement, I decided it was time to go back to college and seriously pursue literature and the humanities courses. I am determined to take every class offered by the English Department at Palomar College.

My three years at Palomar have been the most satisfying of my life. The literature and humanities classes are responsible for that. All of the literature courses I have taken at Palomar College (seven to date) have included lectures and extended discussion of the history, culture, and the structure of the society within which

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be metaphysical and epistemological in nature. The specific issues that are most interesting to me are 1. the problem of naturalism versus ontology, or what might be called the problem of universals. Do abstract entities exist, or is the spatio-temporal universe all there is? 2. The problem of supervenience in the philosophy of mind. 3. The existence of God.

**How do you bring your interests into the classroom?**

I find that these topics come up naturally through student questions. Many students have many questions about the existence of abstract entities as well as the existence of God. I encourage an atmosphere of curiosity in my classroom, and my students seem very comfortable asking questions that may appear to be off topic, but are philosophical in nature. Many of the questions focus on one of these two topics. I also try to keep my students current with what is being talked about in the world of philosophy right now, and one of these topics is the philosophy of mind. These topics come up fairly naturally in class.

**What kinds of assignments do you give your students?**

Besides a midterm and final exam, my students are required to write 4 précis in response to the reading assignments. This is the most challenging type of assignment for most of the students. They also write a 5-10 page paper on the philosophical topic of their choice. My students also respond to class lecture through quizzes.

**What do you want them to learn by doing these assignments?**

The purpose of these assignments is to teach the students to think analytically about their reading assignments and to integrate philosophical concepts into their daily lives. I also want them to learn how to think rationally about their beliefs, and to develop good arguments for the most important beliefs they hold.

**How do you evaluate these assignments?**

I grade the précis on the student's clarity, completeness, and brevity of her or his summary and analysis. The 5-10 page paper is graded on clarity of analysis, comprehension of the chosen philosophical problem, and demonstration of careful contemplation resulting in an offered solution to the problem. The exams are graded on a point system, with points given for correctly answered questions. However, students are encouraged to include everything they know about a topic in the answers to their exam questions as what is most important to me is that they have a comprehensive understanding of the material even if they can't remember a certain term or definition on their exam.

**How do your students show you that they are learning?**

Besides their papers and exams, we spend class time talking about moments when they realized that they were using philosophical concepts in their daily lives. I call this their "Ah Ha!" moment. It is very rewarding when a student comes to me with a story of how an irrational belief turned into a rational belief, and that belief is a cornerstone of their life philosophy.

Or perhaps they are having a discussion with a friend and they find themselves frustrated with their friend's lack of good arguments to back up what they are saying. They find themselves analyzing their friend's arguments. They suddenly have an enlightened moment, and once they have had this moment, they seem to understand the value of philosophy in their daily lives.

**Which of your students' achievements are you most proud of?**

I have had several students who have never written more than a page and have not read any classical works. These students struggle with both the reading and the writing assignments. Some have enthusiastically taken on the challenge and while they struggle with the first few papers, they fine tune their writing such that they leave the class not only understanding philosophy and having the ability to read difficult philosophical works, they can also respond analytically in writing and in verbal conversation. This does amazing things to their academic confidence. These students who struggle into success make me very proud.

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public service, and professional development. As a department, the faculty had several all day meetings to determine our definitions and the criteria we would use to measure each outcome. The first class we used for data collection graduated in Fall 1999, so now we examine the trends and decide whether or not changes need to be made in our curriculum based upon our outcomes.

**Are there Outcome measures not named on the rubric that you consider important?**

**Maybe something more qualitative than quantitative?**

As you can tell, with eight original outcomes, we have been required to monitor a variety of concepts. I cannot think of an outcome we should include, but if but if faculty members feel one needs to be included, they are free to bring it up in one of our department meetings.

**What makes you proudest of the nurses you graduate?**

They have learned how to think critically, and I know the faculty has taught them what they need to know to be safe practitioners. I also love watching how their self esteem has changed as they are proud of what they have accomplished.

**Are your graduates entering a healthy (heh, heh) field?**

Absolutely! Many are interviewed and some are hired before they graduate from school. Others take a little time to relax and review for the state board exam. Either way they are all able to get a job when they are ready. Currently the demand for nurses is very “healthy” (as you would say) and it’s a good time for new graduates to examine their options and select a job they will enjoy. ♪

**What Motivates a Student?**

by Jack Mawhinney, Student

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the literature was produced as well as a grounding in the style of writing, the canons of the period, biographical summaries of the various authors, and the influence of the predominant philosophy of the time and place—all that is necessary to an educated understanding of the subject.

Holistic teaching methods such as this excel at motivating the student. That approach is not only interesting and entertaining, but it opens a conversation with the student and the author, the historian, the physicist, the astronomer, and the philosopher. It creates an intellectual audience for the student, to offer ideas and ideals. It fills the hunger to know.

There is a latent curiosity in every human to understand our origins and place in the cosmos. For some, the instinct for curiosity is allowed to die in ignorance or is limited by belief in myth. For others, education hones the curiosity and piques the hunger to know. The most influential motivation for that hunger lies within the arms of education, both institutionalized and self taught. The most important tool of education is that which teaches the student to apply critical analysis to every event, concept, idea, and behavior. Knowledge comes with the recognition of relationships, the understanding of interconnected cause and effect. Life is a complex metaphor that challenges the mind to understand. Each successful perception feeds the hunger to learn more. ♪

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system and who, I hope, will grow to love us for who we are. The faculty, finally and at last, has ratified its first-ever contract that has been years in negotiation. I want to extend my sincere thanks and appreciation to the past and present leadership of PFF for their persistence and patience (one more time: persistence and patience).

Many of us, faculty and staff alike, spent much of the Fall 2004 semester working together to reestablish positive relationships among the constituent groups. We are united in our determination to find solutions to some of the serious financial problems we have perennially faced at Palomar. We are committed to complete, thorough, and civil discourse even when we discuss thorny, problematic issues upon which we differ. We are committed to using our process of shared governance, and we have the expectation that the processes that we have all mutually agreed upon will be followed by administration. *We have rejected the politics of divisiveness.*

Our Interim President, Dr. Jones, was very instrumental in making the psychological space for such open communication to occur. Remarkably, I have only recently learned that such spaces are created from the top down in an organization. But most importantly, I wish to thank all the constituent leaders (faculty, classified, CAST, and administrators) who have jumped into that black, empty space with me, filled with the hope that we COULD make Palomar a better place and with the fear that we might fail. Thank you ALL for taking that leap of faith.

A word on shared governance and muckraking: Palomar faculty have a reputation for being entitled and mouthy. And we are. We believe, in our hearts, that this institution is as much ours as anyone else's. We believe, in our hearts, that we are as entitled as the President to be a part of the decision making process. We believe that tenure, which is an employment protection that ensures faculty can and will discuss controversial ideas, also means that we shoulder an obligation to be the voice of dissent when others are afraid to speak. What has become acutely clear to me in my position as Faculty

Senate President and as a member of many shared governance committees is that there is a true power imbalance in our system that promotes muckraking among the entitled and mouthy. That is, at any given point on any committee that I belong, in any venue I work on campus, executive administration can change the "rules" of the game. Faculty (and other constituent groups) do not have that authority. When such violations of the governance process (or of contract agreements) occur, the only recourse that the powerless (but entitled and mouthy) have is to call those behaviors out, sometimes in committee and sometimes publicly. So here are my intentions as your Faculty Senate President: to work well with others, to promote inclusiveness, to communicate clearly, and to be a muckraker when required.

As I stand on this summit with all of you, I know that the future may never be as perfect as this moment is now. I know that by taking a few more steps I may see that I have reached a false summit and that on the other side of this trail is a switchback that reveals the next ascent. But, for right now, I am happy to be working here, shoulder to shoulder with all of you, looking expectantly towards the future.

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your questions, suggestions, criticisms, and ideas for articles and interviews.

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