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**Fall Faculty Meeting Comments 9-17-2018**

Environmental writer and activist Bill McKibben once wrote, after 10 years working on the issue of climate change, that he “needed a break from failing to save the world.” What I like so much about his statement is the recognition that his actions had no real effect on the actual problem - the world (the planet) was not being saved - yet he felt he had to keep trying. He could take a break, but he couldn’t stop.

So you may be thinking, what does this have to do with faculty at UNI?

When I started to think about what I would say today, I kept jumping from issues at UNI, to the state of Iowa, the state of the nation and even the state of the Planet. It’s hard to avoid seeing some alarming connections. Here at UNI, one of our current challenges is enrollment. As you all likely know, this is a national trend - college enrollments overall have been in decline for the last several years. At UNI and on a national level certain types of majors are in steeper decline - the humanities, for example, have been hit particularly hard.

Of course there are other issues, including demographics, at play, but it can be no coincidence that these declines are occurring at a time when higher education is being devalued on a national level – and humanities disciplines are often singled out as the least valuable part of a University education. This has taken many forms:

* Budget cuts for public universities around the country that have resulted in significant tuition increases.
* The proliferation of popular narratives about universities being filled with “useless” and lazy ivory tower academics who don’t understand or can’t function in the “real world” and who fill the minds of youth with leftist propaganda and don’t provide them with any marketable skills.
* The publication of numerous articles attempting to measure the economic value of a college degree, or a particular major, as if that were the only way to measure its worth.

We face these challenges at a time when our right to organize and bargain collectively has been limited by new state law here in Iowa. This also reflects national patterns: the undermining of workers’ rights and the attempts to reverse gains on civil rights. We live at a time of growing anti-intellectualism, a dismissal of critical thinking and evidence-based decision making: where factual reporting is dismissed as “fake news” and real problems, like climate change are brushed aside because there is allegedly no evidence that they exist.

Because universities traditionally have stressed the importance of teaching students to think critically and to become active citizens who contribute to the public good - It is no surprise that they would be singled out for hostility by those who want us to believe that evidence-based reporting is “fake news” and Climate Change is not real.

So this set of thoughts lead me to two conclusions:

1) We are facing an existential threat as university faculty members, as Americans and as inhabitants of the planet.

2) This is really overwhelming - that is why I thought of the Bill McKibben quote. It doesn’t matter that we know we are not actually going to save the world – or even the university system - we still have to keep trying.

So what I am suggesting faculty can do?

1) We can be vigilant about upholding democratic practices on campus and elsewhere. On this front there are several campus issues that need our attention this year:

a) There is an upcoming vote to keep UF as our bargaining unit. Because of the new state law, we are being asked to vote on the question of whether UNI faculty members have the right to be represented by UF/AAUP. This is not a vote about whether you want to be in the union or not, just about whether the union can represent us in contract negotiations.

b) Today we are beginning campus wide discussion of the expansion of voting rights to include at least some non-tenure-track faculty. This is another thing faculty will have to vote on to make any change, since it is part of the faculty constitution.

c) We need to be part of the discussion on a number of other proposed changes in the works that will have will have long-term effects for faculty and the university as a whole: such as changes to the Faculty Handbook, including Faculty Evaluation procedures, & our General Education program.

2) I think we also need, inside the university and in public to take a more active stance against attacks on the idea of the University; on anti–intellectualism, on attempts to narrow our focus to job training and the related idea of “useless” majors.

The notion of “useful” and “useless” majors invariably centers on some version of the question: “what can you do with that degree?” as if the only value of a major is its job prospects and starting salary. I want to make it clear, I am *no*t suggesting that jobs and salary are unimportant. I do think we should care what kinds of jobs our students are getting, But I think that using this as the *only* measure of value of a degree weakens the University - in part because it pits certain types of majors/degrees against each other –i.e. “useless” academic v. “useful” professional majors. But also because other things matter.

I want to use the humanities as an example here - to get to the issue of what else is important - because humanities disciplines are most frequently under attack as “useless “ majors – and because that is the area I am most familiar with.

As Philosopher Martha Nussbaum pointed out, humanities disciplines teach skills employers value, such as accountability, logic and innovative thinking, but more importantly they teach skills and ways of thinking that are central to maintaining democratic societies and promoting democratic values. By teaching college students to think creatively and critically and to be sensitive to the perspectives of others, the humanities teaches them how to be thoughtful and engaged citizens of democratic societies, and citizens of the world.

This suggests that the humanities are useful, in fact indispensable, in helping us address the single greatest problem facing all of us: the devastating effects human activities are having on the environment, including climate change. If we and most other creatures on the planet are heading toward extinction by a variety of means – including longer and more intense heat waves, droughts, floods or loss of habitat - nothing else, no other problems we have will matter.

We already know how important science is to this topic. But scientists have already provided overwhelming evidence of climate change and many of its effects. They have made a variety of recommendations for things that can be done to at least mitigate it. But in large part things are not changing. We ignore the problem, although clearly on some level people are worried: how else can we account for the proliferation of end of the world tv shows and movies - from Zombie apocalypses to the Colonization of Mars - except as examples of the return of the repressed.

The humanities can help us to address this paradox in two ways:

1. First, as Nussbaum suggests, by training students to be engaged citizens of the world who are likely to understand and act on the threat posed by climate change;
2. Second (along with the social sciences) by shedding light on the question of why so few changes have been made to address this coming catastrophe, why has it been so widely ignored or dismissed. To get at these sorts of issues we need to explore how various groups of people have understood the concept of “nature” across place, time, and social, cultural and political traditions. To ask how their actions have been shaped by these worldviews, economic and political systems, social structures.

Overall, we need to assert that universities are useful and relevant*, not* *despite* our “non-applied” majors but because of the way that the various majors and disciplines work together – professional or applied and the more “academic” ones. First, as teachers we all try to teach students to be thinking, skilled and informed citizens; and second, as faculty members we conduct research in a variety of disciplines, research that works together to shed light on different aspects of many important questions - including the most important issue facing the world today.

There is a lot for us to do this year, so don’t forget, we are all going to need a break from time to time from failing to save the university, let alone the world.