Interview with the President

On the day preceding the September meeting of the Faculty Senate, President Alexander was interviewed by our inquiring reporter. The portion of the interview most relevant to the topics discussed at the Senate meeting is given below.

NL: When you spoke to the faculty at the beginning of this semester, you referred to our student-retention problem and said that we could no longer afford simply to flunk out students who had the necessary ability but were inadequately prepared — that we should make an effort to retain these students. I have heard quite a few people say that this means that you want us to "lower standards." Is this true?

KA: I feel that as we progress educationally here at Western and in the State of Kentucky we should be in the process of raising standards all the time. Students don't all arrive at college with precisely the same level of preparation; teaching is a process of reaching out to some students and assisting them more than those who need it less. In your own classes, you will have students of widely-differing levels of achievement; a good teacher will be able to pull as many of the under-prepared students along as possible. It's harder work — it's much more difficult than simply "shooting it out there," giving them a test, and flunking them out. With a teacher who tries to bring them along, for many of these students a light will suddenly appear halfway through the term, and they'll feel that now they can move along and they have learned something. My appeal to the faculty was to be sure that we are not leaving these students, that we're making the extra effort to reach out to them. An outstanding teacher, I believe, is able to bring them up to the level at which they should be, and doesn't just reject them and send them home.

An example that hit home to me, in my own family, is my son, who graduated from Cornell this year. In his senior year, he decided to take Latin. He had Frederick Ahl, who is a great classicist of international renown. After the first class, he said to my son, "Son, we're going to learn Latin this year, but first I'm going to have to teach you English grammar." He worked with my son on English grammar, outside of class, and my son finished with an A in Latin and knew English grammar. My son graduated with honors from Cornell University. If Frederick Ahl can do that, we too can do it. That was my point when I spoke to the faculty. Frederick Ahl wasn't lowering his standards. He just helped a student who needed it. That's all I meant.

NL: You were just talking about the individual faculty member making an effort for students who need that, who have the potential but don't have the preparation?

KA: Yes. We're talking about a frame of mind. There is a frame of mind in which a teacher thinks, well, these students are not prepared; if they're not prepared, I'm just going to reject them. That's a bad attitude. We should always guard against it.

NL: Perhaps we all pay lip service to that ideal. Some actually practice it. Many don't. I'm afraid I don't — not unless the student asks me for help. You can get ground down by spending year after year teaching classes in which most of
the students don't even want to learn the subject — they take it to fulfill some requirement. And in a general education section with 90 students, you can't give anything in the way of individual attention, or helping those who fall behind. Most students don't seem to want it; they appear to avoid personal contact with the teacher as much as possible.

KA: Many of our students are not sophisticated; some of them have never been out of their county before coming here. Some of them are in awe of a professor. If the professor doesn't go to the student and say, "Son, you need help," that student may stand off in fear of the professor.

There is a problem in teaching large sections. At Western, we have a student-faculty ratio that is fairly low compared to most state institutions: something about 16-1, comparable to many small, private schools. We should not have large sections that are burdensome to the teacher and create communications problems. If we place a lot of students into one of these sections, and the faculty member teaches it rather perfunctorily while he looks forward to teaching his specialization, that could contribute to our retention problem — which I believe to be the most serious problem we have at Western.

NL: It has been suggested that we are going into the community college business too hastily, that it might cause us to lose enrollment and then faculty, that we should do a study of the possible consequences first. Would you comment on that?

KA: We can't avoid community colleges by not having one. UK's are all around us; they are moving in from all directions. Community colleges are not a new discovery; it isn't necessary to do a study to see what the consequences are — they are there to be seen. The University of Kentucky certainly hasn't been harmed. Its enrollment is rising, primarily due to its community college system. People are unduly concerned about the community college; it is not a major thrust of this University. It is an alternate channel for the non-traditional student.

NL: Will University faculty be forced to teach in the Community College if they don't want to?

KA: No one will be assigned to the Community College against his or her will.

NL: How about the extended campus offerings?

KA: I don't want a faculty member who doesn't want to, to go off campus and teach. I hope to make it more financially attractive, so that faculty members will want to participate.

NL: In your session with the Graduate Faculty, you said that service to the State of Kentucky, given our circumstances, would have to come before research. What did you mean by "service"?

KA: I had in mind the types of programs in which faculty members work with the State, or with Kentucky businesses and industries, in their areas of specialization. It is difficult to draw precise boundaries between service and research, or between research and teaching. You can't provide much in the way of service in an area of specialization if you don't do any research in that area — at least library research. You can't teach a subject if you don't research that subject to some extent.

NL: At Western, the word "service" has taken on a rather specialized meaning. To many faculty members, it refers to things like speaking to the Rotary Club; when you said "service to the State of Kentucky" must come before research, many of us thought you meant that speaking to the Rotary Club must come before research. I take it that was not your meaning?

KA: No, it was not.
EDITORIAL

The College Heights Herald: a New Low

Any number of persons must have noticed, over the years, the similarity between the process of being quoted in the College Heights Herald and the male role in procreation; in both cases, you know what you put in, but what eventually comes out is so different. All dedicated students of the Herald are aware of this phenomenon, and make allowances for it when they read that journal. When a respected colleague, known for circumspection and sagacity, gets the Herald treatment and comes off sounding like one of evolution's failed experiments, we do not immediately conclude that he is brain dead; we chuckle maliciously, promise ourselves never to give an interview to the Herald, and chalk up another reputation to the errant Unterseeboot of college journalism.

As chair of the Faculty Senate Communications Committee, I have a responsibility to see to it that the faculty is as little misinformed as possible about what goes on at Senate meetings. This is the first time I have thought it imperative to issue a warning against believing the Herald account of a Senate meeting.

Many faculty members will have formed their ideas about events at the September meeting of the Senate from reading the article in the September 16 issue of the Herald, entitled President, faculty question Western's education value. There are some correct statements in the article. On the whole, however, the representation of the Senate meeting which it presents is simply (it is the best word) false; it is false in quotation, selection, emphasis, overall impression, and in detail. It is false beyond the tradition of the Herald, and, therefore, beyond the allowances that we automatically make for Herald journalism. In making these statements, I do not have to rely on memory or hastily scribbled notes. I make it a practice to tape-record meetings of the Senate; I still have the tape of this meeting. No intelligent person, unblinded by animosity, could think that the Herald article is in the same part of the universe as a fair description of the Senate meeting.

(i) The headline is absurd. One Senator made a remark that could be interpreted as questioning Western's educational value. No other utterance made, by anyone, at the meeting could be interpreted in the sense of the headline.

(ii) The article gives a false impression of the main topic of the meeting, which was quality in higher education. From a reading of the article, one would think it was the 'value-added' method of evaluation. Half of the meeting was given over to an address by the President, only a minuscule portion of which is mentioned in the article. Dr. Alexander spent 4 minutes and 38 seconds on the subject of value added. Only two questions, and one comment, were asked or made on this topic. The President spent a total of one minute and 48 seconds in replying to all three. That is the extent of the value-added discourse. Furthermore, the article gives the impression that President Alexander advocated the use of the value-added system, over the objections of the faculty. He did not. He said that he was hesitant to go too far in that direction, that he was not comfortable with 'value added' as a means of measuring quality, and that he did not accept pre-testing and post-testing in order to measure value added.

(iii) The article gives a false impression of the nature and tone of the meeting, depicting it as a hostile confrontation between the President and the faculty. It was not confrontational, in so far as I can judge, and was not hostile in tone. It may well be that some of the Senators present were hostile to the President, but, with the possible exception of one rather snippy remark, I have not found any verbal evidence that that was the case. The Herald reporter refers to a 'tense but friendly exchange' between Alexander and Gene Evans (hereinafter referred to as GE). I must have missed that (and I regret it, as I cannot form a clear idea of what a tense but friendly exchange would be like and I seek instruction). I did not observe tension in their 'exchange,' or friendliness, or unfriendliness. It seemed to me to be a fairly typical interaction between GE and a regular person. Questions and comments were asked and made by twelve different Senators.
Only three of these, each of whom had made remarks that were of, or could be interpreted as having, a critical nature were mentioned in the Herald article. Supportive and neutral remarks were omitted. The resulting picture is that of a President harried by a pack of angry Senators.

(iv) When the Herald reporter says that 'Many senators agreed with the idea of measuring the value added by classes,' she is writing fiction. I am sure that many Senators, in their thoughts, agreed with this idea, and still agree with it. I agree with it. But no Senator, in the course of the meeting, said that he did. The sentence I have just quoted from the Herald is immediately followed by the sentence, 'But when they said they didn't know how it could be done and asked Alexander for examples, he didn't have any.' Note that the word 'they,' in the second sentence quoted, refers to 'Many senators,' in the first sentence quoted. This brings us to the fourth, and gravest, offense of the article.

If I could be sure that it were the work of design rather than incompetence, I would describe the Herald article as a particularly heavy-handed hatchet job on the President.

Consider the following examples:

When Dr. Alexander had finished his address, Janet Palmer asked, 'President Alexander, do you have any concrete examples of types of instruments that we could use to assess this value-added instruction and even extend it to faculty assessment?' to which the President replied, rather breezily, 'Not I.' Palmer then responded, 'I didn't think you did.' That is the only case, in the entire meeting, of anyone asking the President for an example of how value added could be measured. Note that one Senator is not many Senators.

The Herald article, in its second paragraph, gives its first version of this event: 'Alexander told the Senate that Western needs to devise a way to measure how much students learn in classes, but couldn't answer faculty questions on how to do that.' In its fourth paragraph, the article returns to the Palmer question in order to give a second version: 'Many senators agreed with the idea of measuring the value added by classes. But when they said they didn't know how it could be done and asked Alexander for examples, he didn't have any.' What is nothing more than repetition with variation, in the manner of Hebrew poetry, gives the impression of relentless questioning by the faculty met with endless inability to answer on the part of the President. It seems clear to me, considering all of his statements on the subject, that Dr. Alexander has serious reservations about the value-added methodology and does not believe that reliable and valid instruments for its measurement exist. Of course, if one arbitrarily adopts the attitude that he is committed to this methodology and intends to force it on us as the method for measuring quality, then, in view of the previous sentence, one must conclude that he is committed to a system of whose instruments he is ignorant. But, on the basis of what the President said at the Senate meeting, I can come up with no reason to adopt that attitude except a desire to reach that conclusion. We should make some measurement of the value added by our courses, but I doubt if we will find a completely satisfactory instrument ready-made.

The article, in its ninth paragraph, compulsively returns for a last time to this theme: 'Alexander said "quality indicators" are used at the University of Florida, where he taught before coming to Western. However, he didn't say what those indicators are.' That, at least, is true; he didn't. And he wasn't asked to.

The President's remarks are misquoted, and even misplaced, in such a way as to discredit him. When GE asked whether we are providing higher education or merely post-secondary education, Alexander replied that, actually, the term post-secondary education refers to all education that comes after secondary school. The Herald has him uttering the idiocy, 'whatever comes after secondary school is higher education.'

The article quotes GE as saying, 'You would expect that a college graduate would not mutilate the mother tongue regularly.' It has the President answer, 'I would hate to have a legislator hear a professor say that.' The trick used here is to print an answer given by the President to one question as the answer to a different question, truncating the answer so as to eliminate evidence that the answer corresponds to another question. Here is the appropriate question: GE asked whether Western is a repeat of high school or an

*Italics added.
extension of high school. Alexander replied, 'I would hate to have a legislator hear a professor wonder whether or not Western Kentucky University should be anything but a high school.' The Herald replaces the last 14 words, which would have given the game away, by the words, 'say that.' In spite of spooky coincidences of this sort, I cannot believe that the Herald travesty is a deliberate attempt to trash the President; why would the reporter want to do that? But it is almost enough to make you question the value of a Western education.

E. S. Dorman

The Senate Meeting of September 11

Senate Chair Gene Evans introduced President Alexander, whom he had invited to address the Senate on the subject of quality in a university.

President Alexander's Address to the Senate

The President informed the Senate that he had spent 2½ years working on 'quality indicators' for the university system of Florida. His idea, he said, of what a state university should be was expressed by Ezra Cornell when he began to plan Cornell University: 'I would found an institution where any person can find instruction in any study.' A university should not be a place of narrow interests and restricted thought, but one of diversity and innovation.

Dr. Alexander listed four competitive ideologies that have contributed to the shaping of higher education in this country: the mental discipline school, which assumed that enforced contact with Greek and Latin grammar, and with mathematics, sharpened the mental faculties and strengthened the character; the philosophy of utility, which sought to make education useful, practical, and of public service; the German system, which considers the universities to be the research arm of society; and the cultural school, which places its emphasis on the humanities and seeks to develop aesthetically sensitive, well-rounded students. We should attempt to encompass the objectives of each of these schools.

In a report published in July, 1986, the Educational Commission of the States identified several challenges to our universities:

(i) To prepare students for the wide range of opportunities offered by a changing work force and society. In the workplace, people will need both the ability to analyze and think critically, and the interpersonal skills necessary for getting along with their fellow workers.

(ii) To improve overall rates of college participation and completion. Nationwide, both the college attendance and completion rates are far too low. The attrition rate at Western is particularly high.

(iii) To meet the educational needs of an increasingly diverse student population. Dramatic changes in student demography can no longer be accommodated by undergraduate programs initially designed for more affluent, homogeneous student populations. Only about one-sixth of the students in higher education in the United States are the traditional, on-campus, resident students. At Western, we have not addressed the non-traditional student.

(iv) To build greater student involvement in the undergraduate experience.

Two weeks ago, Dr. Alexander continued, the National Governors' Association presented a report in which it is stated that, according to a 1984 national survey, 40% of the college and university students in the United States believe that no professor takes a special interest in their personal academic lives. Forty-two percent said that they felt that most students are treated like numbers. The manner in which faculty members work with students is clearly a factor affecting the quality of a university. A quality program must have as its foundation a faculty which can teach and teach well. The quality of a program is closely related to the retention rate: a 1980 study found that the quality of teaching ranked first among the factors influencing student retention. It has been shown
that student satisfaction does not require a lowering of standards, but teachers do need to demonstrate that they care about the students and their work.

Academic advisement is another key to student retention. Dr. Alexander submitted that the students at Western will stop rejecting us in droves when we provide quality teaching, a caring attitude, and a program of academic advisement that demonstrates that we are interested in them.

Assessment of programs for the purpose of determining their quality is always necessary; the accurate depiction of what the students are learning, and what their knowledge and abilities are, will enable an institution to improve the quality of its programs. Governors, and other groups which form and shape education in the United States, have begun to use the term 'value added' as a measure of the quality of education. They suggest that the quality of a program is measured by how much the students learn while they are in the program. In a Nebraska case, a teacher was dismissed because she didn't 'add the value' that was expected, and the dismissal was upheld in court.

Dr. Alexander said that he was hesitant about going too far in that direction; that we must beware of imposing the will of persons external to the classroom upon what happens in the classroom.

Alexander said that he did not believe that quality can be founded on a narrow, parochial conception of what a state university should be. A state university is different from a small, private school. For a state university, quality means diversity, movement, and change. The first President of the University of Michigan said that he had endeavored to induce every citizen of the state to regard himself as a stockholder in the institution, a stockholder who has a real interest in making it of the greatest service to his children and to those of his neighbors. He said also that he had sought to make all of the schools and teachers in the state part of one united system — the young pupil in the most secluded area of the state should be encouraged to see that the path was open from his home up to, and through, the University of Michigan. President Alexander said that, if we can define quality within the scope of the ideals espoused by the founders of Cornell University and the University of Michigan, we will have a sound philosophy with respect to which we can begin to measure quality.

The Question and Answer Period

Janet Palmer asked the President if he had any concrete examples of types of instruments that we could use to assess value-added instruction, and even extend it to faculty assessment. The President replied, 'Not I.'

Joan Krenzin said that she needed help with the interpretation of the term 'value added,' and related an anecdote illustrating the fact that the most poorly prepared students can have the greatest value added, even if they do not finish at an acceptable level. JK also asked a rather complicated question, the essence of which (I speak subject to correction) was whether we should graduate substandard students. Alexander replied that quality is an extremely important issue; however, how it is to be measured is the worrisome part. He said that he is not comfortable with 'value added' as a means of measuring quality.

Robert Baum stated that most workshops attempt to measure value added by pre-testing and post-testing, and that most of those present had had a statistics course and could develop pre-tests and post-tests. The President said that it was much too easy to go to a test to determine value added, that we are not sure just what the total development of skills and knowledge in a class might be.

Rita Hessley inquired as to how closely the President was tying quality and retention together, and asked, if we do have a retention problem, are we led to the conclusion that the quality of the teaching here is quite low? Alexander answered that studies show that quality teaching tends to retain students, but that there are many factors contributing to the problem at Western: social factors, and factors which go back to their high schools and families. He stated that, as teachers, we must agree that quality of instruction is a major factor in student retention.
Gene Evans asked if we are to expect that what we do at Western is more challenging than what we find in the public schools, and whether Western is a repeat of high school or an extension of high school. Alexander said that we should extend the student as far as possible beyond high school; we do not want to do high-school work.

Elaine Humm said that she understood the President to be saying, not that we are an extension of high school, but that many of our students come here with a background that we would not have preferred, and that we have to take such students as they are and do some remediation, such as our 055 and 056 courses, to bring them up.

Chuck Crume commented that, in his first year at Western, he took a course in which there were 30 students, 24 of whom failed. He has often wondered, he said, if the 24 were really that bad, or whether the success rate with that particular teacher was not what it should have been.

Gene Evans said that, at a meeting of the student panel on minority retention, one of the students said that one thing that would help would be for all of the faculty to do their jobs. He took it that that meant we were supposed to teach something. Another factor that came up was that they frequently felt they were all treated as numbers. GE said that, to him, doing the job meant seeing that the students learn something; but, in his 21 years here, he had found that that objective was not always appreciated by the students. He also wondered how significant a factor in the process of evaluating a faculty member is the amount students learn from her/him. [N.B. There are 11 that's in this paragraph.]

President Alexander said that we need to treat the student as a consumer, and as a person who is struggling in the system along with us. Basically, we need to like students and to want to work with them. If we don't, we won't be happy in our jobs.

William Kummer said that, if we want to bring students up to an appropriate level, we need to be continually examining ourselves. We become very haughty, and forget that we were once in the same position as the students. We need to be a little more attentive to the needs of today's youth. He surmised that we may not operate in the same format as the students, or some of them, in terms of language, conceptualization, thinking, and dress. He said that he is convinced that some of us intimidate students, though not necessarily intentionally, and by doing so, leave a nasty, negative taste in their mouths. This influences retention.

Jim Flynn asked the President to talk about his intentions regarding the community college, how it will relate to the programs already in place, and how much expansion we can afford.

Dr. Alexander prefaced his response with the remark that he had never known such a diminutive appendage to cause so much discussion. He said that it was not a major thrust of the University; that it is something to serve a certain type of student, but not something of a nature or caliber to rock the University in any direction. He quoted an article in the Courier Journal which claimed that the UK community college system was the most important factor in UK's rising enrollment. Community colleges are funded by the State formula. As he believes that UK established that formula to give leverage to its community college system, Alexander said that we would be foolhardy if we did not establish a community college program. This would not detract from the University, but could strengthen it, as a community college could allow us to raise the standards of the University by providing an education for students who would fail at the University level. It will not cost us, he continued, beyond the initiation of the program, as the State will recompense us at the same level as it does UK. The concept is one that is well-established, one with which we may be able to educate about 2,000 students, and which can complement the University. The Kentucky State formula gives more money, per FTE student, for community colleges relative to universities than any other state in the country. The University of Kentucky can run 14 community colleges, Alexander said; he doesn't see why we can't run one.

Rudolph Prins asked about the possibility of our community college becoming a full-grown, four-year college and competing with us. The President said that there was no statutory authority for such an occurrence.
Keith Gabehart asked if all the Academic Deans are aware that, according to the President, teaching and student retention are the primary objects of concern to faculty members? Some departments, he said, are being told that research is. Alexander replied that we have to have teaching and research and service. You cannot provide very important service if you do not do any research, and you cannot teach a subject if you don't research it, but there is no question that teaching is the most important of the three activities. It must be number one.

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Letters to the editor, articles, announcements, histograms, etc., may be sent to E. S. Dorman, Department of Physics and Astronomy, TCCW 246.