

An Open Letter to Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs Jeffrey Olson and President Matthew Holland

5 February 2018

As members of the faculty of Utah Valley University, we write to express our concerns about ways your administration is changing the identity of a university we cherish. In particular, recent denial of sabbatical leave for eligible members of the faculty undermines values we believe are at the core of an institution we have jointly developed over decades.

On January 17, 2018, five out of eight sabbatical applications from the College of Humanities and Social Sciences were emphatically rejected: “The request is **NOT** approved because resource constraints and increase in enrollment restrict sabbatical approvals to one from each department.” This sudden change in practice has engendered outrage and dismay among UVU faculty.

You decided to limit sabbaticals to one from each department. After awarding sabbaticals to the outgoing chair of English and to the outgoing coordinator of Humanities, your rejection of two applications from Philosophy/Humanities and three English sabbatical applications means that one of 20 and one of 45 in the respective departments will have sabbaticals in the coming year. On this model, English faculty can expect to have a sabbatical every 45 years. On this model, regardless of the quality of the research proposed, outgoing administrators will be preferred for sabbaticals (your third sabbatical award went to an Associate Vice President stepping down from his position). On this model, faculty in a small department like Integrated Studies can expect sabbaticals every 5 years.

UVU policy states that “Sabbatical leave is an opportunity offered to qualified faculty to engage in scholarly and creative activities that will enhance their capacity to contribute to the University.” Each of the five applicants you turned down would have returned from their sabbatical with greatly enhanced capacities. We teach from positions of strength when our classes are based on our scholarly work.

“The basic eligibility criteria are tenure and six years of academic service in a full-time faculty position at UVU,” criteria all five applicants fulfilled. These criteria suggest, as does the word “sabbatical,” that faculty might reasonably expect and plan for a regular sabbatical. For decades, sabbaticals have not only been granted but encouraged at UVSC and UVU. We have hired excellent colleagues in part because of the expectation of support for research. We are better teachers because of our sabbaticals.

Sabbatical leaves are “subject to availability of funds and suitable instructional replacements” and “applying for a sabbatical leave is a competitive process, since sabbatical funding is limited.” Given these constraints, policy requires that “The college/school and department shall work together to fund the sabbatical leave and the costs of instructional replacement during the absence of the faculty member.” Each of the five applications you denied included statements by the department and the college detailing how these costs would be covered and suitable instructional replacements found. Nonetheless, you cite “resource constraints” as a reason to deny these sabbatical applications. If there are legitimate funding issues at UVU, you would have done well to announce them at the beginning of the academic year in order to save the professors of English and Philosophy the considerable trouble of writing their sabbatical applications.

Because your decision was made unilaterally, because it contradicts department and college recommendations and expectations, and because it makes little sense to us, we are left to wonder if you are working with unstated assumptions and toward goals you have failed to subject to the discussion required by shared governance. At best we work together to improve our university. At worst, changes are imposed by the administration.

Actions taken over the last few years may fit into a pattern that might explain your decision on sabbaticals. We say “may” and “might” because we are left to speculate in the absence of discussion.

- You have in some cases required departments to hire lecturers rather than the tenure-track professors they requested. Lecturers teach more students than professors on tenure track and consequently are less able to pay attention to individual students.
- The new Classroom Building was constructed with large classrooms in anticipation of increasingly large numbers of students per class. Large classes reduce the ability of professors to interact meaningfully with individual students.
- Although they represent a decline in quality instruction, you have touted large online courses as both desirable and inevitable.
- You are arguing for an increase in the size of English 1010 and 2010 sections, a change that will undermine the quality of those courses.
- You sent an email to faculty suggesting that as we make hiring decisions we should avoid hiring colleagues with ambitious research programs.
- We are a teaching university, messages from your administration remind us regularly, declarations that implicitly pit teaching against research and that affect the quality of our teaching.

How can one explain these shifts from UVU’s traditional emphasis on quality instruction, a shift that, as we noted, now includes denial of sabbatical requests for research purposes?

One of several possible answers may lay in an event in our recent past.

In 2014, Clayton Christensen, a professor at the Harvard Business School, lectured in UVU’s Ragan Theater. Christensen is famous for his theory of “disruption” and, applying his business theory to education, he asked how universities can avoid being disrupted by cheaper private universities like the University of Phoenix. The answer, he said, is to quit focusing on quality.

Students don’t want quality from universities, Christiansen argued. And because quality is not important, universities should make extensive use of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) and should cease sponsoring research by their faculty unless the research focuses on teaching methods. There is so much knowledge already available, he claimed, that we can’t possibly teach it anyway and so we should not waste our money on research by professors.

Disrupting traditional practices that support good research in the service of good teaching is difficult, Christiansen said. And because professors will insist on quality, the necessary changes will have to be imposed by administrators. Vice President Olson and President Holland, you both have a history of involvement with these ideas.

In 2011, Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring published a book titled *The Innovative University, Changing the DNA of Higher Education from the Inside Out*. The book features BYU-Idaho as a case study of a university with a mission that contrasts with Harvard's. Among those who "generously read and commented on the manuscript" are "Matt Holland" and "Jeffrey Olson." Several ideas from the book parallel and perhaps explain your decisions. Two quotations seem especially apropos:

"Most universities cannot afford to offer so many subjects to such diverse types of students or to require their professors to compete in a world of research scholarship that is becoming increasingly expensive and conceptually narrow" (xxvii).

"Scholarly activities [at BYU-Idaho] were focused on the scholarship of teaching and learning rather than traditional discovery research" (27).

Is it possible, we ask, that you have been systematically transforming our university according to these disruptive theories? And that you have been doing so without consulting the faculty of UVU?

While we are speculating, speculating because your decisions have been made without the open discussions that real shared governance requires, doesn't it seem likely that your precipitous announcement that UVU would thoroughly revise its undergraduate experience before a new president begins work is the last gambit in this game?

Alternately, might one explain the direction you are taking the university as a response to forces inside and outside the university that are hostile to the very idea of sabbatical leave, to stakeholders who believe faculty are paid to teach and that a sabbatical means only that they are not teaching? If that is the case, might we not reasonably expect you to educate them about the value of sabbaticals, of research in general, of professional development, of the intrinsic connections between scholarship and good teaching?

Or, perhaps your decisions are a response to waiting lists for some of our required classes. If this is the case, we have a suggestion: find ways to let us hire more tenure-track professors. As our student numbers increase, the number of faculty who are in the best position to offer quality instruction must also increase.

While raising these questions about what feels like a precipitous and unfortunate change of course for our university, movement away from the claim in our mission statement that "UVU builds on a foundation of substantive scholarly and creative work to foster engaged learning," we acknowledge that your administration has supported our work in various ways. The recent state-of-the-university address emphasized that your work has led to positive outcomes. To build on that support and on those outcomes, we would do well to discuss the issues in question here. Absent an open discussion, without real shared governance, we are left to speculate and to respond heatedly and to suspect that you don't understand or respect the qualities of the university that has been our project for decades. We need to talk.

*Postscript: Vice President Olson has, reportedly, reversed his decision on one of the sabbatical applications he denied. We applaud that reversal. At the same time, we reiterate our argument that the original decision establishing research and teaching as opponents in a zero-sum game is part of an ongoing pattern that lessens the quality of teaching at UVU.*

Members of the Faculty of UVU

Scott Abbott, Integrated Studies, Philosophy/Humanities, Vice President—UVU AAUP Chapter

Chris Weigel, Philosophy

Daniel Horns, Earth Science

Alex Simon, Sociology, President of the UVU Chapter of the AFT

Wioleta Fedeczko, English

Jim Harris, Botany

Keith Snedegar, History

Lydia Kerr, English

Alan Clarke, Integrated Studies

Kelli Potter, Philosophy

Lyn Bennett, History

Rob Carney, English

Heath Ogden, Biology

Shannon Mussett, Philosophy

David Knowlton, Anthropology and President of the UVU Chapter of the AAUP

Matthew Draper, Psychology

Robert Cousins, English

Robert Robbins, Biology

Nathan Gorelick, English

Rick McDonald, English and Secretary of the UVU Chapter of the AAUP

Virginia Bayer, Biology

Mike Bunds, Earth Science

Kate McPherson, English

Jorgen Hansen, Philosophy

Nathan Gale, English

Jerry Petersen, English

Jeff Packer, Languages

John Hunt, History

Christa Albrecht-Crane, English

Pierre Lamarche, Philosophy

Michael Goode, History

David Scott, Communication

Brian Whaley, English

Dan Stephen, Earth Science

Don Faurot, Mathematics

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