



Faculty Lunches with the Dean (No. 3)

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On Wednesday I had another round of Faculty Lunches with the Dean. This time the group included Whitney Afonso, Chuck Szypszak, Dale Roenigk, and Meredith Smith. The idea from our strategic foresight process is that four faculty members join me each month to share something about their work during a 90-minute (or thereabouts) lunch. I also committed to blogging about the conversations so that everyone could learn about the work of their colleagues. This post highlights the information that was shared by Whitney and Chuck, and I'll post another one soon about the work of Dale and Meredith.



Whitney Afonso

Whitney Afonso. Whitney talked about two things she is working on. She is a member of a



legislatively-created steering committee led by the Insurance Commissioner and the State Fire Marshall to explore ways to reverse trends showing decreased levels of firefighter volunteerism across North Carolina. This is a national problem that, not surprisingly, disproportionately affects rural areas. Whitney can drop some numbers on the subject. 85% of North Carolina's fire departments are volunteers but serve only 35% of the state's population. And the number of volunteer firefighters has decreased by 14% over the last 30 years. Whitney got involved in this project through one of Carl Stenberg's students in the Public Executive Leadership Academy (PELA) who asked if anyone from the School could help out. One reason Whitney was a good choice is because the committee is exploring tax incentives and other policy options that might encourage greater volunteerism. This project also illustrates how the School's faculty members historically have added value by bringing their expertise and general knowledge to bear on a problem that is slightly outside of their usual work. Fun fact: Wayne Goodwin, Commissioner of Insurance, was a night manager at the Institute of Government when we still had dormitory rooms for public officials and he also participated in our state government intern program.



Whitney's Firefighting Friends

Whitney's other item was an immersion course that she is developing for students in both formats of the MPA Program—online and on campus. This elective course (1.5 credit) will be our first one that is open to all MPA students. It will require six weeks of reading and research using our online platform combined with an intensive, face-to-face weekend in Chapel Hill. The students will be exposed to School faculty members offering different perspectives on the same topic—financing change in a community. The final day of the weekend will be a case study facilitated by MPA



alumni where the students will have to present, defend, and negotiate the interests of different stakeholder groups. Whitney is enthusiastic about this class for a couple of reasons. It will offer our online students a meaningful opportunity to interact with our alumni and a broader set of School faculty members. It also is a wonderful opportunity for interaction between our online and residential students. Kudos to Whitney for stepping forward to create this course, which is not something she was required to do.



Chuck Szypszak

Chuck Szypszak. Chuck talked about his work with registers of deeds and growing issues around public access to their records. Registers of deeds are custodians for real estate instruments, birth and death certificates, and marriage licenses. Retaining records is not incidental to the work of registers—records are the essence of their work and the act of filing documents with them can have far-reaching legal implications. For example, the proper recording of documents can determine the security of mortgage loans and the resolution of completing claims to valuable property. These records increasingly are being stored and maintained in electronic databases that can be viewed on the Internet. Chuck says that commercial data brokers and other businesses (Zillow, for example) are requesting large-scale database downloads so that they can incorporate real estate records into their services. Many registers offices, especially in rural counties, lack the personnel and other resources to meet these requests. In some ways this is a concern shared by many public institutions that are required to provide access to records—including the University. The registers also have another concern, however. When registers record documents, they are required to provide assurances about their reliability in ways that have serious legal implications. They are concerned that the public might rely on documents accessed through other services that do not provide those reliability assurances.

Chuck is working with the registers across the state on best practices for dealing with the issues raised by these requests for database downloads. For example, should someone be able to



download an entire database if they have the ability to view the relevant records online? The registers also are looking at possible legislative solutions that balance the demand for access to public records with attention to reliability, authenticity, and the allocation of scarce resources. The registers feel like the public records law hasn't kept pace with the implications of changing technology and the different reasons for accessing public records. Meredith talked about how clerks of court have similar concerns about the availability of certain foreclosure documents. At the same time, however, Dale noted that in some ways there is a trend in the other direction as a growing number of local governments voluntarily and routinely make more of their documents available online. The issue of public records is one that many faculty members at the School address with clients groups that may have different and conflicting interests. I thought the discussion with our lunch group was a fascinating one, and it somehow seemed appropriate that it occurred in the same week we discussed our neutrality principles at a faculty meeting. Our clients may have different positions about public records, and we help them accomplish their goals and advise everyone about the law, but the School itself doesn't have a position on the availability of public records.

A word of warning for future lunch participants. There is no expectation that you prepare anything for the meeting—no handouts and no PowerPoint. Because I am going to blog about each session, I do ask that you give me a one paragraph summary after the meeting about what you discussed . It allows me to focus on the conversation rather than on taking detailed notes, and it makes it much easier for me to write an accurate blog post.