



Faculty Lunches with the Dean (No . 5)

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On Monday I had the latest round of Faculty Lunches with the Dean. This time the group included Peg Carlson, Chris McLaughlin, LaToya Powell, and Richard Whisnant. The idea from our strategic foresight process was that four faculty members would come together and share something about their work. I had thought that 90 minutes would be the right amount of time, but most of the sessions have been closer to two hours. I'm blogging about them so that everyone can learn more about the work of their colleagues. This post will focus on Peg Carlson and Richard Whisnant.





Peg Carlson

Peg Carlson. Peg talked about a new workshop that she is developing with Frayda Bluestein and Lydian Altman. She also is spending a lot of time with her colleagues in planning the new Center for Public Leadership, which is a big topic for another day.

The working title for the new workshop is “Civility and Effectiveness for Governing Boards.” As I understand it, the basic idea is to adopt a holistic approach with governing board members and others about their effectiveness that combines principles of law, ethics, and public leadership. Too often officials approach those issues in “silos.” A governing board member may present the issue to Frayda as a legal question—“Are board members allowed to talk to the media as individuals?” The board member calling tends to be someone who is unhappy that another board member is talking about the board’s business with a local reporter. Peg and Lydian may get a different question about how board members can work more effectively together. Should they post disagreements with other board members on their Facebook page?

Peg indicated that there are seldom clear-cut answers to satisfy the concerns of individual board members. Board members may be hoping for easy answers instead of working to develop trust and their own shared expectations for governing together. The new workshop will give board members a broader context for thinking about effectiveness by combining legal expertise, group dynamics expertise, and ethical considerations in integrated exercises and joint presentations. They can learn about the parameters provided by the law and ethics, which never are as clear as people think they would like. And they also can learn how to develop shared expectations that will produce greater effectiveness and civility.

The first workshop will be piloted with the Town of Mount Airy in March, and then there will be a workshop for the city attorneys’ conference in the spring. In addition to elected board members, workshops can help attorneys and managers re-frame how they might play a greater role in supporting board civility and effectiveness.



Richard Whisnant

Richard Whisnant. The General Assembly toward the end of the last session appropriated money for Carolina to study and address the issue of nutrient over-enrichment in Jordan Lake. The funding came as a surprise. This is a decades-long problem.

The problem is a challenging one. As population grows and land is developed, there is an increase in excess nitrogen and phosphorus that runs off the land or is directly discharged into nearby waters. When temperatures rise and sun hits these waters, algae blooms can be large and kill other organisms by consuming the oxygen in the water. There is even a chance that the algae will be toxic and pose a health hazard to people in and around the water. It is a systemic problem that seems to require a systemic solution, and therein lies part of the problem. How do you get everyone to share in a solution when it might not advance their own interests, and how do you work through the complicated politics? It is important to understand the science, but it isn't nearly enough.

Richard has been involved in past attempts to address this issue. The watershed that feeds Jordan Lake includes most of the Piedmont between Greensboro and Pittsboro. Those past attempts involved difficult negotiations at the state level over development restrictions, agricultural practices, wastewater treatment, and limits on residential fertilizer usage. The rules that were put in place now have been abandoned in favor of this funding for the University to work over the next five years on finding solutions. This also brings to an end the experiment involving the so-called solar bees on Jordan Lake—that somehow were intended to mitigate the algae blooms by circulating the water.



Solar Bees

Richard and Jeff Hughes have been asked to be a part of Carolina's research team. This problem is one that exists all over the world, and Carolina has leading scientists who have studied this problem for their entire career. Richard's experience on this issue will be important in helping Carolina's team understand the history of the issue in North Carolina. In particular, he and Jeff will help to bridge the gap between general scientific knowledge and applying it in ways that will reflect the on-the-ground reality of the present norms and institutions in the area. Progress on nutrient enrichment will require working with local governments, state government, agriculture, developers, and others throughout the watershed. Richard, Jeff, and the School of Government are well situated to help in bridging that gap.