

LESSONS FROM A FIVE-YEAR DIET OF TENURE-LITE

by Victoria Jean Dimidjian

Early in 1996, I took an administrative position at a university-in-the-making, one that had been authorized by the state's legislature and governor five years earlier as Florida Gulf Coast University (FGCU). The state's 10th university was to open in fall 1997 with three unusual characteristics: employment on multi-year contracts instead of tenure for the majority of faculty, emphasis on technology and distance learning, and an interdisciplinary focus in curriculum.

In my first month I was faced by a somewhat hostile group of administrators and faculty from the University of South Florida's College of Education who asked pointedly, "Just who and what kind of faculty are you going to be able to hire at this 'different' institution?" My answer: We would all discover much in the process of founding and filling this new institution. This article describes my experiences and conclusions from my half-decade at FGCU, where dreams and realities often collide.

I should first explain that a month before classes got under way in August 1997, I returned from a conference to find that my administrative job had been eliminated. After seven weeks of legal wrangling, I began as

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a full professor in what was then called the "College of Professional Studies." That day I joined the union, the United Faculty of Florida (UFF); soon after, I was elected senator, and a year later I assumed leadership of the UFF chapter on campus. I continue in that post to the present. Clearly, my career has been a bit turbulent. Actually more than a bit. Yet the values I held coming into FGCU remain strong. Academic freedom and scholarly inquiry and debate are necessities, as are high academic standards. Faculty and students are the heart of a thriving scholarly community, and truth—that ever-elusive dream of every thinker and seeker—can never be fully captured, only pursued.

At the end of academic year 2001, FGCU had 147 faculty on multi-year contracts and 23 on tenure lines, down from the original 29 in 1997 due to departures for other jobs and retirement. Of these 170 faculty members, only 40 remain in the same appointments, at same rank, as on opening day in August 1997.

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Even more turmoil and turnover have occurred among the administrators of FGCU. At opening, 36 individuals held administrative positions. Four years later only seven remain in the same position. Eleven of 36 have left the institution, six have moved to faculty lines, and 12 have taken different administrative positions. The university has had four presidents in its four-year history.

Administrators moving to faculty positions have remarkable stories. Some, like me, have had joint appointments in one academic college for the duration. Others have moved to different disciplines. For example, the dean who erased my position was himself transferred to faculty status two months later. In the ensuing three years, he has been appointed to three different departments in different colleges. While this is the most striking example, I know of at least six transfers from one discipline to another and more than a few faculty who have had joint appointments for periods of time. Finding a stable academic "home" and compatible colleagues has not been easy for many of us.

Having worked with all the faculty for an extended period and having served on or chaired many of the hiring committees, I characterize the faculty as falling into five broad categories distinctly different in makeup from more traditional, older institutions. Each of these groups has distinct issues, questions, and tensions that they voice within the institution.

Together they make a somewhat discordant chorus, calling for attention and resources from the changing administrators. Let me describe each of the contingents:

The Young Ones: The approximately 80 instructors and assistant professors in their first or second academic appointments, recently out of graduate studies and finding that they are big fish in a very visible little pond in Southwest Florida, where the new university makes front page news almost daily and all faculty are called “professors.”

Nearly half the faculty are first appointments. Even more striking, of the original 77 instructors or assistant professors from the original 1997 faculty, only 19 are still at current rank less than four years later. One very vocal member of this group said he came to FGCU because he was told it was a “rankless” institution. He was shocked to see other—and older—faculty calling themselves “senior faculty,” a term that made him wonder about the rhetoric of the institution. Only in the past year has this term become acceptable.

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The New Ones: Professionals from business, education, social service, and environmental issues who were hired into FGCU, most often at associate or full rank, without an academic background but with much experience. Most of these individuals—approximately 15 in number—soon found themselves asking questions that were variations of these themes: “Where do I fit in? What is expected of me and the expertise I bring? Will my colleagues who may have more teaching experience but less “real world” years of service respect and use my expertise?”

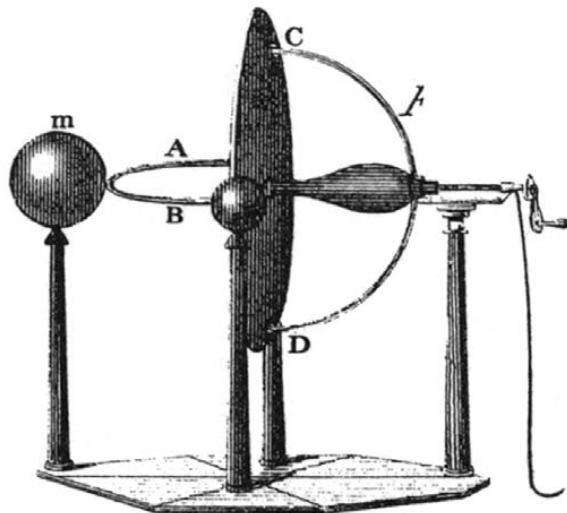
The Transfers: These faculty moved directly to FGCU from other academic appointments in a wide variety of institutions—public schools, community colleges, private colleges, and universities of various types. Many of the approximately 20 faculty who have come in this way—often at higher rank and significantly higher salaries for giving up tenure or a tenure-earning line—soon expressed concerns about the conflicts between their previous academic experiences and cultural mindsets and the current evolving “culture” with all its attendant stresses. “What should I stand up for and what will happen to me if I do?” ask the members of this group as they work through the stresses inherent in building academic programs and recruiting a student body.

The Shifters: Some faculty, like myself, came as administrators and have

been moved, some willingly and some not, to faculty positions in the years since the campus opened. Only seven of those appointed to the 36 administrative positions existing in August 1997 remain in their designated slots. Twelve have moved to other positions in administration, six have moved to faculty positions, and 11 have left the institution. For the “shiffters” on faculty after nearly four years, their questions tend to be variations of, “Where do I really fit? What can I contribute at this point in my career? And of greatest import, “Will others trust and work with me?”

The Tenured: Twenty-three faculty earned tenure at the University of South Florida-Fort Myers campus and transferred over or brought University of South Florida tenure-earning lines to FGCU. This small group comprises three factions: those at the end of their careers and riding out the storms until retirement, those who hired in at full professor rank and are sitting pretty during the fray, and those who have just recently gotten tenure and are aggressively building careers within the institution without the threat of a non-renewal over their heads. The latter is the largest in number and most vocal in the tenured group.

In spring 2001, campus tensions rose when two tenured associate professors applied for promotion earlier than the four-year minimum stipulated in the collective bargaining agreement. Both were promoted although one was not recommended by peer, college, or administrative levels of review. This has served to exacerbate existing high levels of tension and distrust among faculty. One tenured professor announced his



planned departure from the institution during the coming year after resigning from the administrative job he has held for the past nine months.

Does this sound too much like the recent satires of academic life by Richard Russo, Jane Smiley, and James Hymes? As Florida's own humorist Dave Barry says, "I am being entirely serious!"

We who have stuck it out at this tenure-lite "experiment"—as Charles Reed, the former chancellor of the Florida system called us when we were created—hoped to build a credible, coherent institution with an academically rigorous curriculum, and hoped to create conditions of employment that would encourage faculty to come and establish careers here.

What I've described so far is anecdotal, a pulse-taking of the faculty. But there does exist hard data on conditions at Florida Gulf Coast. First, the United Faculty of Florida conducted both

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a mail survey for all full-time faculty and on-campus follow-up interview of all available faculty in spring 1999. Second, the local chapter asked an outside researcher to conduct a mail survey with all departed faculty during summer 2000. And third, the FGCU administration, faculty senate, and UFF chapter jointly sponsored an on-campus survey of all full-time and adjunct faculty in spring 2001.

The statewide study by UFF found the highest area of concern to be job security, judged unsatisfactory by 48 percent of respondents.¹ Other areas that at least one-third of the faculty found to be unsatisfactory were methods of performance evaluation, administrative support, intellectual property rights, academic freedom, professional advancement opportunities, and decision making. On the other hand, a majority of faculty were satisfied with their relationships with colleagues, teaching load, service assignment, facilities and equipment, and clerical support. In some categories, the faculty registered an almost 50-50 split between those satisfied and those having grave concerns. The most striking contrasts showed in the areas of intellectual/cultural climate on campus and salary.

Follow-up interviews with faculty on campus showed dramatic polarization between faculty who felt satisfied and somewhat settled in their new positions and those who identified major areas of dissatisfaction. Many faculty described searching for other employment as a first priority, and there were many departures later that spring. Several others

received non-renewal of employment decisions that spring, and two filed formal grievances challenging reasons for termination of contract.

The following year the local chapter decided that data from departed faculty was essential.² The goal was to amass data on the institution's strengths and stresses, explore the impact of some faculty with tenure and some with multi-year contracts working on the same campus, and summarize reasons such a high percentage of faculty were moving to new employment.

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Some 26 out of the 44 available departed faculty returned surveys. All academic ranks responded and a majority had been employed on multi-year contracts.

Faculty surveyed said multi-year contracts did not provide job security, lacked adequate protections for academic freedom and scholarly inquiry and expression, and did not protect faculty from arbitrary or retaliatory treatment.

Further, 16 of the 22 contract faculty surveyed did not believe that tenured and contract faculty could co-exist effectively on the same campus. The four tenured faculty described tension and hostility in the work environment due to differences in employment status. Additionally, all faculty identified lack of leadership, inadequate strategic planning, and low morale as reasons for dissatisfaction. In response to the question of whether they would recommend a colleague to apply to the university for a similar position, 22 of 26 replied negatively.

The climate survey was conducted in March 2001.³ Although this was a hectic time of the semester, nearly two-thirds of faculty responded. More than half the faculty responding indicated dissatisfaction with workload and work conditions, administrative expectations, job security, resources for scholarship/research, and equitable treatment of employees. More than one-third cited 10 other areas of concern. Of greatest concern was the fact that 40 percent of the faculty were considering leaving the institution within three years.

A task force on faculty retention was established for fall 2001 as the institution begins its fifth year. At the same time, the state's system of higher education has been radically revised as the Board of Regents was dissolved and a "master board" in charge of all public schools, community colleges, and state universities was instituted.

One sign of hope in this regard is that this year the administration and

union worked closely, sponsoring faculty workshops and campus-wide meetings. During the tension-filled months when promotions and contract renewals were progressing, both parties made a concerted effort at communication and problem-solving. It was unusual for a week to go by without administration-union consultation. On April 30, 2002, no non-renewals were issued, a first for the institution.

A s change has occurred throughout Florida's political and educational landscape over the past two years, faculty and administrators have learned considerably from the tenure-lite "experiment." FGCU academic programs have been restructured, emphasizing less distance learning and more traditional majors and ranks. Even job titles are more mainstream. The term "chair" wasn't used in the first years; everything was "team," and administrators were often called "team leaders" in a supposed "flat" organization. Now there are separate departments, mostly headed by chairs who work with enrollment goals and carefully set budgets based on expectations rather than wildly innovative plans.

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Faculty members at FGCU have become increasingly aware of how the institution's funding and structure are linked to national, state, and local priorities. Those who three years ago spoke adamantly against tenure and for a "rank-less" or a "marketplace" mentality now demand clear and consistent ranks, evaluation processes, and in some cases, union involvement or even membership.

Most of FGCU's guiding principles have also been modified or eliminated. Even the multi-year contract has been modified by the latest collective bargaining agreement between the now-defunct Board of Regents and the UFF. Under this new agreement, faculty who complete one contract renewal period successfully will be eligible for a "continuous contract" that is automatically renewable given satisfactory performance reviews. Following the restructuring of the university system, negotiations on the continuous contract will take place on the FGCU campus between the administration and union, under the university's new Board of Directors.

Building any institution is a difficult task, but building one whose initial rhetoric embodied "out of the box," non-traditional themes while functioning within bureaucratic state structures, policies, and guidelines


seemed destined to difficulty, even self-destruction. Higher education faculty and administrations must, therefore, realize its lessons so that students enrolled and faculty employed may have a smoother transition than those experienced here.

The first lesson faculty and administrators should learn is to build with care and caution, using history and tradition as the ground for beginning change. Changing the traditions within academe comes best from careful planning, weighing what to change and what to maintain. Without that, systems spin and veer, people's lives and careers can be smashed, and students' needs for stable and wise teachers go unattended.

The second lesson is to work creating equality and stability as guiding principles in designing a new institution. Elements of internal stress are unhealthy and unnecessary to a successful "experiment" in higher education. Designing a system for competent faculty and administrators to work with stability and collegiality must be done to make an institution "work" as a teaching/learning environment.

Finally, the demands of building a new institution should be viewed as humanely as possible. Communication and consensus-building must be the basis for the planning and maintaining of academic programs. Balancing innovation with continuity must be the central dynamic tension within the new institution.

Colleagues at other institutions have asked me over the past few years why I have remained at FGCU and devoted so much time to governance and union activities. I respond the same way I did during the interviewing process, that this has been a once-in-a-life experience, one which I hope to see to stability and success. Today the whole institution seems focused on building a quality academic community with dynamic links to the region and larger world through a talented, competent, and secure faculty.

Florida is my adopted home. I've lived in the state for 12 years now, appreciating how distinctively different it is from the rest of the country. Currently its whole system of education is undergoing radical change, particularly higher education. We who are in the midst of multi-level stresses can only continue to work for what we believe to be best in this time of change, and it is incumbent on all of us in higher education—both inside the state and around the country—to monitor the evolutions of this state's higher education system and to learn from it as it is transformed. 

ENDNOTES

- ¹ United Faculty of Florida statewide study of FGCU faculty completed by Abt Associates, spring 1999.
- ² United Faculty of Florida FGCU local chapter study of departed faculty, completed under contract by Dr. Bob Miljus, summer 2000.
- ³ FGCU climate survey of in-unit faculty conducted by the Office of Planning and Research under sponsorship of Provost, UFE, and FGCU Senate, March 2001.

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