

Remarks for RIT Staff Awards Ceremony - 2008

I am delighted to join you here for RIT's annual staff awards ceremony, and I especially want to thank all of the staff present for their contributions to this wonderful institution. As you know, I am now in my second year at RIT, and I have come to appreciate your commitment to this university and its students even more. But then, I've had a long career in which to learn about the crucial role that staff play at colleges and universities.

This Fall I once again had a transforming personal experience. Having been a faculty member my entire life, I got a chance to see a university in an entirely new light - as the parent of a student there. In that capacity I once again learned to appreciate just how important are the contributions of staff at our colleges and universities to the educational experiences of our students.

Seeing a University through the eyes of a parent has caused me to think a bit about my own career as a faculty member and administrator, and the role staff have played in my career, and I decided to reminisce a bit. So here goes.

I came to to academia many years ago not as a faculty member, but as a postdoctoral researcher fresh out of graduate school. Even though I had earned a Ph.D. in engineering, that didn't mean I could actually design or build something, since my real-world experience at that point had been practically nil. I quickly learned that the people who can turn ideas into hardware are rarely the Ph.D.'s, but rather in almost every case talented technical staff members. I learned that skilled technicians and engineers could somehow figure out how to get done what I

wanted. I really think that my own success as a researcher was as much a result of their efforts as my own.

On the educational side of the fence, I think that when I became an Assistant Professor, I thought that anything other than the classroom and laboratory instruction that our students received from the faculty was, in a sense, peripheral to the real educational mission of the institution. Thus it was something of a shock when I learned for the first time after becoming a department chair that, in contrast to my prior assumption that students magically showed up in the Fall, we actually recruited students to the University, and that from their first day on campus their success or failure was as much determined by their out-of-classroom experience as it was by their formal coursework. I remember learning that not all advisors were faculty members, that all phone calls went to voice mail if the staff were not around, and that almost all student services, from the health center to the dining hall, were provided by staff rather than faculty.

Speaking of faculty, we all know that not many young faculty have much teaching experience prior to their arrival at the University, although many have served as teaching assistants in graduate school. Many of these faculty learn as they go along and become good teachers, of course. But virtually no faculty member comes to the University with any experience in administration. When I became a department chair for the first time, I had absolutely no idea how to administer anything, never mind how to administer a department with 60 faculty and 1400 students. So how did I manage? Well, my Administrative Assistant told me what to do! Gradually, as I got the hang of the thing, she let me make more and more decisions on my own (all the while making me feel like she worked for me instead of the other way around, of course), until finally I learned the ropes and

became an at-least marginally capable department chair. As President of RIT now, I get to work for Karen Barrows. Living up to her expectations is really tough, but I try my best. Frankly, while she could probably manage without me, I don't know how I could manage without her.

These staffers, however, turned out to be only the tip of the iceberg. Annual reports were prepared by clerical staff from information provided by the faculty, business officers kept track of the money (and in more than one case saved me from myself), and lab technicians prepared every experiment performed by our students. I could go on and on, but I think you get the picture.

When my son enrolled for his Freshman year this Fall. Rebecca and I went to Parents' Orientation and I spent the entire day experiencing the University as a new parent does. I heard presentations from housing and dining, from the health center, from campus security officers, from commuter affairs, and a host of others, and each presentation was made by a staff member.

As a result of these experiences, I have been developing a particular theory about the operation of colleges and universities ever since I became involved in university administration. My theory (actually it is more a matter of faith) is that if all of the highly paid administrators at the University, including myself, were to disappear off the face of the earth suddenly, the University would continue to operate normally (aside from an immediate announcement of multiple search committees to find replacements, all of which would be staffed by you, of course). Why? I believe that RIT is actually secretly run by a large number of under-appreciated staffers. You are in most cases the first human face that students and

others encounter on campus, and you are at the heart of a supporting community that makes their experience a meaningful one.

You are, of course, not given the credit you deserve at an institution that glorifies advanced degrees and research and scholarship, but at least here and now I want you to know that those of us who try to administer the university really do appreciate your extraordinary service. You, quite simply, represent the best that the University has to offer. I thank you for your dedication, your skill, your loyalty, and your enormous contributions to what I still think of as a noble enterprise – facilitating the transition of thousands of wonderful young men and women from dependence to independence, while perhaps teaching them a few things along the way. Thanks very much for the invitation to join you.