



# SYSTEMATIC EVALUATION OF UNIVERSITY ADMINISTRATORS

An Idea Who's Time Has Come  
(And Is Long Overdue!)

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The purpose of this essay is to propose a simple idea to the University community, which, at virtually no financial cost, could make an extremely important contribution to improving the quality of our institution, which President Russi has declared seeks to become a “university of distinction” within the next few years. In fact, this idea, which has been the official policy of the national American Association of University Professors for 25 years, was actually first suggested to me by President Russi, when he was provost about 10 years ago. He also promised to me and other faculty then that he would implement it. But this never happened and it is badly needed: a program of systematic faculty (and, in some cases, student and staff) evaluation of the performance of high-ranking University administrators.

Currently, students are (very reasonably) evaluated by faculty, and faculty are (very reasonably) evaluated by students, faculty and administrators. In fact, to suggest that students should *only* be evaluated by other students or that faculty should be evaluated *only* by other faculty would be to invite ridicule. We all need to know how our peers, our

supervisors and those whom we supervise view our performance. It sometimes isn't pleasant to find out the results, and sometimes we may choose to continue using methods and materials which are not popular, but surely we should at least want to *know* in what light others view ourselves and what suggestions that might have for our improvement.

Yet, top administrators, those who wield by far the most power in the University setting (obviously, not only at Oakland) for the most part are *only* evaluated by themselves, at least in any systematic way (defined as at least approaching the regularized, year-in, year-out, manner in which faculty and students evaluate each other). As many faculty know, recently Provost Moudgil has begun to poll all faculty of the relevant schools when the deans are up for review, which is definitely a most welcome move in the direction of systematic evaluation (during my almost-30 years at Oakland, the entire faculty of by-far the largest school, the College of Arts & Sciences, has only been polled twice before with regard to administrative performance: when CAS Dean John Urice was reviewed about 10 years ago and during the selection process that eventually led to the choice of Provost Moudgil). What is needed now is to both regularize such evaluations (i.e., make them at least a yearly process) and to extend them (i.e., to include other high-level administrators, such as the president, the provost, and top assistants to them and the deans). Moreover, just as Provost Moudgil has recently been asking for staff as well as faculty evaluations of the deans currently up for review, input should also be systematically solicited from staff, and, with regard to administrators who regularly have significant interaction with students, from student representatives (such as the leadership of Student Congress).

For the good of themselves and the University, our top administrators need to know how those whom they are presumably serving feel about their services. A similar program was recently endorsed (March 15, 2004) by the University of Michigan faculty Senate and will begin shortly (as of now, without the cooperation of the University of Michigan admin-

istration, which, while highly desirable, is not necessary, since both there and at Oakland faculty can circulate evaluative questionnaires among themselves and, if administrators refuse to cooperate, publish them or post them on a web site). In fact, a recent poll of Michigan faculty ranked systematic evaluation of administrators as their number one priority and concern.

In an address to the University of Michigan Senate on September 20, 2004, Prof. Richard Alfred eloquently explained why systematic faculty input is needed with regard to the evaluation of administrators, drawing on his own concrete experiences as a former high-ranking administrator. He noted that 30 years ago,

as an ambitious and inexperienced Vice President of Finance, Planning and Management in the City University of New York, I spurned an offer of assistance from a faculty task force to help in the redesign of our institutional planning and budget system. The system that we eventually constructed was narrowly conceived and restricted our access to opportunities and resources rather than advancing it because we did not understand the work of faculty and the way in which it was connected to resources in the external environment. The material resources we lost were money and opportunity, but the real resource we lost was the faculty. By not including them in an important institution wide activity, we unwittingly disconnected our most important resource from the future of the institution. This was a terrible mistake the cost of which to the institution was two years of lost opportunity.

Given the increasingly turbulent environment that the University operates in and the increasingly complex makeup of its infrastructure, it is likely that now, more than ever, campus groups like faculty, executive administrators, middle administrators, classified staff and students will live and work in very different worlds. We live in an increasingly complex environment, we live in different campus worlds, we face different challenges, and we see things differently. It is ironic that at the very time we

need to know more about one another to achieve important goals, we actually know less. This is the reason why providing administrators with information about faculty assessment of their performance (and the converse) is important. If carried out properly, it should actually work to improve the climate of the University. It should make it a better place to work for those who are already here and a compellingly attractive place to work for those who will consider coming here.

A number of other universities have long had such programs of systematic evaluation of faculty in place, and the national AAUP has endorsed such a program as a vital necessity for all universities for almost 25 years. In 1981, the AAUP's 67<sup>th</sup> annual meeting endorsed a statement which declared that in view of the organization's "conviction that interdependence, communication, and joint action among the constituents of a college or university enhance the institution's ability to solve educational problems," faculty members should "contribute significantly to judgments and decisions regarding the retention or non retention" of administrators (and should also place a significant role in the original decisions to hire them). Specifically, the 1981 policy statement declared:

Institutions should develop procedures for periodic review [on a routine basis] of the performance of presidents and other academic administrators. The purpose of such periodic reviews should be the improvement of the performance of the administrator during his or her term of office. . . . Fellow administrators, faculty, students, and others should participate in the review according to their legitimate interest in the result, with faculty of the unit accorded the primary voice in the case of academic administrators. . . . A more intensive review, conducted near the end of a stated term of administrative service, may be an appropriate component of the decision to retain or not to retain an administrator. . . . All decisions on retention and nonretention of administrators should be based on institutionalized and jointly determined procedures, which include significant faculty involvement. . . . No de-

cision on retention or non retention [of a university president] should be made without an assessment of the level of confidence in which he or she is held by the faculty. With respect to other academic administrators, sound practice dictates that the president should neither retain an administrator found wanting by faculty standards nor arbitrarily dismiss an administrator who meets the accountability standards of the academic community. [For the complete text of the AAUP statement, along with links to information about evaluation of administrators at various universities and additional related information, see the documents which I have posted at the Oakland AAUP website: [oaklandaaup.org](http://oaklandaaup.org) (click on “Vox Prof,” then on the postings entitled “Evaluation of Administrators”)].

Especially in light of this official policy statement by the national AAUP, the Oakland AAUP should have been implementing a program of systematic evaluation of Oakland administrators for many years now, but local AAUP officials have basically told me when I have approached them about this subject, “It’s a good idea. We’ve proposed it many times but the administration has rejected it. So that’s it” (a position which I find ludicrous, but all too representative of the passive, complicit approach that we as a faculty accepted for all too long). President Russi, personally promised to me that such a system would be implemented about 10 years ago at time of the evaluation of former CAS Dean Urice, at which time he specifically told me (the words may not be exact, but the sentiment is), “All senior administrators will be systematically evaluated by faculty, including me, while I am provost.” He was right about the need for these 10 years ago, and it’s even more needed today.

I believe that the basic argument for systematic evaluation of administrators is compelling even if only made in an abstract or theoretical way—it just doesn’t make sense that those who wield the most power get systematically evaluated only by themselves, but those with less power get systematically

evaluated by all around them. But I think this argument becomes much important and practical because I and virtually every colleague I've ever talked to at length feel that there are long-standing, extremely serious concerns about the quality of the Oakland administration, particularly with regard to what often seems to be a routine lack of consultation, a frequent seeming inability of the administration to make even the most trivial decisions in a reasonably prompt manner, and the general lack of importance with which the administration seems to view the faculty's role.

I think it's far more than symbolic that a few years ago, apparently without any faculty consultation, the administration abolished the staff newspaper, *Inside Oakland*, although somehow the money is still available to fund large glossy magazines for alumni. In fact, the *Oakland Journal* is now the only publication via which the Oakland faculty and staff community can seriously communicate with themselves, although, of course, the very nature of an infrequent publication means that it cannot possibly replace a regular newspaper. I fully realize that there is a University website, but a website (and e-mails) cannot replace a regularly published newspaper that is communally read at more or less the same time. The message is that the administration thinks it's more important to communicate with alumni, no doubt in the hopes that they might cough up large sums of money, than with the faculty, who just teach here.

It has been my hope that the administration would see that a program of systematic evaluation of administrators, carried out jointly by representatives of all concerned groups, makes enormous sense and would greatly help improve the quality of our community (a word, which, of course, references the "common" concerns of all of us who devote such a large percentage of our time and energy to it). This proposal is not about tearing Oakland down, but about building it up, about making the University and its administration both more responsive and more responsible to its faculty and student constituencies.

Since March 2004, I have been in contact with President

Russi and Provost Moudgil with regard to this proposal, but thus far the only response (if it is one) has been the introduction of the polling referred to earlier of faculty whose deans are currently under review. In September 2004, I publicized this idea via an interview with the student newspaper, *The Oakland Post* (September 13), and by addressing the University Board of Trustees (September 15). (For the full texts of both, see the website cited earlier.) Subsequently, a significant number of faculty have told me that they agree with this idea but are afraid to publicly support it for fear of suffering administrative reprisals. Needless to say, this is a rather sad commentary, given that “academic freedom” is supposed to be the *sine qua non* of university life.

My hope is still that the University administration will cooperate to help establish this idea on a sound collaborative footing, more or less modeled on the current system of student evaluation of faculty, with the results reported only to the administration itself and to a small number of faculty monitors. Absent such cooperation, I reluctantly believe that the only alternative is for the faculty to implement this program by itself and post the results of evaluative surveys of administrators on a public website (which is the approach which the University of Michigan faculty has adopted, due to the administration’s failure to cooperate there, with the first postings scheduled for the end of the Fall, 2004 semester).

This is not a desirable outcome, but there is no alternative if Oakland administrators fail to see the wisdom now of then-provost Russi’s far-sighted wisdom of ten years ago. Preferably, the administrative and the faculty will set up a committee to establish systematic evaluation of administrators on a cooperative basis, or else the Board of Trustees should act to mandate such a program to complement the existing extensive programs by which we systematically evaluate students and faculty. But if others fail to act, or to cooperate with the faculty, the faculty should assert itself and act unilaterally in the interest of bringing about that “university of distinction” which we all desire.