



Monday, July 16, 2001

Questions & Answers: Virinder Moudgil

The following are notes excerpted from the interview of Virinder Moudgil conducted by the selection advisory committee (SAC) charged with seeking campus reaction to the candidates for the position of interim vice president of Academic Affairs and provost. The notes are not intended to be a verbatim account of the interview, but to provide a general description of the conversation.

SAC: Suppose the observation has been made that the same group of people are always called upon to provide opinions, act on task forces, etc. How would you broaden participation of the faculty on campus?

Moudgil: I personally am witness to all of decisions that administration and faculty have made since 1978. When I started holding international conferences at OU, I included people who would further the mission of the conference and further the mission of OU. I called together individuals who had never served on committees for conferences before, and I let them make recommendations, and we followed those recommendations. I would strongly encourage more faculty to help us make decisions. I want people who would bring pride to the position and who want to advance the mission of the university. I would not hesitate to approach new colleagues and ask them to share their wisdom based on what they did at another institution.

SAC: What steps would you take to establish accountability to the faculty?

Moudgil: The first thing that relates to accountability is trust. If I invite my colleagues to participate in an important task, I would like to earn their trust by listening to them. I do not hesitate to make difficult decisions, but I want to hear faculty opinions. If I earned the trust of my colleagues, I would not hesitate to discuss my decisions with them, even if they are difficult or unpopular. If we are on an academic mission, we should agree on the issues to make progress. I will not ask someone to do something that I wouldn't or haven't done myself. I think we should build a community in which the shared values are celebrated.

SAC: Tell me about a difficult decision. How you handled it. How you resolved conflict.

Moudgil: I have many. This is one thing I take pride in. I have made several decisions as a faculty and more recently as a chair. One impacted nearly 40 percent of the instructional space in biology. I had begun my sabbatical and I gave it up and came back because I had to fix this. I had tirelessly pursued the issue, and systematically approached every single individual in the administration and presented my reasons why this was a bad decision for OU. They had to reconsider this decision and I was able to convince them to do so. I believe in the power of persuasion. I do not know anyone on this campus who will not listen to a good argument.

Second, I had to make personnel hiring decisions. I only go for quality and I am proud of that. When hiring, promotion and tenure decisions are made, I made hard ones as chair. The faculty agreement allows the chair to have an independent opinion. I did not want to be chair if I couldn't make a decision to hire the person with the best credential to get the position. I am willing to tell others why I want to make this decision. If we hire a person who is not the best, in the long run you hurt the institution.

SAC: In item 1 (of the position paper), you mention partnerships, can you give me examples?

Moudgil: I do not wish to indicate that I am expert in everything. I try to emphasize things in which I have personal experience. I have trained nearly 50 percent of graduates in my labs. I mention this to indicate the diversity of resources in our community. In the Howard Hughes programs I directed, I visited community high schools and made presentations. We went to Finney High School to encourage kids to finish high school, and it worked, we do it to this day. We made high school students feel welcome at OU, and some graduates have come to OU even in preference to Wayne State. We made donations of older equipment to the Pontiac schools. A graduate works for a business that has decided to use the animal facility, they have talked to me, and I encouraged them.

We could do more, Academic Affairs should provide incentives and to help remove barriers. There are untapped resources in our community of very high proportions. We need to do more and I am willing to do this.

SAC: You have a continuing research activity, do you see it continuing?

Moudgil: On the way here, I met with two of my graduate students who still have to write their theses. As a chair, I have been

most productive as a scholar, which is better than many with more time. I am very proud of that. My students are flexible enough and understand my time constraints. If I were to get this job, I would ask for access to my lab. I would make time, on weekends, in the mornings, etc. I would not know what Academic Affairs is, if I am not academic. The laboratory incubates my thoughts. I have had scholars from eleven different foreign countries. For one of my students, I arranged for her to work at Mayo clinic for a couple weeks in order for her to learn how to do a critical experiment for her research.

When Dr. Russi made the announcement of the list, obviously I was honored, but the e-mail right before his was from a journal that indicated an article we had submitted was accepted. We were so excited. Research is real.

SAC: Do you think the task forces were a good idea or not? Why or why not?

Moudgil: I think the concept is good. Gathering a group of colleagues to try to help move the institution forward is basically a good idea. I am part of a musical group, and we had fun, but we got bored. I suggested we do a concert and the goal changed us positively. I see task forces in the same light. They help to get new ideas and improve the institution. General education is important to the institution. We needed to look at this and improve.

Yes, I think task forces are important. When the time comes for implementation, we need to involve the entire community. Not just the Senate, but the entire community. I would like to have the whole community review the recommendations. Then we can move forward to implementation.

SAC: How will you act in a leadership role to support and promote research at OU?

Moudgil: Lead by example. Research is food for the brain and thought. We need to produce graduate and undergraduate students who know more than the books. Research is one way to see this through. I would put in incentives. I have been the chairman of the research committee in 1986 or 1987. What I learned was the breadth of research on this campus. I learned more about research in engineering, nursing, health sciences, etc. In two instances, I went with Mary Otto and got additional money for worthy projects. As provost, you need to get more matching money to encourage research. I want everyone to have access to the starting line. The first thing to do is to understand the needs of the faculty as an incentive to overcome obstacles to doing more research. Active researchers should be maintained, but you need to broaden the base so more people can step in.

SAC: What about the structure in the Provost's Office for Graduate Studies and Research?

Moudgil: I do think they are related. Graduate studies do need to be related to research. Creative endeavors also need to be supported. I need to hear from others on what structure they see would help. I am strongly committed to supporting research. I would like to see a team with a big platform where every person could step up to ask for support. I think this can be done within the resources that we now have. When I organized the first international conference in 1987, I had to raise the money. I raised \$250,000 in 1987 to support this conference. If you have a goal, and a good estimate on what it takes, I'm going to put on gloves and go and do it.

SAC: What issue would lead you to fall on your sword?

Moudgil: First, if I find I'm not effective as a representative and leader for Academic Affairs, I would not want to stay there. If the president lacked confidence in me, there is no reason for me to stay. If my integrity is questioned or an issue in which I deeply believe is contrary to my beliefs, I would not stay. However, I have a very good relationship of mutual respect with the president. I do not predict that I will have any difficulties with Dr. Russi.

SAC: Given the current situation, how would you rebuild trust?

Moudgil: Dialogue, education, one-to-one interactions. In groups, sometimes people will not reveal what bothers them. I work best one to one. If you make a sincere effort to gain trust and do what you say you will do, people will trust you. Hidden agendas do not promote people to trust you.

SAC: What would a successful first year look like?

Moudgil: In the first year, the issue of trust has been resolved. We have stability in the sense of action, created an environment in which things are happening in a stable way. There is a role for OU nationally, steps would be made in that direction. That undergraduate students receive a unique experience at OU. Howard Hughes grant was a step in that direction. The Merck award is another step in that direction. We need to act as a team. If we do not, we are not going anywhere.

SAC: Is there anything we didn't ask that you want us to know?

Moudgil: I've been here for so long, I've seen OU grow. This is my home. I do my part to promote Oakland. I breathe Oakland, it is very important to me. This job is a great opportunity to help Oakland move forward. My record should show that I can do this

effectively. This adds to my involvement to promote Oakland.

SUMMARY

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