April 21, 2017

Addendum to FAME talk of 3 years ago, for website.

An important aspect of my career that I forgot to include in my talk is that I failed to realize a very important career ambition. I had always thought that when I reached the rank of professor I would have the opportunity to participate in the politics and leadership of my academic community and influence the character of the institution on a grander scale than was possible in just my small laboratory. I looked forward to leading a division or a program or being an influential member of one important committee or another.

Very early in my 30 year tenure at OSU in fact I was a participant in the leadership. Whisler asked me to be co-director of the division if I wished; I served on a couple of search committees for deans and chairs; I was made the first director of the MD/PhD program; I served four years on the departmental P&T committee; etc. But it did not take long for me to be rejected from continuing in these posts. I was formally fired from three jobs by three different associate deans, largely for a managerial or interactional style that was too confrontational. Ultimately I was never more asked to participate in leadership groups. My self-assessment is that temperamentally I was simply unsuited for these tasks. This void was a big disappointment to me.

To some extent I satisfied myself with being a behind-the-scenes leader. I sat in the front row at faculty meetings and spoke up on important issues, stating my opinion and then sitting down, declining to argue. I wrote influential white-papers attempting to influence important institutional decisions. Seldom was vocal and open support offered, but often colleagues would write confidential emails that encouraged and seconded my words, envying my perceived courage in voicing contrary attitudes and standing for high ideals. Fellow faculty considered me bulletproof because of my extramural grant support whereas they themselves felt suppressed and effectively silenced by the academic leadership.

I have often wondered whether my innate forcefulness and other personal characteristics that enabled good science were inherently antagonistic to effective political participation in institutional leadership.