

Report on trip to the AASCU Academic Affairs Winter Meeting, Orlando, February 10-12, 2011

Dick Reddy

Leaving on Wednesday, February 9th and returning on Sunday, February 13th, I had the opportunity to attend and to participate in the Academic Affairs Winter Meeting of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, held at the Hyatt Regency Grand Cypress Hotel in Orlando, Florida.

AASCU, under the leadership of its Vice President for Academic Leadership and Change, George Mehaffy, initiated its Red Balloon Project, but desired to expand its reach from Provosts and Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs, the usual participants in its biannual meetings, to teaching faculty and to students. I was invited by Vice President Horvath to join her in attending this meeting in light of her interest in the Red Balloon Project and her invitation to me to be a part of that project both on campus and nationally.

The first meeting of the day on Thursday was the Red Balloon Project meeting. Our campus Red Balloon Project activity had principally been the Red Balloon Dialogues—discussions of three books in the Fall 2010 semester and three books in the Spring 2011 semester. In each case, presenters reviewed the key ideas from the selected book and then there was the opportunity to discuss the issues and themes developed in them. Although some of the non-presenters may have also read the book, the presentation was intended to be enough for discussion to flow for the entire group.

However, in Orlando, George Mehaffy asked each individual to highlight what their own campus was doing with their Project. It soon became clear that the concept of “Red Balloon” was being implemented in a wide range of ways on the various campuses represented—something that undoubtedly makes sense since “one size” probably doesn’t “fit all.” In some cases, it didn’t appear as if there really was anything new for the campus. The campus (or the Provost/VPAA) was already doing some things and simply kept on doing those things, sometimes labeling what they were doing as “Red Balloon,” sometimes not. Indeed, in some instances, it was stated that the campus had reached its tipping point (or had gone beyond it) in terms of new initiatives, something that was certainly easy to believe. In other instances, Jacksonville State University (Alabama) may have taken the opportunity of the Red Balloon Project to initiate a campus-wide effort to shift their approach from being a student-centered university to becoming a learning-centered university. Toward the end of the session, George Mehaffy summarized some of the key ideas which had come up from various campuses and added a number of his own ideas based on his experiences, including a number of discussions with leaders in the higher education community and visits to various campuses. Although the question of the format for the Summer Meeting in Portland, Oregon was broached, it really wasn’t resolved. There was, however, a sense that campuses might well want to expand their presence at that meeting by inviting additional faculty and students. There also was a sense that some attention would be paid to course design issues associated with the introduction and expansion of blended learning activities on campus.

The opening Plenary Session featured Charles Dziuban of the University of Central Florida on the topic of “technology-enhanced education.” Central Florida has been a leader in creating blended learning courses and in very careful, systematic, and long-term evaluation of all educational formats (classroom-only, blended, and entirely online). Their research, year after

year, has shown that generally speaking, blended courses work best for student learning. They also offered to all instructors on their campus(es) help in designing appropriate course evaluation instruments for their courses including help with data collection, with Institutional Review Boards and their possible concerns, etc. Dziuban offered to provide interested campuses with extensive information on his data and on how his office works.

Friday's sessions started with a plenary session on "Cultivating a Culture of Evidence." The focus of attention was on two campuses—Kennesaw State in Georgia and the University of Central Florida. Ken Harmon of Kennesaw State cited his campus as being (or at least striving to be) "evidence based," with clear and ambitious goals for student achievement. He indicated that Kennesaw State had a strong commitment to "closing the loop." They have a "Data Day" to reflect on their assessment results and to plan for further actions. They care about monitoring the impact of the changes they make. They are also sensitive to possible criticisms that assessment efforts are used to "get" faculty members. To avoid those perceptions, the approach they take is to use assessment for identifying problems that have to be fixed (that WE have to fix—and trying to fix them) rather than affixing blame. They also make a point to celebrate their successes and to share assessment approaches across their various institutional units. They think of assessment as being "assurance of learning."

Staci Provezis discussed the extensive assessment resources available at the website of the National Institute for Learning Outcomes Assessment (NILOA) and research she has done on the data available there on what's taking place on campuses. In particular, she reviewed what campuses put up on their websites and, unfortunately from her perspective, far too often assessment information and reports on assessment are a challenge to find on those sites. She called for greater data accessibility and currency (being updated regularly). She also called for the assessment data posted on websites to be more user-friendly—being "easy to understand."

Tace Crouse described what the University of Central Florida has been doing (although this had been covered pretty thoroughly in Thursday's plenary). Each degree program has a set of defined student learning outcomes on which they are assessed (typically 8-12 outcomes with two measures for each of the outcomes). In addition to their own internal efforts, they have also been committed to external reviews of their outcomes. They have worked hard to create (and sustain) a culture of evidence and outcomes.

I then attended a workshop on "The Role of Academic Affairs in "Stewards of Place II." I had learned of AASCU's "Stewards of Place" emphasis and, although I understood its thrust (basically to distinguish "us"—mostly regional colleges and universities—from "them"—major university centers), I found the term, "stewards of place," to be quite awkward. AASCU is currently working on developing four additional components to the "stewards of place" idea—P-20 education, civic engagement, international education, and community-based research. The thrust of the discussion was on the value/necessity of being closely integrated with our communities and regions and to have and expand mutually beneficial relationships with them, including, of course, work on economic development/job creation issues and possibilities.

The argument is the in the future (now actually) the community and its needs should be an integral part of a college's mission/vision, hopefully producing a win-win situation for both and including off-campus engagement/civic engagement efforts. AASCU's Richard Dunfee mentioned the need for a broader definition of "engagement," for more student learning opportunities in the community, for more private sector partnerships, as well as having campuses identify their strengths and try to match those strengths with community/regional

needs/ambitions to the extent possible. Ideally funding support/assistance for these sorts of efforts can come from foundations, non-profits, and the federal government.

Barbara Burch of Western Kentucky University highlighted the need for devoting time and planning energy into this process. She emphasized it's a "with" process, a genuinely collaborative process throughout rather than something that is done either "to" or "for" the community/region. The goal is genuine, visible "win-wins" that meet the needs of the community, projects that are mutually agreed to and mutually worked on. It's highly desirable to embed civic engagement as an expectation of courses and as co-curricular activities. It's also highly desirable/necessary to make sure that the faculty is incentivized through recognition and reward programs both as they initiate community-oriented activity and as they work to sustain it. Burch also indicated that colleges need to give serious attention to making sure that doing "applied" research isn't an impediment to gaining tenure or promotion or other forms of recognition or rewards. WKU has a "Center for Civic and Community Engagement" to encourage both.

Friday's luncheon plenary dealt with "Higher Education's Role in Meeting National Policy Imperatives in Education." The speaker was Ken McGuire. He started out by reviewing the economic challenges/problems we have been experiencing in the U.S. as well as the budgetary and political challenges in our states. He then focused on a series of problems/challenges both for K-12 and for higher education. His review was excellent, but scarcely surprising to anyone who is keeping track of these trends and developments. Toward the end of his presentation he noted that some for-profit colleges and universities are much more flexible and rapid in their responses to opportunities and challenges than most college and universities are.

The next (and final session of the day) I attended (along with Ginny and others from a number of campuses) was sponsored by Peter Ewell of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems and Staci Povezis from the National Institute for Learning Outcomes and Assessment. They were seeking insight into what was actually taking place on campuses. Among the practices mentioned were "assessment days" during which classes were not held and the faculty and administration focused on the assessment results they had achieved, the use of institutional research offices to facilitate assessment efforts, the requirement of assessment considerations (and "closing the loop" efforts) in annual reports, etc.

The first plenary on Saturday dealt with "State Data Systems and Teacher Effectiveness—The Louisiana Case." Frankly, it didn't seem to have any value to me or, likely, to our campus, so I decided to spend the time available revising (and significantly improving) and rehearsing the remarks I was scheduled to make in a session later in the day.

In the time slot for the first concurrent sessions, I chose to attend a presentation entitled "Learning Centered: It's Where We're Going." It featured a discussion of the Red Balloon efforts at Jacksonville State University, efforts to shift from trying to be a "student-centered" university to trying to be a "learning-centered" university. While the topic itself was potentially interesting, I also chose this because one of the two co-presenters for my own session was from and was going to be talking about the Jacksonville State effort and I had already had some sense of what they were trying to do since they discussed it during the project committee meeting on Thursday. Jacksonville State has made a thoroughgoing and exceptionally well-planned effort to transition in to a "learning-centered" university. Their leadership identified key people in key places to lead discussion groups, bolstered by carefully chose readings to discuss, to interest and intrigue and gain the commitment of larger groups throughout the university. They also put money/resources where their "mouths"/commitments might be. These processes tended to help

overcome a sense that Jacksonville State was capable of actually changing “in a big way.” AS their work continued, they made an effort to keep everyone updated and informed with running stories in a fact book, in the student newspaper and even in the local paper. The emphasized this as being a collaborative process and as driven by the best theoretical understandings/justifications they could find in the literature. Moreover, they were intentionally committed to making this happen and redound throughout every aspect of the university—which often required a great deal of “out of the box” thinking. But fundamentally (and collectively) they were addressing four questions: What does a learning-centered university look like? What will we try to look like in five years? What values influence (and will influence) our decision-making? And What strategies should we use to help us reach our goals? Overall, increasing numbers of faculty and staff came to understand and embrace the value of significant change to accomplish the goal of improving student learning.

After lunch I attended a concurrent session with two quite different topics. William McKinney from IUPU—Fort Wayne discussed “Social Networking and Liberal Learning” as a part of their Red Balloon conversation on “Re-imagining IPFW’s Academic Future” and Christy Price from Dalton State (Georgia) discussed “Why Don’t Students Think I’m Groovy? The New ‘R’s’ for Engaging Millennial Students.” McKinney sought Faculty Senate buy-in for the effort, reminding it of the changing circumstances and challenges that called for a response and appropriate changes. They wanted to be out ahead, to be a model of a re-imagined public comprehensive university. They used a number of techniques to generate interest and to stimulate engagement among the faculty including a “re-imagine: blog. They believed that faculty roles and rewards had to be a part of the Red Balloon conversation, including exploring how the scholarship of engagement could and should “count.” They found that the “re-imagining” idea was a powerful one in moving toward a new strategic plan.

Christy Price did an outstanding job presenting her research into millennials. She started out with a tongue-in-cheek description of a faculty member as “someone who talks in other peoples’ sleep,” noting that boomer faculty are often losing millennial students, with neither on the same wave lengths or sharing the same desires and expectations. She stated that often millennials desire (and expect) a relaxed learning environment. They expect faculty to be open-minded and laid back and to be interested in what they are saying. They very much prefer the non-authoritative and authoritarian. They also very much want to know that the faculty member “cares about them.” At the same time, they often don’t care about “knowledge” per se. Instead they want to be guided and mentored toward learning.

Next came my session, titled “New Models: Implementing Red Balloon Project Ideas—On the Road to the Red Balloon: Faculty Discuss New Directions in Higher Education.” Gena Christopher talked about the efforts at Jackson State University. No need to expand here on that since I’ve already given their work a good deal of attention. Maurice Hamington talked about developments at Metropolitan State College of Denver. They hadn’t done anything formal regarding the Red Balloon Project, so his comments were mostly about Metropolitan State itself and the problems/challenges it faces, sharing a campus with two other universities. I offered a number of general remarks and then described our own Red Balloon efforts.

Ginny was the moderator for the closing plenary session, entitled “The Red Balloon Project—Leadership for Re-Imagining Undergraduate Education in Challenging Times.” The panelists were Marry Hellenbrand (Cal State, Northridge), Ivelaw Griffith (York College—CUNY), William McKinney (IUPU—Fort Wayne), Mel Netzhammer (Keene State, N.H.), Ronald Rosati (Southeast Missouri State), and Rebecca Turner (Jacksonville State). It was quite a lively and wide-reaching discussion. Ginny did an outstanding job (I’m not paid to say this and I do try to

be unbiased and objective) in guiding the discussion, making sure that everyone had a say (and everyone genuinely did) and that the “waterfront” was covered. Most of the participants in the discussion were people I had met and listened to during the meeting and had come to know at least somewhat. But it was obvious (at least to me) that of the panelists Harry Hellenbrand had earned great respect for his insights and understandings, followed, I think, by Mel Netzhammer and Rebecca Turner.

The discussion itself was premised on the idea that there isn’t much time left to re-imagine undergraduate education, that courses need to be realigned, and that the Red Balloon Project was (or could/should be) an organizing framework on campus to accomplish that, a means to create a wide-open, free-flowing, transparent dialogue (multi-log? Omni-log?).

We are in a high-anxiety era, an era of challenge and opportunity where there’s at least a possibility of being or becoming “ahead of the curve” and helping to direct change rather than being overwhelmed and swamped by it.

From a provost’s perspective, it’s essential that whatever happens within what we call “Academic Affairs” is bought into by all of the university’s leadership (the entire “cabinet”).

A key element in the process overall is building/re-building trust among various campus communities and with the larger community as well. That requires collaboration and it also benefits from recognizing and genuinely celebrating successes and reaching milestones.

The entire process also calls for a number of traits/virtues: patience, trust (again!), creativity, collaboration/partnership and, on the human level, changing and improving people’s lives.

In what I thought of as a transformative moment for AASCU, the conversation then turned to what should happen at the summer meeting scheduled for Portland, Oregon. Although I was totally new to AASCU meetings, I do know that what then transpired is exceptionally rare for just about any organization—the acceptance of a radically new paradigm for at least one future meeting.

There was discussion of and an emerging commitment to a meeting based not on presentations and discussions but rather on “doing things,” producing “deliverables,” engaging in collaborative, interinstitutional course design efforts with an emphasis on blended learning. In essence, a collective effort in re-imagining (really both for the campuses and for this aspect of AASCU’s work as well). There was also a recognition that for this to work it would be necessary to open the meetings doors to considerably larger numbers of faculty from the various campuses, since they would have to be principally involved in the redesign of their own courses. Those redesigns could well incorporate the new technologies that are now fully in use among our students (and some of our faculty).