

Recently I was heartened to learn that the Hexter (Interim) Administration at our beloved local university has decided to reverse a proposed long-range plan to build on Russell Fields, having responded to the concerns of the community. The open space created by those large fields provides a tremendous intangible benefit to those who (like me, a “heads in the clouds” grad student) walk by them or over them, or (like the more down-to-earth undergrads) play Frisbee football or rugby on them, run cross-country around them, etc.

One early evening a few months ago, I chanced upon a very unusual scene, while walking near the fields along Russell Avenue. An older, senior citizen-aged woman was sitting on the sidewalk in front of one of the fraternity houses across the street and was crying out loudly: “DON’T LEAVE ME!!! PLEASE DON’T LEAVE ME!!!...” I stopped and wondered what I should do, if anything.

She shouted out a name (and I’ll use a made-up name here): “MARK, DON’T LEAVE ME!!! PLEASE...” It was a cry of deep desperation and anguish. I continued on my walk and spotted a man in the darkness just ahead of me on the trail. He had stopped walking and was looking in her direction. “Are you Mark?” I asked. It turned out that he was and that the woman across the street was partially blind. “She’s following me,” he said, “and she won’t leave me alone.”

It turned out they had both taken the bus from out of town and he had been walking around, collecting cans, to (I surmised) supplement a modest, retirement income.

The experience of meeting Mark and witnessing the apparently dysfunctional relationship between Mark and the woman sitting on the sidewalk provides too powerful an illustration and metaphor for me to pass up, specifically as it relates to the selection of our incoming chancellor, Gary May.

In general (and I’m not saying this applies to Dr. May, because it appears to not be the case at this point), there’s been a growing trend recently in university administration in the United States, involving a musical-chairs-type scenario, with what amounts to a system of itinerant, or near-itinerant leadership of universities becoming increasingly the norm. University presidents (or chancellors) typically come in, go through the motions of shaking things up (for example, by appointing a new provost), and then make their exit a few years later, in their continuing quest to seek a higher income and a more elevated professional and social status

for themselves, without having really done anything of importance or achieved anything meaningful.

The real-life Mark, who I met that evening (with his apparent companion, or at least hitherto friend), was only passing through town while collecting cans. He didn't appear to have a deep connection to our fair city or campus – a state of affairs and state of mind, one wonders, that seems to fit our former, infamous (pepper spray-associated) chancellor's mindset and M.O. – someone who, with shallow hand-waving in relation to alleged plans to set up an additional satellite campus in Sacramento and alleged plans to build a new chemistry building on the main campus, seemed actually to be making plans to leave us in the near term. She had bigger fish to fry.

As a member of the recent search committee that advised President Napolitano, as part of the chancellor selection process, I have to admit that I was shocked to find out about the level of compensation Gary May has been receiving for what amounts to being a moonlighting position, a situation which, on its face, appears to involve a level of questionable ethics, in spite of such being legally allowed and morally acceptable to the UC Regents. (And I apologize to the community for falling down on the job and not discovering this earlier, while the selection process was in play.)

I believe, though, that we really owe him the benefit of the doubt and should give him a chance to explain his situation (i.e., How could his service on a corporate board really be worth that much in compensation, when it's not even his primary gig? If it's not worth that much, then what's the real purpose of the money?) Perhaps he will decide to reassess his situation and resign from the big (small?) moonlighting job. If he comes into town to begin work and ends up not ever addressing the issue at all in any public fashion, it's going to be difficult to see our new chancellor as being someone who intends to stay here and become deeply rooted, personally, in our institutional and civic life.

There are a host of other issues that the metaphor of Mark and the woman across the way bring to mind: Why do we really even need a chancellor? What really is the chancellor's proper role? In what dimensions should the role be political? Should the university constituents possess a moral (and even practical?) veto power over the chancellor's decisions? Will Chancellor May be able to balance his

engineer's tendency to think in quantitative terms with an ability to appreciate intangible values and see "beyond the numbers"?

If I had had a chance to talk with the woman who was crying out that night, I might have asked her: "If he doesn't want to be your companion, then why would *you* want *him*?" Maybe we should be asking ourselves a similar question about the type of "itinerant-style" university leaders who keep one foot outside the door the moment they first arrive on campus, while intending to stay only for a short while. If they don't really want us, and are just passing through, then why would we want them?

Let's hope this description does not fit Chancellor May.