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The Pace and Place of Change

Change is hard. It breaks our habits, challenges our assumptions, and gets us out of our comfort zone in many other ways, both large and small. But I think Ben Franklin missed one: Beyond death and taxes, change is also inevitable.

Sometimes change comes at you and you must respond. Changes to the formula for allocating funding among the 14 PASSHE universities and the shifting demographics of our region are obvious examples. This is frightening.

At other times, change starts within. Examples of this might include an adult deciding to return to complete their degree, a professor tackling a new scholarly project or preparing to teach in a less familiar area, or an office at the university deciding to reengineer how it serves the community. These changes may carry a bit of fear, but the primary emotion is excitement about something new.

I lived in California for five years. Having the ground suddenly move out from under you a few times can reset your perspective. Things seem to jump off the walls at you. Places that had seemed safe become the worst possible place to be, and an action that seems counterintuitive and risky – running outside – is usually safest.

It turns out that an earthquake is a pretty good metaphor for higher education in Pennsylvania, circa 2006. Everything is changing. The demands our graduates will face, the way we are funded, the society's and other stakeholders' expectations of us, the demographics of our region...everything.

Everything, that is, except what we are trying to accomplish. What a paradox! In this environment where everything is changing, our goal – to make our students ready for the next thing in their lives – cannot change. But the way we get the job done *must* change.

The earthquake metaphor is also

useful because it tells us that if you respond to an earthquake when it happens, it's much harder to stay safe than if you had laid plans ahead of time. In our case, where the pace of change isn't likely to slow, we must react and plan at the same time. A very good trick, but this community is up to the challenge. How do we identify places that will stay safe amidst chaos, and how do we build our university so that it will withstand the shaking?

What are our safe choices? The glib answer is that there are none. A more meaningful answer is that we must focus on our core values and make certain that Mansfield's quality in these is unassailable. What are these? Character. Scholarship. Culture. Service. Everything we do must be in support of these four goals or it must be considered expendable.

The other answer is that the riskiest thing we could do in this environment would be to try to avoid risk. It's risky to declare oneself and be distinctive, but being just like everybody else almost guarantees failure. Starting with the foundation that a liberal education is at the heart of what every Mansfield graduate takes away with them, and marking the concept of leadership development as the distinctive characteristic of a Mansfield experience, is bold and somewhat risky. But it is authentically who we are, and we can make it come alive on this campus. That is a recipe for a wonderful future.

Making our students' experience resound with these concepts will take hard work across the campus. Yet each of us tends to believe that "everybody else had better adapt, but what my office is doing is perfect, so we should just defend against change." Every one of us has work to do, but in doing this work, we can turn fear into excitement.

- Michael Renner

News in Brief

- * Mansfield University has initiated an application to be accepted into COPLAC, the Council of Public Liberal Arts Colleges. More details will be announced as they become available, but a site visit is likely in the Spring semester.
- * Mansfield has received official notice of accreditation from the CADE, the national group overseeing dietetics education.
- * The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) has unconditionally renewed Mansfield University's accreditation until 2013.
- * The searches for Dean of the Faculty and Associate Provost are proceeding on schedule.

Spotlight on Scholarship

Congratulations to...

- * John Ulrich and the entire Department of English and Modern Languages hosted colleagues from nine states and four countries for a highly successful annual conference of the English Association of the Pennsylvania State Universities.
- * Nancy Boston of the Music Department, has released a new recording, *American Women: Modern Voices in Piano Music*
- * Scott Thornsley, Criminal Justice Administration, was the keynote speaker for the Commonwealth Forum on Criminal Justice Reform.
- * Matthew Haner, Math/CIS, published "The nonorthogonal estimator" in *Statistics and Probability Letters*