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President's Weekly Perspective, 7/2/2012

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UNM President's Weekly Perspective

Good morning.

Through reading the recent Weekly Perspectives, you know that over the past month I have been meeting with a number of people, invited to a number of events and speaking publicly about a number of issues relative to the future of UNM. It's been an exhilarating whirlwind, and a privilege to be invited to meet New Mexico's educational, business and civic leaders.

In attempting to find balance in the various aspects of being a university president, a husband and father, and just Bob, I often think about a concept about which we all know but frequently forget... we must give priority to things of real importance. But in a world where everything from your inbox to your dental appointment to your child's soccer game is competing for your limited time, this requires deliberate, consistent choice. The good news is that life seems designed to teach us to develop the habit of choosing what's really important over everything else.

Meaningful Actions: Investing in Those Important But Not Urgent Tasks

In devoting time to new initiatives that are important to the future of our institution, we may become drawn in by the day-to-day challenges, not to mention meetings and events that serve existing needs, but do little to advance needed change. I've been there, and I know plates can be very full. If we are to achieve a meaningful and relevant future for UNM by the year 2020, we are going to have to consider spending our time on things that are important and not just urgent.

The idea of measuring and combining these two competing elements has been attributed to both former U.S. President Eisenhower and Dr. Stephen Covey. Eisenhower posited, "What is important is seldom urgent and what is urgent is seldom important," and Covey brought the idea into the mainstream and gave it the name, "The Urgent/Important Matrix," in his 1994 business classic, "The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People." This framework is a powerful way of thinking about priorities, helping to focus on what's really important and move from "putting out fires" into a position where we can grow and transform the university.

The first step is to understand the distinction between the two – Covey articulates that "important activities have an outcome that leads to the achievement of one's goals, while urgent activities demand immediate attention, and are often associated with the achievement of someone else's goals." Urgent activities are often the ones on which we tend to concentrate - the squeaky wheels that get the grease. They demand attention because the consequences of not dealing with them are immediate. However, in this day of tight budgets and all doing more with less at public institutions such as UNM, we can drown in a sea of urgent tasks, which amounts to very little achievement at all.

The point is not that we should ignore emergencies or refuse to aid others who have a challenge they are facing. However, it is essential to protect time to invest in innovation, because that is where real opportunities lie. Without this understanding, our decisions will often be unfocused and unrelated to helping us achieve our most important goals.

When we implement vision, priority, importance, thinking long-term, and a focus on providing value, the natural result is that we will become “highly effective.” When we spend the majority of our time doing what’s most important to us, we’ll create a wealth of value for UNM and the community we serve.

Important Perspectives on Election 2012

Central to a University’s academic mission is the expertise its faculty brings to the campus and the community. The faculty of the University of New Mexico are creators of new knowledge and apply their research and intellectual acumen to improve our community and society. As representatives of a public research institution, they are also sought out to provide expert opinion, comment and analysis on a broad range of subjects.

In an effort to share faculty expertise and resources with the community and the media, we have recently launched a [2012 Election Experts site](#). Here, UNM’s political experts provide insight into different aspects of the current political landscape and the corresponding relevance for the 2012 elections. They discuss what can be done to strengthen the U.S. economy, what role the Hispanic vote will play in the 2012 election, the value and cost of higher education, the immigration debate and other emerging topics.

Student Innovation by Design

One of the benefits of an institution like UNM – with a strong emphasis in practical learning – is that we have tangible results of our students’ work. Highlighting those results and our students’ talents is the UNM Formula Society of Automotive Engineers (FSAE) team. Most of us have heard of or seen “the UNM race car.” What everyone may not know is that these engineering students conceive, design and fabricate this small formula-style racing car in intercollegiate design competition.

Recently, members of the UNM FSAE team traveled to Lincoln, Nebraska for the Formula SAE West Competition. Here, teams bring their race cars to this annual competition for judging and comparison with 80 other vehicles from colleges and universities throughout the world. The UNM FSAE team had its best ever performance at this four-day competition, finishing 10th out of 81 U.S. and international entrants. The UNM team also had some notably high finishes in individual events: 5th in marketing presentation, 6th in endurance event, 12th in autocross event and 14th in design.

The end result of such applied learning is a great experience for our students in a meaningful project as well as the opportunity to work within a highly collaborative environment.

Reflecting on Education on Independence Day

As we celebrate our independence with an appreciation for those who defend our country and what it means to be an American, it is a good time to consider key elements in the fortunate history of our country – founding principles, patriotic fervor to protect our freedoms, government of the people and an educated citizenry.

I'd like to focus on this last element: at the heart of our democracy is an educated citizenry. President Lyndon Johnson said, "Every child must be encouraged to get as much education as he has the ability to take. We want this not only for his sake, but for the nation's sake. Nothing matters more to the future of our country...for freedom is fragile if citizens are ignorant." Education in our country is based on the values of freedom. We've recognized from the first days of our republic that being educated is significant not only to an individual but also in what that individual contributes to the broader society.

As I've reflected on my academic career and the wonderful opportunities that I've been afforded, I have become more cognizant of the privilege we have been given to live in the United States, the only country in the world that accepts everyone into our educational system regardless of background and tries to address their needs so that they, too, may reach the heights we celebrate today.

Have a great week, and a safe and enjoyable Fourth of July holiday. Go Lobos!

Bob