

Rumors and Ruminations¹

They were known as “the fabled four” around the hallways of the Casa Grande Faculty Office Building. Each from a different department, they regularly lunched together with the sole agenda of critiquing the latest foolishness perpetrated by the shoe-clerks and bottle-washers who clog the bloated campus administration. The fabled four had grown up together through the faculty ranks, having been hired more than 35 years ago by a dean whom they remembered as the best the school ever would have. They contributed mightily to the college, including taking their turns as program directors and department Chairs many years ago. As very senior tenured full professors, the fabled four, although less active than in earlier times, remained a force on campus that others, newcomers all, ignored only at their peril.

This bright April day the talk turned to operating budgets. “Why the dean doesn’t give our department any travel money is beyond my understanding,” commented Professor Alvin Aftlook, as he swept the breadcrumbs from the table cloth into his soup bowl. “Where does the money go these days? When I was Chair we always made it a point to send faculty to at least one professional meeting a year, and we paid for everything! Once there was a time...

“We get \$675.50 per trip. I know because our department votes on it,” interrupted Professor Belinda Benthere, before Aftlook could launch into one of his famous rants. “Rampant democracy is what I call it. A bunch of new faculty made up rules for everything: Xerox, postage, course materials, toilet paper, visiting speakers, student assistants, professional travel, software, you name it. We should never have given them tenure. The Chair is nothing but a glorified bookkeeper with a spreadsheet and a copy of the department minutes. There are no decisions to make anymore. And, of course, if you don’t use it you lose it.

“That’s not fair,” said Professor Cyril Crabtrellis. “I’ve always said that was a stupid policy. Departments ought to be able to keep what you don’t spend and use it the next year.”

“You can! Cy,” said Aftlook. “Somebody changed that policy a few years ago. And you get some money from summer school too I think. But who knows where it goes or what you can use it for. There’s too many changes around this place anyway. Once there was a time...”

“You can!” said Crabtrellis. “That’s not what our Chair said. Just last week she said the dean takes all the money away at the end of the year and spends it on furniture. I couldn’t think of anything more stupid. If it were up to me, I’d...”

“We have a committee on that,” interrupted Benthere. “But the Chair won’t say how much is in our account. Can you believe we’re having a war over pocket change?”

“What does your committee want to spend the money on?” asked Dierdra Donethat, the only scientist at the table.

“An alumni dinner and guest speaker,” I think, replied Benthere.

¹All characters, situations, and stories described here are fictional. No reference to actual persons, events, or institutions is intended or assumed. Drs. Peter and Noreen Facione developed and refined these hypothetical cases based on the experiences gained through their many decades of service as faculty, administrators, workshop presenters, and leadership consultants to colleges and universities throughout the nation.

“You can’t use it for travel, I’ll bet,” said Aftlook. He wiped his glasses with his tie.

“Travel! Who can afford that?” said Donethat. “Our department uses so much equipment we don’t have money to replace what breaks or to pay for service contracts on the expensive pieces. There hasn’t been an increase to any departmental budget in the past five years and our department has added three positions and two more student labs. We don’t travel anywhere. We don’t have committees either, to worry about this. That’s the Chair’s job and we don’t want to be bothered. Someday the administration will realize that it has been starving our department and expecting us to just keep on going with no support at all. Well you know what I think about those jerks on the top four floors of the power tower.”

Benthere shook her head and said, “Our Chair said that we just had a 5% budget increase and that we were in line for another boost next year. I don’t mean to quarrel with you about this, Dierdra, but I’m on the campus budget committee and we’ve voted steady increases in the university operating budget every year for the past twelve. Isn’t the money getting to your department?”

“Look,” said Crabtrellis, “our Chair says our budget was frozen last year and will be for the coming three. I want to know what’s going on around here!”

“Let’s each go ask our Chair some basic questions, then meet here tomorrow and see what we’ve learned,” suggested Benthere. “How about these for starters? How much travel money does the dean allocate? What happened to the budget increases the university budget committee voted last year? Who decides what gets spent on what in each department? And what happens if we end the year in the black or in the red?”

“Good idea,” said Crabtrellis. “Then a couple of us will e-mail the dean and the associate dean with the same questions.”

“I’ll phone my buddy in the business office and get the real story,” said Donethat. “Then we can compare notes.”

“Yes. And if we get different answers from different people, then we’ll all go as a group for a second conversation with each of them to find out what’s really happening,” said Crabtrellis. “There has to be a way to clean all this up.”

“Where am I supposed to get the money to cover the airfare and hotel for the national meetings next month. I’m supposed to present a paper,” said Aftlook. “Once there was a time when....”

Questions:

- 1. What are the problems here for the academic leadership?**
- 2. Should a uniform policy on the use of department operating funds be established? If so, by what processes?**
- 3. How should considerations such as justice, harmony, respect for rights, student learning, faculty development, fiscal responsibility, and maximal utility shape the allocation of operating funds to individual programs and departments?**
- 4. Should departments be able to carry forward budget surpluses and budget deficits into future fiscal years?**