

Faculty Frustration

Heckler hears out concerns

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An emotional Valparaiso University President Mark Heckler addressed faculty last Thursday after facing scrutiny over a series of decisions that were announced earlier this summer, as well as growing concerns over faculty compensation.

Heckler spoke on Thursday, Sept. 6 during his semester address to faculty. During the course of the meeting, several faculty members brought into question an administration reorganization that led to several promotions during a time when faculty resources have been limited. Faculty members were also frustrated with the administration's lack of transparency over several years.

Heckler listened intently as faculty member after faculty member voiced their concerns, which ranged from anger to embarrassment to bewilderment at some of the changes.

"I feel like I failed you. I'm sorry. I tried my best. This is my attempt at trying to bring a perspective and voice to try to make improvements," Heckler said. "I don't want to fail you. I want to be successful. I want you to be successful. I want to address the concerns. It's the best I can do."

Faculty frustrations came to a head earlier this summer when Heckler quietly announced an executive reorganization in an email at the beginning of August.

"Some of us have had careers in industry prior to this and no other organization that I've ever worked for made itself more nimble by adding administration," Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations Amy Atchison said.

During his address, Heckler spoke about the hiring of new administration. In the email sent out in August, Heckler outlined the following changes:

David N. Phelps was hired as the executive vice president and chief operating officer. Phelps will have several individuals in new positions working under his oversight, including Rick AmRhein and Jon Varnell. The executive management team was retooled to include several staff members who remained in their current roles, received promotions or added new responsibilities. This team includes Mark Biermann, Susan Scroggins, Ray Brown and Darron Farha. The Integrated Marketing and Communications office will now report to VP of Advancement and Strategic Initiatives Lisa Hollander.

Phelps and Brown both delivered remarks during the faculty meeting on Sept. 6. Following their remarks, faculty members were given the opportunity to address their concerns in a Q&A session. Key among faculty concerns was the question: Where is the money coming from?

In his address, Heckler talked about the goals of the University and how the changes in administration fit into that context.

"I can tell you that we are [not] taking and will take no dollars from any academic or student affairs to affect all this reallocation within the administration of this institution," Heckler said.

The immediate goals of the University are to build succession into the institution, diversify the institution, mirror demographic change, grow the endowment and simplify student processes and responses, according to Heckler.

"There are two primary objectives I'm trying to accomplish with realigning the administration. The first is to

increase the capacity of the organization because this university is not agile," Heckler said. "We are not able to make decisions quickly. It takes forever to implement things. So increasing capacity, agility and responsiveness, especially responsiveness to our students and their parents first -- and second is responsiveness to

what is happening in the external environment -- so that we're prepared to be nimble and more nimble than we are today. And then the second is to improve our position for our institution's long term sustainability."

"If we haven't moved this university toward greater sustainability and agility in two years, I'm walking away from this model and coming up with something else," Heckler said.

When asked about the number that the University needs to meet, Heckler responded with around 1,000 freshmen.

In the Q&A session after Heckler's address, faculty spoke about their frustration with the lack of transparency in the administration.

"I found that the announcement made with no explanation troublesome, and I don't find a lot of comfort in today's explanation about this," Associate Professor of Political Science and International Relations Gregg Johnson said.

Johnson also stated the faculty work very hard to make a positive experience for the students and faculty.

"The faculty, from people who have spoken to me, are either demoralized or furious with some things that are happening, and so we end up in this situation -- and I'm not trying to filibuster but there was a long lead-in -- why are decisions made with so little transparency, so little input from the faculty and not much discussion in terms of openness in hiring?" Johnson said.

"Right now we've got a president or vice president for every about 22 faculty

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Taylor Bundren / The Torch
President Mark Heckler addresses the crowd at the faculty meeting on Sept. 6, 2018. Following his address, he opened up a question and answer forum where faculty and staff could directly speak to him.

members, and that seems like we have a lot of administrators and not many faculty in comparison," Johnson later added. "And I guess in the end, why do we have these large pay raises in the top whereas the faculty seems to have stagnated? And I can only imagine the staff who work in this university are seeing even less."

According to Heckler, the administration is required to look at the salaries of the faculty and staff each year and analyze whether the salaries are within the range of 80 to 120 percent of peers from different institutions. The board asks Heckler to make a recommendation about how to keep the salaries competitive with peers. He said that even if he doesn't recommend a raise, the board is still able to push the raise and make the change.

"We're not here just because of the administrative expansion -- we're here because we are demoralized and we are frustrated and

we are angry," Atchison said. "And it's not just about this. It's about -- well, I've been here eight years -- so eight plus years of executive decisions that leave us and our staff in increasingly difficult positions."

"Basically what I heard you say is you've had a lot on your plate and you were able to unilaterally hire someone to take it off your plate. And yet faculty and staff at this university are being continually asked to do more with less, to deal with ongoing budget cuts," Atchison said to Heckler directly. "Some of those budget cuts have hit our most vulnerable in ways that are much harder than have been hit to faculty -- to tenured faculty. But in general the explanation here that

the senior staff all had meltdowns -- do you have any idea how many of the faculty and staff in this room have

meltdowns on a regular basis because we are working 60 and 80 hours a week to deal with 40 advisees

each, to effectively manage our student load, to effectively manage a teaching load that we have been asked to increase?"

Atchison described her frustration as coming from "years of erosion of faculty trust in administration."

"So what many of us are here because of is what we perceive as a persistent failure of leadership, and it is

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