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Donald E. Hall

West Virginia University, donald.hall@mail.wvu.edu

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BUILDING BRIDGES: WHAT STATE COMPREHENSIVE
UNIVERSITIES AND RESEARCH INSTITUTIONS COULD LEARN
FROM ONE ANOTHER

Donald E. Hall
Department of English
West Virginia University

In 2004, I made one of the most difficult decisions of my life: to leave behind a job that I enjoyed at an institution that I loved for the sake of personal and professional growth. I had spent thirteen years at California State University, Northridge (CSUN), had been with it through wonderful times and terrible times, and had forged some of the best friendships and most valuable professional ties of my life. I saw CSUN battered and broken after the 1994 earthquake and reborn and thriving a decade later. I was hired fresh from graduate school to the first tenure-track position of my career in CSUN's English Department and rose through the ranks to become department chair there. I met my partner, Bill, while working at CSUN and saw him embraced as family by friends and colleagues across the university. I worked under two extraordinary presidents (Blenda Wilson and Jolene Koester) from whom I learned life-changing lessons about the joys and challenges of an administrative career track. In sum, CSUN left a deep and lasting imprint on my life, one for which I am enduringly grateful.

However, thirteen years is a long time to spend in a single institutional context, especially if one foresees a future in administration for oneself. When a position opened up at West Virginia University in late 2003 in a department with which I had also developed deep professional and personal ties (of friendship, collaborative editorial work, and frequent intellectual exchange) I applied for and then accepted the offered position, though only after several weeks of discussion with Bill and my most trusted mentors. Not everyone in the latter group thought that the move was a good idea; some felt that I would hate living in small-college-town Appalachia, others thought that I was throwing away a nearly certain, successful career path as an administrator in the California State University system. Even so, it was the right move for me; this I still firmly believe five years later. It has led to extraordinary new opportunities to learn how another institutional system functions and to discover just how much institutions can learn from each other, even when operating in different parts of the country and with different missions and student populations. I have discovered that research universities have much to learn from teaching universities and, yes, vice versa.

It is from that betwixt and between position that I write today, half a decade after I moved from a state comprehensive to a flagship

research university, and three years after my return to department-level administration at a research university. In my role as chair of the English Department at WVU, I have tried to draw upon and implement the best practices and policies from my years at CSUN. If my career loops me back to the California State University system, I would do the same, drawing on my time at WVU to challenge and change a few revision-worthy practices and policies at a state comprehensive. I will discuss some of my thoughts here on that needed cross-fertilization, as I examine three qualities and values of the state comprehensives that I hold as trans-institutional “goods,” and then do the same with reference to the research university. The following reflections are casual and idiosyncratic to my own experience, but might be of use to others as they reflect upon the singular strengths and continuing challenges of their home institutions.

The Signature Strengths of the State Comprehensives

1. Clarity of mission.

The quality of CSUN that I admired and still honor the most, even as I find it somewhat lacking at WVU, is the crystalline clarity of the mission of my former university. CSUN was unequivocally focused on meeting the needs of its core student population: undergraduates matriculating from local and regional high schools who graduated in the top third of their classes. Every decision—financial, curricular and personnel related—was judged on its merits relative to that core mission. Peripherals not related directly to that mission were luxuries and deemed dispensable if conditions warranted. As a case in point, when the CSU system encountered financial hardships in the late 1990s, CSUN President Koester made the difficult but fiscally responsible decision to drop football from the university’s sports offerings. Football, as loudly as some alumni demanded its continuation, did little to contribute to the educational experience of most of CSUN’s commuter student population. Games were poorly attended and the program had to be subsidized out of general university revenues. We could not afford it; few students supported it; football needed to go, and it went.

“Student-centered” was not just a throw-away phrase; it was truly the operant principle. When I scheduled classes, I was told to think first of student needs. When we evaluated applications for faculty positions, we thought first about how well prepared the applicants were to teach our students and understand their backgrounds and challenges. When we re-considered our major and minor, we had foremost in our minds the future career paths of those students and their need for intellectual and practical preparation for careers in the diverse and changing Los Angeles economy. To be sure, we faced innumerable challenges internally in our department because CSUN’s student population had altered significantly

since its founding in 1958; some of our faculty's perceptions of our students had not expanded and changed in concert with San Fernando Valley demographics. Nevertheless, we as an academic community always had our clear touchstone: What do our students need and how best do we meet those needs?

That laser-like focus is rarely true for research universities. We are pulled in various and sometimes irreconcilable directions by the demands of a student population recruited nationally, by those of a powerful alumni body whose commitments are sometimes far more narrowly focused on big-time sports than on academic standing, and by those of faculty whose research careers often take priority well above that of meeting the needs of students (and with undergraduates often getting particularly low regard). As a land-grant institution, WVU has a mission on paper that is not wholly dissimilar to that of CSUN, though with the state, rather than the local "catchment" area as the region whose needs are of supposedly paramount consideration. Unfortunately, the lucidity of purpose originally inscribed within the charter of the land-grants has been degraded at many, if not most, of them because of the complex challenges of major-league athletics and major-league research programs. In my opinion, the land-grants need to re-center themselves to better meet the needs of students from their state.

2. *Connections to the community and embracing of diversity.*

Related to that clarity of mission at the state comprehensives is the clear connection that most have to their immediately surrounding communities. CSUN knew its constituency and was dedicated to addressing that constituency's most urgent demands. As just mentioned, this had a clear impact on scheduling and fiscal prioritization.

However, that mission's most memorable manifestation (and its strongest continuing impact on my personal worldview) was in CSUN's unwavering commitment to ethnic and cultural diversity issues, following naturally from the institution's desire to reflect the complexities of its community. Los Angeles is, of course, an extraordinary mosaic of linguistic, religious, national, ethnic and cultural differences. Our clear charge at CSUN was to hire faculty and develop programs that mirrored that diversity. With such an unequivocal commitment emanating from the president's office, reinforced and intensified in the faculty affairs office and again in the dean's office, department chairs knew that diversity was held as an unquestionable "good" that always had to be weighed alongside research excellence and other experience when evaluating job candidates. My personal commitments to diversity hiring were fully compatible with those of the upper administration (therefore their charge was further intensified at my level), so when I met

with any residual skepticism regarding certain candidates and how their profiles did or did not meet a hiring committee member's internal (often unconscious) template of "excellence," I had ample leverage to ensure that diverse candidates received appropriate consideration. Out of the twenty hires that I oversaw as hiring committee chair during my last nine years at CSUN, eight were from under-represented groups. Colleagues and I mentored all of them and almost all have been retained to date (except for two who have left to take different positions that met personal needs or professional aspirations).

That leverage is lacking at WVU in my experience to date. It is certainly not an institution hostile to diversity, but it is located in a state whose demographics are very different from those of California, so there is little articulated demand from in-state students to see their own diversity reflected in that of the faculty. Identity politics has never been a front-burner issue here, though certainly issues of class and religion do figure highly in many students' lives.

Even so, student pressure (or lack thereof) does not account for my own department's continuing homogeneity. The local community of Morgantown is substantially more diverse than my English department's faculty. Other priorities have too often outweighed that of diversity in hiring and retention processes. Research excellence, narrowly defined, has tended to trump all other values in the hiring process. "Fit" is a concept too often used to reinforce the traditions, and monochromatic profile, of a department. Furthermore, the commitment to diversification by various administrative bodies beyond that of the chair's office has not always been consistent. I have little leverage to deploy, beyond moral suasion, when I am confronted by overly narrow and deeply entrenched notions of what constitutes the profile of a "best" candidate. I have absolute faith in the good intentions of my colleagues at WVU, but the context makes the value of diversity so murky that departmental decisions on hiring and even curriculum float freely from any set of well-articulated university priorities. The clarity of the CSU system is one that I still hold as a model.

3. *Commitment to educating educators.*

Finally, CSUN was admirably comfortable with its responsibility for the training of future primary, secondary and community college teachers. A full third of our 400+ English majors were in the pre-credential track. We had an elaborate system in place to ensure mastery of content knowledge and assess readiness for coursework in the College of Education. Our undergraduate population of future primary and secondary school teachers was vocal and enthusiastic in our classes and their vocational plans were highly respected and well supported

through advising service and support networks. Similarly, our graduate population of MA-seeking students planned often for careers in one of the many community colleges in the Los Angeles area, along with a few preparing to continue on to PhD programs. And even those doctoral program-bound students were acculturated into a department that had solid respect for the work of instructors in a wide variety of educational contexts. The traditional hierarchy of “best” academic jobs—with research universities at the pinnacle of prestige—held far less sway at CSUN than it often does elsewhere.

Again, this is not the case at WVU. Frankly, I do not know at the moment how many future high school teachers we are educating because, historically, my department has taken little interest in or responsibility for those students. They do not even appear on our list of majors. Our College of Human Resources and Education is “charged” with their training, in an “out of sight, out of mind” way that dates back many years. When we did finally hire a tenure-track assistant professor to serve as a liaison with the College of HR&E (the year before I became department chair), it was over the objection of many in my department and at the express demand (command, really) of a dean who could not understand the department’s continuing lack of interest in teacher training. We are only beginning to develop the productive ties across colleges and the advising support networks that CSUN has had in place for decades.

Similarly, our graduate students (MA, MFA, and PhD) are not academically acculturated into a climate of respect for community colleges. Too many think that to take such a job would be to “fail” as a professional. While it is true that a wider variety of jobs in the academy is validated here than it was at my own graduate institution (the University of Maryland), that expansiveness extends primarily to liberal arts colleges and teaching institutions. It is gratifying that CSUN-like positions are seen as desirable for our graduates—and I am happy to speak often to graduate students about the joys and challenges of life in teaching institutions—but I am hoping to encourage equal enthusiasm among those students for careers in the community colleges, where appropriately trained and committed professionals are still in high demand. The egalitarian and practical mindset of the CSUN graduate program and student population is a model for my own students here at WVU.

Yet in offering the thoughts above, I do not wish to imply that it is only the research institutions whose worldviews could be usefully complicated by attention to the priorities of other higher education sectors. I want to turn briefly now to the cross-fertilization that could productively occur in the other direction.

The Relative Strengths of the Research Universities

1. Valuing of research as integral to effective pedagogy

State comprehensives have much that they could learn from their research university peers (and I do consider them peers). Obviously, research has a higher priority at institutions defined by that very prioritization. Nevertheless, the gulf between these two sectors of higher education should not be as wide as it often is. Teaching institutions that truly value high quality teaching, not simply high quantity teaching, must support and demand greater research productivity from their faculty. It is unacceptable that faculty who no longer participate in the vigorous flow of intellectual conversation in their areas of specialization are allowed to teach anachronistic material and offer outdated perspectives to undergraduate majors and, especially, graduate students. I have seen that process of calcification occur far too often, and I have seen innumerable students suffer because of it. When state comprehensives tenure and promote mediocre or marginal researchers, those individuals have a lifetime contract to teach stale and static material.

I would like to see “teaching” institutions require less teaching, but of significantly higher quality, and require more research for tenure and promotion. Granted, it would be wholly unreasonable to expect that state comprehensives would simply mirror the priorities and work balances of research institutions; that erasure of distinction is neither necessary nor even desirable. However, there is a world of difference between a 4/4 teaching load with little or no research expectations, and a 3/3 teaching load with the expectation of clear research success and demonstrated capacity and ability to continue to build on that success. Even if it is unlikely that all current faculty at state comprehensives would shift to a new “research” track, one way of initially instituting a selective rebalancing would be to create a category of “graduate” faculty, on a reduced teaching load, who are reviewed every three years for renewal and reappointment. In fact, that is precisely the way we handle research expectations now at WVU, where individuals are reassigned from a non-research faculty teaching load of 4/4 to a 2/3 research load, with an intermediate category of 3/3 faculty for those transitioning off of research faculty status. Those who transition off the “graduate faculty” do not teach graduate courses and teach fewer courses designed for majors, where the most current scholarly knowledge is demanded. Faculty are rigorously reviewed every three years by a department committee, the department chair and a college committee, and placed in the appropriate category. It is not a perfect system, but is one that could be adopted by many state comprehensives so that the most research-productive faculty could receive appropriate recognition for their efforts. This would ensure (to the extent possible) that the information that instructors pass along

to majors and graduate students will remain fresh and applicable to the lives and vocational goals of those students. I suspect that under such admittedly competitive conditions, more faculty would remain research productive.

As a side note, enhanced research expectations also raise the possibility of enhanced funding sources through research grants and sponsored projects. I know well that it would be unlikely, if not impossible, for state comprehensives to offer the start-up packages required for scientists and engineers to build the laboratories they would need to compete successfully for the most prized, multi-million dollar grants. However, even relatively modest outside grants provide some funding support to departments through F&A and faculty time buy-out dollars. My own English department at WVU has received two National Science Foundation grants for linguistics and digital humanities projects, totaling almost \$400,000, for which my faculty was highly competitive without significant start-up costs. It is our culture of research productivity that led to my faculty members applying for their grants. They and we as a department are benefiting from the outside funding that they have received.

2. Understanding the need for that multi-faceted professional life as a means for renewal and the avoidance of cynicism.

The same emphasis on research productivity also means that far fewer of my faculty at WVU go down the tragic road to cynicism and burnout. To be painfully honest, the most bitter and resentful faculty I have ever met have been at state comprehensives with 4/4 teaching loads. I am not simply referring to CSUN faculty here, but to many others whom I have met in faculty development forums at state comprehensives across the country. Of course they are not in the majority (or even close to it) of the hard-working and usually highly enthusiastic faculty members at the state comprehensives, but they are a significant minority. Some are legitimately angry about funding and other issues that state comprehensives face as the “poor relations” of the flagships; others are filled with a more amorphous and free-floating anger that can only be attributed to a sense of frustration, status envy and disconnect from the vibrancy of their fields and the intellectual conversations that are ongoing in their professional organizations and among scholarly peers.

As much as burned-out and angry individuals are always responsible for their own attitudes, behaviors and complicities with larger hierarchies of value in the profession, their frustration at having little or no support for their (laudable, often) scholarly ambitions and research desires is understandable. The category of “graduate faculty” or “research faculty” as described above would at least give them an

avenue for pursuing a more vibrant research life, if they desire and prove themselves capable. If they cannot or do not meet the ongoing expectations for continued appointment to that category, then they would have no one to blame but themselves. Certainly, many would continue to find other reasons to complain or find new targets of blame if they do not maintain an active and successful research agenda, but the institution will have done what it can to support its faculty and to minimize the chances of burnout and cynicism.

3. *Understanding the support department administrators need to do their jobs effectively and to remain active professionals beyond their administrative roles.*

What is true for faculty and their need to remain intellectually “connected” to their research fields is also true for department-level administrators. I have served now as department chair at both types of institutions and can honestly say that department chairing at CSUN was infinitely more exasperating and even debilitating than it is at WVU. Without an associate chair to assist in constructing my former department’s several-hundred course schedule and to help in hiring, evaluating and giving assignments to part-time faculty, my day was consumed by those tasks alone. I did have an associate chair (and served in that role, myself, for 7 years) but she was responsible for advising hundreds of majors and reviewing all graduation paperwork for our students. I had no advising center beyond her office and shouldered all other department tasks (budgeting and financial planning, tenure-track personnel review, program review and oversight etc.) alongside the endless process of schedule building and schedule revision.

While WVU is hardly an institution flush with resources (we are among the lowest paid faculty and administrators working at a flagship in the nation), it is an institution that understands the support that department chairs need for their departments to function reasonably and for their own teaching and research to continue. While I am constantly busy at WVU, I am not insanely overburdened as I was at CSUN. My calendar is full, but rarely do I go home sweating and anxious that I could not get to the twenty other tasks that I knew I needed to address but couldn’t possibly squeeze in. I love administration, but I also love being able to do my job well by not having to rush through duties and assignments. I want to be able to reflect on an issue rather than make a hasty decision about it. I have enormous respect for department administrators at state comprehensives. They are working under sometimes appalling conditions and with impossible upper administrative expectations.

And rarely are those norms and conditions challenged because not enough of those administrators at the dean’s level and above have

moved around and seen how other institutions function. Granted, it is very uncommon that administrators move among the various sectors of higher education—state comprehensives, liberal arts colleges, research institutions—but more administrators in the state comprehensive system need experience outside of that system, even if only in another state. A substantially closed circuit may lead to an extraordinary fund of expertise among those administrators who know the state comprehensive university deeply and well, but it also leads to a sort of calcification as all state comprehensive university norms become reified as the only and true way of doing things. Insularity of that sort is never healthy. It is much more common among research institutions for department chairs, deans and provosts to come from peer institutions from across the nation. Transitions can sometime be bumpy as each institutional context has its own unique challenges, and learning curves therefore can be steep, but there is much more cross-fertilization of ideas, of ways of addressing challenges, and of diverse approaches to budgeting and staffing issues. Diversity of viewpoints is an unquestionable good, in my opinion, and that is harder to achieve from within a closed system.

Facilitating such a far-reaching and productive conversation is precisely what I have attempted to do in my brief comments here. I treasure the years I spent at CSUN and am enjoying equally my time at WVU. They represent different institutional climates and missions but have much to learn from and about each other. The PhD-granting research institutions train the faculty who teach at the state comprehensives. Continuing and deepening the conversation between the sectors can only benefit the departments who train those faculty and the ones who hire them. Everyone benefits in the process of conversing across the sectors: administrators, who learn new ways of approaching problems; faculty, whose institutional lives and assumptions are challenged and changed through the process of exchanging ideas; and students, who will benefit from a more dynamic and engaged faculty. The only thing holding us back from pursuing such cross-cultural conversation is our own traditions and assumptions. Once we acknowledge that such barriers are those we alone create and replicate, we should be eager and able to surmount them for our common good.