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Trachtenberg Proposes Trimester System for GW

Calls for Establishment of a Working Group to Examine Idea

In a policy address to a faculty assembly Nov. 11, University President Stephen Joel Trachtenberg proposed that the GW calendar year shift to 14-week trimesters.

"Students would be on campus for two of three trimesters, and faculty would teach two of three trimesters," Trachtenberg said. "The learning and teaching requirements would remain the same as they are now."

He called for the establishment of a working group comprising faculty, staff, trustees, and students to examine the implications of such a system and report results by May 1, 2003.

"...(T)his is a proposal," the president said. "If the study group finds too many problems, we will abandon the idea. If they believe it can work, we will pursue the idea further."

Here is a complete transcript of Trachtenberg's remarks:

"May you live in interesting times" is an old Chinese saying. Actually, I hear, it isn't a saying — it's a curse, a serious one reserved for the worst offenses, like raining brimstone and fire on Sodom and Gomorrah. I think the Chinese are on to something. Our times, if not exactly cursed, are certainly interesting enough to make them often hard to bear and to make me worry about the future.

This is especially true in universities these days. Part of our plight, I hasten to add with pleasure, is our great success in recent years. GW, in particular, has seen the quality of its faculty, of the students it admits, of its facilities, and of many other things improve notably. Being a better university — and especially a better university on its way to being a great university — comes at a price. To be accurate, it comes at many prices, with more money for salaries, for financial aid, for building new buildings and refurbishing old ones, for buying books and technology and for rose bushes. There's no such thing as a free lunch and there's no such thing as a free Media and Public Affairs Building either.

Mind you, I am not saying money alone makes instructors teach well and scholars publish articles of great merit. Nor do I mean that improved yield and retention rates among our applicants and students are commodities available at wholesale. But salaries and financial aid are two of the greatest costs in any university's budget, and without meeting these costs as generously as possible, the university stagnates. And it is not surprising, therefore, that when we are best able to fund faculty and students, we have the greatest success.

What happens, of course, is we get used to success and want more of it. Why not? It feels good to be better, to strive to be better, to cook up the ideas that make us better. I can't imagine getting out of bed every morning and beseeching God to make me truly second-rate — let alone getting the answer to my prayers.

But our interesting times are applying stresses and strains that are truly daunting. And not only to us at GW. I don't think there is a

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university or college in the country — public or private — that is not wondering how it will continue to pay all the many prices it must pay to hold its own, let alone succeed in improving itself.

At the same time, we know here at GW — as university faculties and administrations elsewhere also know — that a lot of what we call success is not the extraordinary feat or action that may be represented in the bricks and mortar of a new building, the addition of a new program, the snaring of a high-flying professor, or the receipt of a stupefyingly large gift. All of these are welcome, and I spend many of my daily hours pursuing goals like these.

But there are things with less drama, but not, I think, of less importance to our success and well-being that we also must pursue. As I'm sure you know, we have produced a strategic plan to help guide GW for the next three to five years. You will be hearing a great deal more about it shortly, but not much about it from me today. Except this:

Part of the plan was a specialized kind of poll of students, faculty, parents, administrators, and alumni called a gap survey. The survey asked them first what they thought needed improvement and then a second, equally critical question — how important is this deficit or problem to you? In other words, the survey told us how big a gap exists between what is and what is actually needed while also helping us to establish an approximate pecking order.

For example, some of the biggest gaps perceived by GW faculty were in graduate financial aid, especially for doctoral students, and the holdings in the library. Some of the smallest were GW's academic reputation and parking availability. I am not telling you anything you didn't know before, but it was useful to get some quantified expression of what we all in fact knew before...

Because this will guide us in selecting the things we need to do first., and for good reason. Any institution has gaps it wants to close. And most institutions, certainly this one, do not have the resources to take on everything all at once. Thus, we place the resources we have where we think the need is most urgent and where those resources will produce the most good. Now as I said, improving the amount of support we offer doctoral students may lack the drama of the new building or the endowed chair, but I do not think it is any less important to our success. Success is not always flashy.

Nor does it ever come for free. Even maintaining the status quo — something I would never be content to do and a feeling I hope you share — is not cheap or easy. It used to be that universities were labor-intensive, spending most of their money on salaries. Salaries are still the largest item in the budget, but as we have grown, we have become capital-intensive as well. I think we're all glad we have a new home for the Elliott School and a rebuilt Marvin Center. But I wish — who wouldn't? — that they had been produced exclusively by some large benefactions. They were not. We had to raise the capital.

And we had to do it at a time when giving is down because the markets, terrorism, and the uncertainty about war and its effects on prices and prosperity are inhibiting donors, large and small. And we had to do it at a time when our endowment income is also down. It may be an ironic benefit of having a comparatively small endowment, but a half-percent decline in the market does not send ours down by more than $90-million, which is the case for Harvard... although I think I'd swap present losses for remaining endowments with them if they are willing.

Now this leads me to the greater issue. What I have said about the various demands on GW's resources is important to understand: there are the glamorous expenses, the less-than-glamorous efforts, and the meat-and-potato expenses that we must face, and finance, day after day. But what I have said is not a conclusion and it is not dispositive. It simply provides a local point of reference for the prevailing facts

— and, I hope, a local point of departure for ideas and solutions among ourselves. Institutions of higher education everywhere are facing similar problems and similar stresses, arising from tough financial times and, as I have said, from the success we have all grown accustomed to achieving. Harvard is not exempt, nor is Princeton — the richest university per student — nor even the state universities. I want to talk about the more widespread problems before returning to what we at GW may consider doing.

Let me begin with a public university and our neighbor, George Mason University. GMU has just announced a 13 percent tuition increase for the spring semester — following a 25 percent increase last spring, a compound increase of over 41 percent in less than a year. The increase, they say, will avoid layoffs and preserve a full roster of classes. But still, 150 faculty positions will not be filled. Most of Virginia's other public universities — the University of Virginia, Virginia Tech, Old Dominion, Radford, and Longwood so far — have all announced they will probably raise fees this spring as well.

The University of Maryland raised tuition 5.5 percent last year and, given Maryland's budget is $1.3 billion out of whack, will probably have additional increases and quite possibly layoffs or program closings. As *The Washington Post* observed, Maryland voters are more concerned with primary and secondary education than with the state university system.

This assessment of the public's sentiment is significant. Many public universities have endowments, some of them admirable in size. But their true endowments are the state treasuries. When revenues fall and taxpayers — not to mention legislators — recoil from tax increases, the sure result is identical to decreased endowment income. What is happening now in Virginia because of a $2-billion shortfall in the state budget is almost sure to happen in Maryland.

Private colleges and universities rely on endowment income and nearly all have seen falls in income —even the rich ones. For example, Wellesley, down 6 percent. MIT, down 12 percent. Boston University, down 27 percent. Dartmouth, down 5.7 percent, and so delaying construction of a new residence hall and life sciences building. Berea College in Kentucky, which does not charge tuition, down 26 percent, leading its chief financial officer to say the school will probably terminate programs "with the fewest majors... which we cannot afford." And Indiana University, the champion among public institutions in building its endowment, is down nearly 9 percent.

The results of course are obvious. The College Board recently announced that tuitions at public institutions are up 9.6 percent this year over last and up 5.8 percent at private institutions. Of course, private university prices are about two and a half times as great as public on average. Aside from the direct impact increases like these have on students and their families, there is collateral damage. For example, only about 10 percent of students pay the full freight at private institutions. The rest get loans — which means young people may start their careers with, typically $17,000 of debt — or hope to win some financial aid in the form of a grant. This in turn puts pressure on the colleges and universities to provide as much as they can to attract and retain the most promising students — that is to say, they're reducing their revenue anyway. Or, many students spend more time working for pay than for learning because they have to. And finally, 20 years ago Pell Grants covered 84 percent of an education at a public university. Today, they cover 42 percent, half as much.

All right. These facts may seem mundane, and they are certainly dreary. But they are the prevailing facts in American higher education. And no doubt will obtain for years. Naturally, everyone is trying to save money, sometimes in ingenious ways. Dartmouth has installed a centralized computer printing system for its students. Kent State and the University of Akron share joint software licenses. The

16 campuses of the University of North Carolina have formed a purchasing co-op for software. Ingenious, but the savings are comparatively small — a few hundred thousand dollars — when the shortfalls are in the millions. Other universities have been draconian, for example, 10 percent across-the-board cuts at the University of Missouri and greatly increased use of non-tenured lecturers at the state universities in Georgia.

These last two measures are unacceptable to me and I'm sure to you, too. We can save some here and some there, and everything we save adds up. Saving a quarter-of-a-million dollars on software licenses pays three good salaries, after all. But our interesting and daunting times require saving more — or bringing in more. Both, to be sure, but I think it is possible to increase revenue.

Let me tell you what I'm thinking. But first, let me take the risk of quoting myself. A couple of weeks ago, I was preparing a talk I'm planning to give to the National PTA. I observed that schools still run on the agrarian calendar, a leftover from earlier times. It makes, I said, no sense to subordinate teaching to planting, cultivating, and harvesting when so few of us work on farms or live by agriculture. A colleague then asked me if this should also apply to universities, since we use pretty much the same calendar. I said no because the terms and stakes are different. The time off for work and research is critical to students and faculty alike. And I stand by that.

But we do not need the summer off. Work and scholarship are possible in any season. So this is what I am thinking and proposing to you.

What if we went to a trimester system? It might work like this. The entire calendar year would be divided into three trimesters, still each 14 weeks long, with breaks between them. Students would be on campus for two of three trimesters, and faculty would teach two of three trimesters. The learning and the teaching requirements would remain the same as they are now.

But I think there would be advantages. First, instead of trying to accommodate 8,000 undergraduates all at once as we must now, we could slightly increase enrollment to 9,000, yet have to accommodate only 6,000 students during any one trimester. We have 6,000 beds — so we could escape the pressure to build more residence halls. A larger enrollment, with the additional students spread over three trimesters instead of two semesters, would increase revenue while class sizes could actually remain stable and possibly decline slightly.

The idea is simply to make full use of both the year and our facilities. We are maintaining and paying for our buildings and grounds 12 months a year, but we are profiting from them fully a little more than half the year. Two 14-week semesters actually. I learned recently that GW makes money from the residence halls in the summer, but not mainly from students. We rent them out to interns and to groups holding meetings and conferences. It is not full utilization.

I find the logic of full use of time and facilities apparent and compelling. So I am proposing to you today that we begin to consider switching to a trimester system at GW. I am also proposing a working group of faculty, staff, trustees, and students to study the implications of such a new system. I will ask them to look broadly at how a trimester system at GW would affect — indeed, improve — academic and co-curricular life here and to report to me by May 1.

I also want them to look narrowly at everything involved, including the effects on student learning, our policies concerning teaching, research, and sabbatical leave, registration, the coordination of general university events like commencement, the possibility of replacing the current five-course semester requirement with four more robust courses, likely additional revenues and expenses, staffing requirements, and the evidence from other universities that employ alternatives to semesters.

Mind you, this is a radical proposal. Research by the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers reveals that only about 18 percent of American universities use a trimester or quarters system — though in most quarters systems, the summer quarter is rather like traditional "summer school," an exception being Dartmouth, which requires some summer attendance. Moreover, trimesters and quarters are shorter than our traditional semesters, usually only 11 weeks rather than 14. This means that students often study three out of three consecutive semesters or quarters. I am proposing something else. Radical, as I said.

But, I stress, this is a proposal. If the study group finds too many problems, we will abandon the idea. If they believe it can work, we will pursue the idea further. But a proposal has an intention — to succeed. I said a little while ago that we are dealing with facts that are mundane and dreary, and so they are. This proposal, I believe, is neither. At the very least, it liberates us from old assumptions about how the machinery of GW must operate. It invites us to refresh our ideas about teaching and learning. And it counters the idea that interesting times must be a curse when they may be offering us better opportunities and a happier future. Memory need not be the enemy of change.

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