

“Committee, Commitment, Committed

... three problems that make my life hell!”

So sang Ron Laskey, in one of the tracks on his wonderful album *Songs for Cynical Scientists*. I had the great pleasure and privilege of doing an undergraduate vacation project with Ron Laskey, and through that got to know about his other life as a folk singer, and about the album he recorded at Cold Spring Harbor. It is still available (see Links). Several of its songs have stuck in my head over a life of research. In particular, while reading papers on gene control, I often hear Ron’s *Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes in the genome; they’re all made of ACGT and they all look just the same* in particular (note to younger readers: there was a famous 60s song protesting the suburbanization of the Western world, *Little boxes, little boxes, little boxes on the hillside, and they’re all made of ticky-tacky and they all look the same*. The song goes on to make the same criticism of those who live in them). Over the last four years, though, the Ron Laskey song I hear most in my inner ear is “Committee, Commitment, Committed”.

For most of academic life, one can be part of the faculty of a university and do nothing but research and to teach, with maybe some course organization work. People are dimly aware of a bunch of senior people who keep the show on the road but, if they do their job well, they are in the background. It works very well. But, for all of us who stay in the faculty long enough, there comes a time when someone in charge points out that we have become the ‘senior people’, and that we now need to step up because, if we don’t, the university will not be able to run. Unlike in industry, there is no more pay for this and, although in theory there will be a balancing drop in expected other work, there is not, of course. The old joke about academic life being 50% research, 50% teaching and 50% administration just becomes a bit more real.

In my case, the ‘invitation’ to put my shoulder to the wheel came in the form of a request to apply to the post of Dean of Education, a role I have had for around 4 years until passing it on to the next lucky recipient, at the start of this month. The word ‘lucky’ in that sentence is not altogether satirical: I have actually enjoyed having the chance to shape the current and future educational strategy of the College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine and of the University as a whole. The appointment did, though, involve some interesting times.

The start of my occupying the post, taking over from Neil Turner who had been doing a great job, coincided with the COVID pandemic, the necessary pivot of almost all teaching and assessment to online, and the need to graduate medical students earlier than normal so that they could help on the 'front line'. The latter was helped enormously by an imaginative, energetic and very capable colleague, David Kluth, who was later honoured by the Queen appointing him to an OBE (Order of the British Empire) for services to medical education.

The transition from all-online working back in in-person teaching, trying to keep the best of what we learned in the online period with the best of in-person, coincided with the beginning of a very long strike by the academics' trade union (of which I have never been a member). I am not anti-union in principle; my grandfather, who was a big influence in my early life, was a socialist who did much to help unions fight for Welsh coal miners to be treated fairly by owners of private collieries. Born in the 1880s, he has his own back broken in an underground accident when he was just 14 years old, and knew well of what he spoke. But I have always felt that the business of a good trade union is to defend the weak against the exploitative strong, and have therefore steered clear of a union that is prepared to take action that denies young students, who have no power and are often too young to have had the chance to vote, their education. Much of my work at that time was therefore to work with the instinctive professionalism common around medicine to try to minimize the impact of the strikes on students in the College. It largely worked, thanks to my wonderful colleagues; almost all of our students received all of their teaching and assessment and graduated on time with no fuss. Other parts of the university, staffed by people with different priorities, had a different experience.

The third element of 'interesting times', which is ongoing, was the decision of the university to make a really major change to the structure of its courses – *Curriculum Transformation*. This, championed by Colm Harmon who had overseen a similar process in an Australian university and led by our own serial innovator in education, Jon Turner, will make what we offer much more suited to the 21st Century, and much more aligned to the lived and skills we expect our graduates to have, including their coming back as lifelong learners.

These three things, and the smaller things that have been going on, have been really interesting. What I had never been prepared for, though, was the sheer number of Committees and Boards that exist in this university, that I needed to join. Some were predictable – the regular meetings planning

Curriculum Transformation, for example. Some had worked so well over the years that I had never noticed them, vital as they are – the Senate Academic Policy and Regulations Committee, or Senate Quality Assurance Committee (pronounced ‘squak’!) are two examples. Are they exciting? No. Are they necessary? Yes – and they are also run really well and attended by really talented and committed colleagues from whom I learned a lot. Then there are groups I would never have imagined. A lecture captioning board, for example, or a board to oversee changes to an online learning environment. I had also not anticipated the number of pre-meetings that take place before actual meetings. Overall, I reckon about two ‘theoretical working days’ (eg 7h) per week were taken up with these meetings. Don’t get me wrong – they do largely do their jobs, and do them well, and they do deserve the time they take. I had just not appreciated, before being involved, just how much internal coordination is needed to run what is, after all, the largest employer in this capital city of Scotland.

Catching my breath and looking back now, I do feel it was a privilege to have had this role, and I learned a great deal from some wonderful colleagues, many of whom are almost invisible to those who live lives of research and teaching, but whose efforts are critical. This comment applies not just to academic staff, but also staff on what we call the operations side. When I took on the role, various of my research colleagues referred to it as ‘going to the dark side’. I knew what they meant, and I still do. Managing a large institution necessarily involves small-p politics because you have to work to engage other people in new ventures for which they will be critical. And any kind of politics is ‘the dark side’ to those of us whose research lives are spent in the transparency of conducting experiments, whose results, if the experiments are well designed, are ‘black and white’ and require no nuanced approaches or shades of grey. But I gained a huge respect for those who work so effectively in this small-p political world and who keep the university running for the rest of us. Some of the operations people, in particular, are truly brilliant.

I still have connections to university and college strategy, and also doing more for external bodies such as grant funders. But these will be with a lower overall time commitment, so I can look forward to more time back in my white coat at the lab bench. I imagine the PhD students and postdocs in the lab feel the sense of impending doom that goes with the news that a Professor will be running his own experiments again!

Waiting for the cells to grow: a laboratory blog at <http://golgi.ana.ed.ac.uk/Davieslab/wftctg.html>

Links

Songs for Cynical Scientists <https://www.amazon.com/Selected-Songs-Cynical-Scientists-Laskey/dp/0879696850>