

Senate “Future History” Forum, November 18, 2015

President Wilson Parker opened the Forum by explaining the format for the afternoon’s “Future History” exercise (see appendix). He introduced those present to the concept of “future history” as a method for envisioning future crises and thereby becoming better prepared to deal with actual situations. Provost Kersh then elaborated on this kind of exercise, which he has employed successfully with other University units including the Dean of the College office and the Law School. Our exercise asked participants to separate into groups and imagine a future event (in this case, that the Carnegie Foundation has given Wake Forest a prestigious award for being a model of effective governance). Participants spent a brief time sketching such a scenario and what events led up to it. They were asked to think about the challenges facing colleges and universities as outlined in the preparatory materials the Forum Planning Committee had circulated to all Senators prior to the meeting as possible situations that spurred the Senate to find a solution (see appendix). Afterward, group members were asked to share their visions and come together in compiling a shared narrative about the supposed award and the chain of events leading up to it. Each group then shared their narrative with the Senate members present, who then questioned the presenters about the details of their proposed “future history.”

The Senators present were grouped around three tables for the exercise. These minutes include a report from each table about its imaginary “history,” including the follow-up questions and answers about each narrative.

Table 1: Claudia Kairoff (reporter), Kathy Smith, Kevin Jung (representing Bill Leonard), Mark Welker, Rebecca Thomas, Christopher Knott, and John Parks.

In 2025, Wake Forest University plummeted in the *US News & World Reports* and other annual published rankings. The University’s resources had been stretched thin by years of attempting to compete with better-endowed institutions for the honor of high ratings. As a result, applications dropped and faculty members were hard to recruit. At this juncture, the Faculty Senate came to the fore as sponsors of a space where accurate information could be shared and suggestions proposed by the entire community. Several years before, a “Safe Space” for no-holds-barred discussions had been established by the Senate, where faculty members, administrators, and students who meet and learn about pressing issues facing the University, discuss these topics, and register their opinions or suggestions, with the Senate responsible for collecting and disseminating these ideas. As a result, the community was accustomed to being informed and responsible participants in University issues and confident in their right to free speech. To address this important crisis, the Senate sponsored a series of meetings designed to study and resolve the plethora of competing interests on campus, in which students, faculty, and staff often seemed to have different and contradictory goals. After this inventory, not only were all units more knowledgeable about each other, but they could come together and decide on a clear, streamlined set of academic goals, some quite innovative. These included an Innovation Quarter-based “incubator” for lifelong learning, in which not-for-credit courses were offered to both alumni and current undergraduates. This encouraged continuing learning for graduates and provided role models and mentors for undergraduates, and helped faculty members serve as “bridges” between current students and alumni. Other ideas included building an additional

component into every practicable course, whether of service or creativity or some other enriching “plus.” Because the Board of Trustees had built a solid relationship with the Senate, and through the Senate, the faculty, its members approved the curricular changes and enhancements, and approved the streamlining of priorities. Although American students were being urged to seek vocational training rather than pursuing a liberal arts education, numbers of students began to seek WFU out for its enhanced curriculum.

Questions:

Where did you imagine the “safe space”? We imagined a place like the Green Room: a central location where people could come from all over the Reynolda Campus (and perhaps even park for free if coming from the Med School or downtown campuses!).

What new students did you imagine recruiting? In our scenario, aside from increased undergraduate admissions, we imagined alumni in “lifelong learning” courses.

How did you win over faculty members to the idea of an enhanced curriculum? We wooed them with the idea of faculty members as “connectors,” widening the scope of faculty influence beyond the 18-23-year-old time frame.

Where did the money come from the support the new initiatives and to attract new students? One source of students might be “boomerang” alumni who participate in lifelong learning and then send their children to WFU. A big source of resources came from the exercise in streamlining University priorities. If, for example, we stepped back from our most expensive sports programs, the College revenue saved could be used for scholarships. We even thought of approaching alumni with a new version of an old Wake Forest College tradition of working to support the community, involving not literal labor, as on the old campus, but monetary donations.

How did you imagine delivering the lifelong learning courses? We imagined these primarily as online courses. We did not envision WFU developing a massive online learning presence, but scattered non-credit-bearing courses. We imagined beginning with a few courses, perhaps available to students on the IQ campus, and expanding the program as rates of participation grew. We anticipated a small but significant number of returning students enhancing the experience of our 18-23-year-old undergraduates.

Table 2

Scenario:

Year: 2030

Event: Carnegie Foundation gives WFU an award for being a model of cooperative faculty/administration/Board of Trustees governance. The award was for saving a private university during the purge of the mid-2020’s. UNCG had been sold to Amazon, and the free tuition to community colleges had devastated both public and private universities.

Setting: 2 Carnegie members are interviewing the officers of the WFU Senate to hear how it happened, for their report.

One Group's Result

1. In 2019, WFU hired a new president and CFO. A 2-year debate began at WFU about the form of faculty governance. The faculty saw committees as too demanding of time and relatively powerless. The administration saw committees as too slow to nimbly adapt to changing circumstances. The debate ended with a 2021 vote by the faculty to dissolve committees. The University Senate would become the center of all faculty governance.
2. In 2022, Rogan Kersh left to become president of Harvard. A new provost was hired, Carly Tiona. Negative student reviews became intense, often on YikYak. Faculty, staff, and administration were demoralized. A major financial crisis was revealed, and a report was circulated that the crisis was the result of poor financial management. Faculty agreed to take a salary cut of 10% in exchange for more administrative power, and the Trustees agreed to match that salary cut with a donation.
3. In 2026, a new agreement was reached in which the University Senate would vote on all WFU policies, but that the administration would set all policies. Academics were agreed to be always prioritized.
4. In 2029, a new president search was chaired faculty member, and a prominent public intellectual was hired.

Questions from Interviewers

Who were the largest Donors?

Domestic and international.

How was the paycut distributed?

Evenly across the board.

How did the Trustees change their mind?

They saw the collapse coming. Desperate measures call for desperate times.

What specifically changed?

There was a consensus about priorities. Academics had the highest priorities.

How did decisions go through the Senate?

The Senate was the decision making body rather than faculty committees. Senate committees voted on policies. Policies came early in the process to faculty, so faculty weren't criticizing policies near the end.

Table 3: Participants: Kevin Cox, James Ford, Wilson Parker (reporter), John Pickel, Omari Simmons, Beverly Snively, Michelle Steward, Julie Wayne

Wake Forest began its path to its current status as an exemplar of faculty/administration/Board of Trustees collaboration when the President organized a unique, three day retreat of the Faculty Senate, administrators, and members of the Board of Trustees (BoT) during the summer of 2016. Over the course of two and a half days, trustees,

administrators, and sixteen senators were able to forge personal relationships and learn about one another's backgrounds, job responsibilities, and visions for the University. There were several workshops during the retreat. More importantly, several ad hoc committees were formed that continued to meet after the retreat. Committees included: (1) one focused on a new presidential search (addressing goals and process), (2) one exploring the current status of a liberal arts education, (3) one addressing the balance of tenure track and teaching professionals at Wake Forest, and (4) one addressing the composition of the BoT and developing best practices going forward to foster deeper trust and understanding among the three main constituencies of governance. It was agreed that at least eight faculty senators would attend the regular BOT summer retreat once every three years to ensure ongoing collaboration on these and other important challenges facing the University.

The President's invitation had initially been challenged by some senior administrators who feared that rogue faculty might subvert the administration's attempt to present a coherent message to the trustees, but the overwhelming success of the retreat calmed these fears. Some members of the Faculty Senate and BoT had been skeptical as well, doubting that a one-time retreat could overcome years of mistrust and disagreement. However, the actual effect was transformative and launched a new era of collaboration and lasting initiatives in University governance. As one BoT member reported, "For the first time, I actually gained a clear understanding and appreciation for the demands on faculty and their concerns with the revolutionary changes taking place in higher education. Faculty, as I learned, are not simply out to protect their jobs or the status quo. In fact, they represent the heart of our mission and are much closer to many of the challenges—curricular, pedagogical, and student-centered—that we face as trustees than we can be. It is incumbent upon those of us with administrative and fiduciary responsibility to understand their perspective and hear their voice. I now look forward to regular get-togethers with my faculty colleagues at various BoT meetings."

A result of the retreat was that all current members of the Board of Trustees committed to spend a day shadowing faculty members, in order to gain an appreciation of what faculty did. Job shadowing would be incorporated as a part of the orientation for all future trustees. Another result was that the BoT made a concerted effort to get a more diverse membership and modified the financial requirements associated with the position.

Similarly, faculty members were to shadow administrators for two days, to gain an appreciation of what they did. The faculty members would then report to the senate on their experience. This would occur every 5 years.

In 2017 there was a presidential search. It was conducted with faculty input pursuant to the plan developed by the ad hoc committee mentioned above. New President Elizabeth Warren began her tenure by announcing that Wake Forest would follow a management philosophy similar to that employed by the U.S. Navy on the aircraft carrier U.S.S. Abraham Lincoln. On the Lincoln, all decisions are made to maximize the effectiveness of the fighter pilots who are based on the carrier. The work of the pilots is recognized as the core function of the enterprise. Similarly, the core purpose of the university is to maximize the effectiveness of the faculty. By so doing, all constituents of the university benefit. (We are not talking about giving "treats" to the faculty. We are talking about putting them in a position to maximize their effectiveness.

Great responsibility falls upon the faculty to then meet their responsibilities.) The faculty obviously benefits as their collective needs are addressed. The students benefit from excellent teaching and mentoring. The university benefits as its reputation grows due to excellent research. Alumni morale benefits from the public perception that the university is a place committed to excellence.

This vision was initially opposed by the Dean of Students, who argued that addressing the needs of students was the core mission of the university. While students are certainly a core stakeholder in the university, the research commitment of the faculty addresses needs that are not all directly student related. Eventually, the Dean of Students realized the wisdom of President Warren's approach.

There was also a successful Provost search in 2020. Innovation Quarter also developed in a methodical way. Faculty cooperated in major projects because they consistently had input at an early stage. Faculty recognized that there are always hard choices to be made by the administration and BoT, but that choices were now made after thoughtful consideration of faculty input. Faculty "buy in" on major decisions remains exceptionally high, particularly when compared to the adversarial environment that exists at many peer institutions.

Originally, a Senate meeting was scheduled for January and there was no meeting scheduled for February. The Executive Committee has decided to CANCEL the January meeting (scheduled for next Wednesday, January 20) and instead meet in February. The February meeting will occur on February 24 at 4:00 in DeTamble Auditorium.