5. Building a World-Class Faculty

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Building a World-Class Faculty

In preparing its report, the research commission queried senior faculty and administrators from peer institutions on which strategies most improve the quality of research and scholarship. “The response was clear and unanimous,” the commission wrote. “Their number one priority is hiring and then supporting exceptional faculty members. This strategy so out-distances all others that we could not get them to name a second.” While “universities do not exist for faculty,” the report added, “[they] certainly thrive because of them.”

Ohio State had far to go to match its peer institutions in the number and concentration of eminent faculty or in academic programs ranked in the nation’s top tier. Thus, the Academic Plan’s first two initiatives were to recruit, over three to five years, “at least 12 faculty members who have attained or have the potential to attain the highest honors in their disciplines, concentrating these appointments in areas of strategic focus,” and to “implement a faculty recruitment, retention and development plan—including a competitive, merit-based compensation structure—that is in line with our benchmark institutions.” These steps were intimately linked with the Academic Plan’s second strategy, which was to increase the number of world-class academic programs. Although more could have been achieved in a less restrictive economic environment, there was progress on both fronts.

What’s more, the president worked successfully with the University Senate on a host of touchy and, in at least one case, controversial issues.
Signature Initiative: Compensation

Recruiting, retaining, and motivating about three thousand regular faculty and sixteen thousand staff requires competitive compensation. But even though the faculty received average salary increases of 3.5 and 4 percent during Kirwan’s first two years as president, with some departments adding another half a percentage point from their own funds, average salaries remained about 2.5 percent below the benchmark average. Ohio State’s ranking among benchmark institutions had slipped from above the median some years ago to eighth out of ten. Staff salaries were below market by 7 to 10 percent.

An optimistic budget forecast in the fall of 2000 deteriorated, and by the late spring of 2001 it was apparent that not even a typical salary increase was realistic for Kirwan’s third year. With FY2002 fast approaching, the administration granted a flat $395 annual increase to all regular faculty and staff whose performance met expectations—enough to cover only cost increases for health benefits and parking. It was the equivalent of 0.8 percent, furthering the disparity with peer institutions.

The $395 increase was unusual not only in amount but also in structure, since for more than a decade, raises had been given on individual merit rather than across the board. Individual increases normally ranged from zero for those failing to meet job performance expectations to more than the average amount for those who excelled. This year, however, everyone would get the same small amount.

“We are painfully aware of the inadequacy of these compensation gestures,” the president told the trustees in June 2001, “but it’s the best we can do at the moment.” Going forward, he said, Ed Ray and Bill Shkurti would prepare a compensation strategy to raise faculty and staff compensation “to the mean of our benchmark institutions within three or four years.” A Competitive Compensation Oversight Group would be formed to assist in this process.

The president also emphasized that reaching compensation parity with inadequate state funding would require cuts to existing programs and that some other objectives be sidetracked. “I do not underestimate the difficulty of this task,” he said. “However, if we really believe that academic excellence starts with a top-quality faculty and staff—and we do—then this is the right step to take, and we must take it.”

“At first employees begrudgingly understood,” says Human Resources associate vice president Larry Lewellen. “Then, as they learned that other Ohio
colleges had given more normal increases, resentment built. There were more contentious Faculty Council meetings, forums, and so forth.” While the move was not popular, Shkurti adds, it helped position the university to protect its academic programs when additional budget cuts hit later in the year.

Given that fiscal restraints did not permit the university to implement the Academic Plan as aggressively as it had intended, Kirwan identified four primary initiatives for the short to medium term. Topping the list was compensation, which became a test of Kirwan’s commitment to excellence and of the Academic Plan’s credibility.

In May 2002 the trustees approved a salary budget increase in the range of 4.5 percent, which was 1 percent above market. “This is the first year in our plan to provide salary budgets of up to one percent above comparable institutions,” Ray said. “We hope that within the next several years, Ohio State will again be offering competitive salaries.” This did not mean that the eventual goal was merely median performance. Rather, the goal was considered a way station en route to even more competitive compensation.

This action was taken—and the promise kept—during a year of severe budget reductions. When the dust finally cleared, faculty salaries went up by 4.8 percent, more than 2 percent above market. However, a major challenge remained. Benchmark salaries had risen more than 23 percent over the past five years, compared with just 15.8 percent at OSU.

**Stars Shining Bright**

Initiated in 1993, Academic Enrichment was an early initiative to encourage excellence by awarding dollars—usually matched by the recipient departments—to high-potential faculty programs. The initiative was intended to build such programs, with a special emphasis on interdisciplinary collaboration. In the seven years between 1993 and 2000, when the program was discontinued, about one hundred awards were made to programs in fourteen colleges and other university units totaling about $7.8 million in continuing funding and about $3.9 million in onetime payments.

Among the faculty supported by Academic Enrichment funds were Len Brillson and Winston Ho in the Center for Materials Research; Karen Bell, then chair of the highly regarded Department of Dance and later dean of the College of the Arts; Mauro Ferrari, who was hired on one of the health sci-
ences awards and who, as director of the biomedical engineering program, later participated in an award fund position in nanotechnology; and Maria Palazzi, associate director of the Advanced Computing Center for the Arts and Design. These awards also provided seed funding for additional undergraduate honors courses and supported the recruitment of graduate students.

With Gee’s blessing, Dick Sisson and Ed Ray took the next step in initiating Selective Investment for Academic Excellence. The program, just starting when Kirwan arrived, was designed to raise already strong departments to the very top of the national academic ladder. The initiative was so compatible with his goals, Kirwan said, that he promptly championed the idea. The first four awards were made in September 1998, with each department matching $500,000 in additional continuing university funding ($1 million total) over a period of years. Four additional awards were made in 1999 and five more in 2000, for a total of thirteen. Recipients were: Electrical Engineering, Materials Science and Engineering, Physics, Psychology, Chemistry, History, Neuroscience, Political Science, an interdisciplinary proposal in cardiovascular bioengineering from the Colleges of Medicine and Public Health and Engineering, Economics, English, Mathematics, and Law.

In addition, at the suggestion of David Brennan, the Board of Trustees created the $8.5 million President’s Strategic Investment Fund to help jump-start Academic Plan priorities. (Of that total, $5.5 million was freed up when the Development Office began to support its operations out of fund-raising receipts rather than the General Fund, while $3 million came from the State of Ohio’s Research Challenge.) Kirwan used this fund to help establish the MicroMD Laboratory in the Science Village, Medical Informatics, and the Biomedical Research Tower, as well as to enhance the undergraduate experience, technology transfer, and pharmacology.

In July 2001 the Ohio Board of Regents awarded Ohio State four of the state’s seven new Eminent Scholar positions, providing up to $750,000 per position in endowment support to be matched by new university fund-raising. And during the winter quarter, in accordance with the Academic Plan, a faculty committee recommended pursuing proposals for nine distinguished faculty positions, five of which were filled by Alastair Minnis, English; Ann Hamilton, Art; Wolfgang Sadee, Pharmacology; Joel Saltz, Bioinformatics; and Roger Ratcliff, Psychology. Among other outstanding individuals recruited to play prominent roles in the success of the Academic Plan were Martha
One key indicator of progress in attracting eminent or “star” faculty are memberships in the ultraprestigious National Academy of Science, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine as well as the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an organization founded in 1780 by John Adams and other scholar-patriots. When Kirwan arrived, Ohio State boasted fourteen such faculty. When he left, there were twenty-three—still well behind such universities as Penn State (34), Michigan (132), and UC–Berkeley (404).

The university also continued its tradition of designating a small number of faculty as Distinguished University Professors. During the Kirwan years, the university added seven DUPs to the ten that had already been named. Many other faculty and staff were honored by campus, state, national, and international organizations. A new tradition, Faculty Recognition Day, took root in 2001 at the Northwestern game in Ohio Stadium, where a halftime ceremony recognized recipients of the year’s most prestigious faculty awards. The Best Damn Band in the Land created six star formations around which the honorees clustered, with Kirwan and Ray visiting each group.

At halftime during the Northwestern game in the fall of 2001, the university held its first Faculty Recognition Day event. President Kirwan and Provost Ray are shown here with thirteen faculty members.
Senatus Universitatis

In his annual address to the University Senate on January 10, 2002, Provost Ed Ray stirred the academic pot by announcing three important actions. The first, covered in the next chapter, was the appointment of an ad hoc group to study the future of the Colleges of the Arts and Sciences, including the possibility of consolidation.

The second was a request from the senate for enabling legislation to permit colleges outside the health sciences to propose the appointment of clinical faculty—highly qualified, nontenured women and men who utilize their real-world experience to teach but do little research or service. The Moritz College of Law and the Fisher College of Business had requested approval to establish such positions, leading the provost and the president to request enabling legislation and the subsequent consideration of such proposals on their individual merits. Enabling legislation was enacted in June 2002, after which the law, engineering, and business schools submitted specific proposals.

Distinguished University Professor Matt Platz, Chemistry, applauds as the Best Damn Band in the Land entertains at the 2001 Faculty Appreciation ceremony recognizing recipients of the year's most prestigious faculty honors.
The third item in the provost’s senate address was the announcement of his decision to extend the probationary period for regular tenure-track faculty in the College of Medicine and Public Health (COMPH). Knowing that tenure was the “third rail” of campus politics, the provost had worked extra hard on this section of his remarks. “This has got to be right,” he told a colleague he asked to review a draft of his remarks. But while Ray achieved his goal, his relations with the senate—which had been pretty good until this point—were damaged as a result.

The saga began when Fred Sanfilippo expressed a desire to extend the probationary period during which medical faculty could earn tenure from the sixth to the eleventh year. (A companion proposal would allow COMPH to make promotions to associate professor in advance of a tenure decision.) The argument was that medical faculty have extensive duties that other faculty do not; for example, tenure-track faculty who also maintain clinical practices devote many hours to patient care as well as teaching and research. Thirty-seven of the nation’s top medical universities, as ranked by U.S. News & World Report, had such provisions.

Colleges seeking this change had to gain the support of their own faculty, then petition the provost for approval. Sanfilippo obtained his faculty’s approval, then took the proposal to Ray, who expressed his willingness to extend the probationary period. He also agreed to uncouple promotion and tenure decisions for tenure-track faculty with patient clinical service responsibilities, but not for faculty in the basic sciences. Sanfilippo submitted a revised petition, which Ray approved.

The rub was in the interpretation of senate rules. Butttressed by an opinion from university attorney John Biancamano, Ray contended that he was obliged only to consult the Senate Rules Committee, after which he could make the decision on his own. The senate, in contrast, believed it retained the right to vote on such changes and that a sacred principle of university governance was at issue.

“Important issues centering on tenure, such as the length of probationary periods, absolutely must, in our opinion and in keeping with the totality of the University Rules, be the purview of the University Senate,” wrote Marilyn Blackwell, chair of the Faculty Council, who also expressed the view that “had the proposal gone to the Senate, it would have been approved.” Senate secretary Susan Fisher, who succeeded Gerry Regan in 2000, says the issue could have been resolved “if Ed had been flexible.”

Others saw it differently.
This was a major decision, and I was deeply impressed with the care and consideration Ed gave to the proposal and the extent of his consultations across the University,” President Kirwan wrote in a widely circulated letter. “Further, I am in complete agreement with his decision and admire the forthright manner in which he addressed the topic at last month’s Senate meeting.”

Nonetheless, the president had worked hard to build good relationships with the senate, and this dispute was damaging those relations. Thus, Kirwan worked with Fisher and Vice Provost Barbara Snyder to change the rules so they could vote in the future. The rule change was passed unanimously at Kirwan’s final senate meeting.

“Early on, Ed had been amenable to having the senate vote on this,” Snyder says. “He is a big believer in shared governance. He tried throughout to do the right thing. Brit did all he could to support Ed. The medical faculty wanted this, of course. Fred was impatient; he wanted this done quickly but was told it would take some doing.”

The Kirwan years also featured renewed discussion of the pros and cons of switching from an academic calendar based on quarters to one based upon semesters. President Kirwan made the case for semesters in his 2000 State of the University address, and the proposal was incorporated into the Academic Plan.
“I felt very strongly about quarter to semester conversion,” Kirwan says, citing a national trend toward semesters, a difficulty in collaboration with other universities, academic limitations of a ten-week quarter, a “credit creep” for graduation which made it tough to compare Ohio State with other institutions, and the tendency of students in a quarter system to rationalize dropping “briefly” out of school. At his request, Susan Fisher impaneled a leadership group chaired by Professor Grady Chism whose members eventually cast an affirmative straw vote on the controversial issue. Then, citing the budget crunch and the need to install a $30 million student information system before such a conversion could take place, Kirwan asked the senate to defer the matter, which it did. “I feel the stage is now set [for eventual conversion],” Kirwan said.

The president also asked the senate to consider a companion issue, which was to revise the General Education Curriculum (GEC). An ad hoc Undergraduate Curriculum Review Committee chaired by Marilyn Blackwell undertook this assignment, issuing a report on July 30, 2002, that was distributed within the senate for review.

At a senate reception during his transition, Kirwan referenced a process in Maryland in which the senate had benchmarked itself against other similar bodies at other universities. He suggested that Ohio State’s senate might want to do the same. Later, he reiterated the idea, which was also mentioned in the Rhodes report. Eventually, Caroline Whitacre chaired a Kirwan-appointed Presidential Commission on University Governance to undertake the university’s first-ever overall review of senate operations. The group worked for eighteen months to produce a report, plus another six months on implementation. Views differ on how much was finally accomplished. Susan Fisher notes that fifteen of seventeen recommendations were implemented, while a proposal to add staff as voting members was defeated. Others say the major achievement was a decision to hold senate meetings on Thursday afternoon rather than Saturday morning.

**Note to Chapter 5**

1. This is a knowledge base of techniques and applications for healthcare delivery and information management in support of patient care, research, and education. Medical informatics is in the Department of Biomedical Informatics.