

■ ■ Message from the Chair ■ ■



Looking for Bright Spots

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This is my last message from the Chair, and I have been thinking about the times we are going through and issues we are facing in this weak economy. Layoffs, furloughs, lack of funds for classroom materials as well as loss of travel funds do not make for lighthearted campuses. For the person without a job, there is not much that is positive, and, even if you have a job, you probably are holding your breath hoping you do tomorrow. I contend, however, that there are some beneficial aspects to this situation, and I would like to mention three.

At North Carolina State, our program is losing a full-time and two part-time faculty members, forcing us to rethink the way we provide instruction for students. Since the number of students has not proportionally diminished, we are looking at ways to stretch our resources. To accomplish this, we are experimenting with technologies that can offer more efficient ways of providing the same quality of instruction, since the luxury of teaching reasonably size classes, totally face-to-face, has disappeared.

This brings me to my first point. While our students have been “face-booking” and “twittering,” the majority of the faculty has continued to rely on old methods of teaching. Because funds are now tight, instructors who have been unwilling to adopt new technologies may now be forced to think outside the box, to innovate, and to experiment with new teaching and learning strategies to simply survive teaching the number of students who require their courses. In doing so, faculty also have to rethink and reexamine the course’s content and organization to teach the new way, which makes them look closer at the course and the pedagogy involved in moving to a new way of presenting material. With instruction delivered through technology, instructors finally may become the “facilitators of

learning” that educators have been talking about for years.

Science now understands that evolution in living organisms occur in sudden bursts and not the steady pace earlier postulated. Some of these sudden changes are thought to be due to cataclysmic events. For education this recession could well be a cataclysmic event that forces instructors to move quicker towards mirroring the technological nature of our society, or, at least, the technology the students in our classes are already comfortable with.

A second benefit of the recession is we may have greater empathy for our students and what they face as they leave school and hunt for that first job. Students have always left school with a certain amount of anxiety about their future, but over time faculty tend to forget what it feels like to leave the familiar environment they have known for work in the real world. Students in the current economic situation are leaving school with even greater anxiety. As we all are facing uncertain futures at this time, it is easier to relate to their anxieties.

A third benefit of the recession is that organizations and administrations that govern our institutions will be streamlined. With tighter budgets, the need to save money will initiate an examination of administrative units, and we will end up, hopefully, with a more efficient administration and organization because there is an incentive to trim the administrative tree.

We will survive all of this, and I think we will come out stronger on the other side. Unquestionably, some things will be lost that shouldn’t, but we also have an opportunity to gain in some ways. I guess I am looking hard for bright spots where ever I can find them.