



THE ADVOCATE



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INTERVIEW WITH OLIN

"You could have driven a truck through the hole in my heart."

The following interview was conducted by David Wickham, English Professor and Faculty Senate President at Montgomery College, who describes himself as "a proud member of the AFT since 1995."

Wickham: What is the difference about being a vice president as opposed to a philosophy professor? What have been some of the major transitions for you?

Joynton: The truly decisive transition moment for me was the first day of classes in the fall semester. I watched the faculty of Montgomery College go about to meet their new students, and for the first time in twenty-four years, I didn't have any. You could have driven a truck through the hole in my heart.

A couple of weeks ago I was in the home of a faculty friend for a dinner party, and after hemming and hawing a bit the hostess asked me, "Olin, as a vice-president are you called upon to do more unethical things than you were as a faculty member?" I laughed and told her that yes, now I have to do at least half a dozen unethical things every day!

Her assumption is common among faculty and one that I sometimes made as a faculty member. Viewing it from a different angle now, I believe it proceeds from certain facts of administrative life. In the first place, I have needed to play a greater number and diversity of roles than I did as a professor. One minute I'm trying to figure out office space for a new staff member, the next it's budget work, then a meeting with high school counselors on articulation agreements, followed by a visit from a faculty

member with curriculum revisions, and so on. For a person who likes to have a thorough grasp of the matter before rendering a judgment, it's quite a challenge to deal with matters you don't always have the time to understand fully.

Secondly, I find administrative work to be more outcome-oriented than teaching, especially in a subject like philosophy, which is more dedicated to the processing of ideas than the arrival at a definite conclusion. (I recently heard a line that says most of twentieth-century philosophy tries to make things so clear that no one can understand them!) Without becoming so punctilious that nothing ever gets done, it's also a challenge to keep the end from justifying more than it should. From time to time I've jumped in to solve a problem, only to discover afterward the proper procedure.

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Finally, without diminishing the effect that a teacher has on a student, I have felt a heavier sense of responsibility for the consequences of my actions in the new role. When the learning doesn't occur in a course, and the student receives an "F" or a "W," he or she can take the course again and move on. When a senior administrator makes a bad call in a difficult personnel case, or miscalculates and moves an institution in the wrong direction, people's livelihoods are jeopardized, along with the viability of the college and the cultural and economic health of the community.

On the upside of all this, I made this change with my eyes open to these dimensions of administrative responsibility, and I have welcomed the chance to grow by dealing with them. I have been extraordinarily fortunate in the coaching and understanding I have received from the staff of Montgomery College at every level. In short, they have been fully accountable for the risk they took in hiring me and have done everything possible to assist my growth into the position.

Wickham: There is sometimes a perception that membership in AFT marks one as an adversary of the administration. You were a charter member and officer, Advocate editor, and active participant in negotiating solutions to many problems. Would you comment on your feelings about the AFT, its purpose, and your reasons for being an active member?

Joynton: I joined the AFT in 1980 because I believe in its ideals of democracy in the workplace, standards of quality for serving our students, and fair treatment of employees. I also admired the other founders like Kevin Bailey, Carolyn Davis, Bob Locander, and Alan Hall for their energy, innovation, and courage as change agents for the good at North Harris County College. I wanted to be associated with people who were pioneering forces for significant faculty input into administrative decisions, open flow of information, full service to southern Aldine, and due process for faculty involved in personnel actions. Sure, we got crosswise with the administration from time to time, even to the point of filing suit when the college president mailed out anti-union propaganda to many of its current employees' homes and a board

member angrily shouted at a member. "If you want to join a union, go drive a truck!" However, the end result is that in practices NHMCCD now looks much like what the union founders envisioned. The AFT can't take all the credit, of course, but it was definitely an early adopter of trends towards openness and inclusiveness that pervade much of the business and professional culture of our nation today.

Though it sounds un-unionlike, I believe that the laws against strikes and collective bargaining for public employees in Texas have actually benefited our district's chapter of the AFT. They have saved both the union and the administration from untold amounts of foolishness and adversarial posturing, leaving intact many bridges that might otherwise have been burnt. Over the years the union leadership has wisely maintained and crossed those bridges to work effectively with administrators to find solutions both behind the scenes and in open forums. Because of their personal negotiating skills, and those of our current generation of administrators, the level of mutual trust allows district leadership in most cases to view the union as a resource rather than antagonist.

Owing to this climate, it never occurred to me that my AFT background would pose an impediment to my being considered for a vice president position; on the contrary, I presented it as an asset in my application materials and interviews. I do remember one question about it during my interview as more of a request for reassurance on evenhandedness than a challenge. In my administrative role I don't see my commitment to faculty advocacy as fundamentally altered; indeed, my strong faculty background was a selling point in my being hired. Again the AFT leadership has created the climate where this could happen by not attempting to defend the indefensible in resolving employee/supervisor conflicts.

Wickham: After three months on the job, what do you like most and the least about your new position?

Joynton:

- Most**
- * Growth and change, learning something new
 - * Broader perspective on educational and student development programs, seeing interrelationships among them
 - * New working relationships with high-performing members of the MC staff and my counterparts at the other colleges
 - * First-rate physical facilities, beautiful campus
- Least**
- * Reading Coordinating Board memos instead of Aristotle and Descartes
 - * Never reaching the bottom of the Inbox
 - * Not seeing my friends at North Harris every day

Wickham: What's next for Olin Joynton?

Learn the new job as well as I can and evolve to the point of being truly useful to the college. One thing for certain, it will take two or three years before this job begins to feel as comfortable as teaching had become for me.

After that, it's hard to say. When I discussed my interest in administrative work with Sandy Shugart a while back, he said there are two things you need to know about it. One is that you have to be prepared to move around. Though I have extended family here, I accept that as a possibility when new opportunities arise and when it's time for someone else to take my place at Montgomery College.

The other is that you can't go back. This is the part that I don't accept. In Plato's Republic the philosophers take turns governing for a term and then return to the dialectic of ideas. That model has always been in the back of my mind. North Harris College's former chief academic officer now serves again on the faculty with distinction. This is a great college district, and I would feel privileged to take any role that had a strong connection to the good of our students.

Important Retirement Information

One of our members approached the union with a retirement question. He plans to retire in two years, and his wife, who is also a college employee, would like to retire at the same time. She is in TRS and will be 54 at the time. TRS retirement is governed by the "Rule of 80." In order to receive full benefits, one's age and years of service must equal 80. The couple understands how they will be affected regarding financial benefits since she will not meet the Rule of 80 at retirement. However, the couple was not sure how early retirement would affect her health benefits. They inquired of various people with the college who should be in a position to know regarding what would happen to her health benefits. The couple was told, "If you retire before 55, you can't claim your health benefits" and "You'll lose your health benefits" by different people. These responses are incomplete and misleading.

Our member asked the union to look into the matter, so we contacted Sandra McMullan, General Counsel/Vice-Chancellor of Human Resources, and Ray Brantley, Associate Vice-Chancellor of Human Resources. What we found was that ten years of service are required to vest in the college's health insurance but the employee can not claim the benefit until 55. If the wife chooses to retire at 54, she may continue medical benefits for one year at her own expense. Under COBRA, she will pay the same premium as the college does for individual employees plus 2%. This particular case is unusual, however. Since her husband works for the college and will be 55 at retirement, the State will continue his medical benefits for life. It may be cheaper for him simply to carry her as a dependent for one year. Either way, she does not lose the medical benefit. When she turns 55, the State will assume the costs of medical benefits premium for life. We also learned that while medical benefits are continued at no cost to the employee, the continuation of dental insurance benefits (even after 10 years vesting) requires that the employee pay the premium, both for him or herself and dependents.

The consequences of the type of incomplete information that the couple received can be significant. The

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couple in this case made some financial decisions based on the information they had been given, decisions they well may not have made had they received all the facts.

A surprising bit of news came out of the conversations between the union, McMullan, and Brantley. According to Brantley, faculty in ORP who withdraw their entire retirement account upon retirement lose their eligibility for State funded medical benefits! This means that you must secure your own medical insurance coverage after your COBRA extension ends. If you are considering lump sum instead of a monthly payout, leave \$1.00 in your account. So long as you have an active retirement account, you are eligible to continue to receive State-paid health benefits.

Legal Benefits

At the September 28, 1999 Board of Trustees meeting, the Board approved a prepaid legal insurance plan for employees which is voluntary and paid for by the employees. According to Board records, the participating employee and family "can receive legal assistance with contracts, accidents, and moving violations, have personal letter written on their behalf, have wills prepared, IRS Audit assistance, trial defense, and unlimited telephone consultation with an attorney." The cost to the employee will be \$14.95 per month.

For some time, the union has provided legal assistance with membership. We provide an \$8 million professional liability insurance plan which covers you should you be sued over the performance of your job. You also receive up to \$5,000 in criminal trial defense if found guilty and up to \$35,000 if found innocent. Membership also includes legal defense funds should you find yourself in a legal conflict with the college. You are also entitled to free document review and consultation with an attorney. These benefits are included as part of your monthly union dues, which are \$13.55 for adjunct faculty and part-time staff, \$16.65 for full-time staff, and \$23.80 for full-time faculty. However, union membership provides you with far more than legal benefits. Why not apply the \$14.95 per month you might pay for prepaid legal insurance through the college to union membership which will provide you

legal protection plus a host of other benefits? These additional benefits include advice and representation in your day to day work. Union membership continues to be a bargain.

Current Facilities

NHC boasts a new technology building, a new child development facility, and a soon to be completed library. These new facilities certainly have generated excitement and enthusiasm. I recall during the planning discussions participants also recognized the need to devote funds to renew our older facilities. While the majestic clock tower rises among the stately pines, the wallpaper in the older buildings peels slowly down the walls. A heavy rain last summer flooded faculty offices and several classrooms. Unsightly mildew grows on the wall surrounding the outdoor kiln and on the base of many of the outside windows, some of it visible from the street. Two of our classrooms were formerly music rooms and have sound absorbing material on the walls. Over time, students have dug in the material, gouging huge holes in it. The rooms' appearance certainly does not create the proper learning environment. It is an embarrassment. The elevator closest to Thome Drive in the Academic Building seems to be broken more than it runs. I recently had the experience of walking in from the employee lot with a visitor who had much difficulty walking. The individual wished to go to an upstairs office, A-270, which is very near that elevator. We discovered that the elevator was out of service again, so we slowly, painstakingly walked around to the elevator near the library and, once upstairs, retraced our steps to A-270. The return downstairs required this process to be repeated in reverse. Placing disabled individuals in such a position is inexcusable.

We recently had a student who lost his temper and smashed his hand through one of the large windows lining our hallways creating large, jagged shards of glass. A maintenance person calling on the radio for assistance was heard to comment that the glass should have been safety glass, but it was not. Moreover, the repair appears not to have been made with safety glass. Perhaps there is no code requiring safety glass, but the college should shoulder the cost in the best interest of students and employees.

These windows are large, beginning approximately three feet from the floor and rising to the ceiling. Students horsing around in the hallway could easily fall against the glass, seriously cutting themselves or perhaps even falling through to the ground below.

These examples suggest that it is time that the college begin some serious R & R. I recently visited with Dr. Shugart on this issue, and he shared with me some reassuring information. A committee will have met by the time The Advocate goes to print that will work on appropriating funds for refurbishing older facilities. The District's R & R budget is insufficient to make all of the necessary repairs. However, some refurbishing can be done in conjunction with construction, so bond money may be used. Under consideration for refurbishing with the bond money combined with some funds out of R & R are several projects.

Renovated classrooms (30)
new tables, wall covering,
ceiling tile, boards
increased classroom
technology

Improved exterior lighting
Upgraded stage lights in the
Performing Arts Theater
Improved signage
Improved landscaping
Replaced roof and air handlers in
some buildings

These changes have not been made up until now for two reasons. One is lack of R & R funds. Fortunately, the construction provides us a mechanism for changes that otherwise could not have been made. The second reason is simply the workload on those employees in charge of construction and repairs. They have been overwhelmed with the demands of three new buildings. Unquestionably, the new buildings look good, however, the changes to our older buildings will be welcome. In some instances we have waited too long. We need to be more vigilant in the future not to let our facilities fall to such an embarrassing level. We need to think about safety glass and get a new elevator.

Alan Hall

Letter to the Editor

Soon after the latest issue of The Advocate was distributed, I met Alan Hall on the walkway to the parking lot. I was excitedly waving my copy of The Advocate at Alan and told him that Tom Lovell's article discussing the "nontraditional" student had pumped me up and that I and most of my colleagues with whom I had discussed Tom's position overwhelmingly agreed with him. I also told Alan that I thought it was excellent for the AFT to state our appreciation for our salary raises in The Advocate to the NHMCCD Board and Dr. Pickelrman. I said, "The Advocate alone is worth the union dues I pay." Alan asked if I would write these thoughts for the next issue of The Advocate. So here they are.

Some of the old timer AFT members at North Harris College may remember around ten or so years ago, before I had joined the union, that I gave a presentation to the union expressing my views that the union should be abolished. I attempted to justify this position on the idea that having multiple faculty organizations with different agendas would cause a weakening of focus and a diluting of collective expression. At that time, I argued that the faculty senate would be sufficient to address all the concerns of the faculty. The AFT members at this meeting listened politely to my presentation and I left extremely impressed with them because their respect for free expression permitted a non-member to challenge the value of the existence of their union. I, of course, was very wrong about the need for the Union. At the present time, no formal mechanism exists between the four respective faculty senates for the faculty or a faculty member to raise their concerns in a district wide forum. I hope some day our faculty senates will

see the need for such procedures and implement them. However, even if this is accomplished, the need for the AFT and The Advocate to continue will remain. My primary reason for holding this view is the independence, financial and otherwise, of the AFT compared to the faculty senates. I suppose Tom could have used the e-mail system to present his ideas. But, given that the institution is responsible for maintaining and subsequently controlling the e-mail system, I just don't see how the freedom to express ideas would ever be equal to that provided by The Advocate. Numerous news stories report that both public and private institutions are increasingly placing restrictions on their employees' use of their e-mail systems. Likewise, because the printing expenses of the faculty senates are covered by district funds, the independence to express and distribute ideas could be more subject to restrictions.

Shortly after my aforementioned presentation to the union, I asked Alan why we needed a Union because I believed that our district was then and is now a truly wonderful place to teach. Alan said, "to make it better." Those words had a powerful effect on me and I soon joined the AFT. I believe that Tom Lovell's piece in The Advocate made our district better. I, for one, will now view such labels as "non-traditional" with much more caution, and I strongly suspect others will too. I hope to see more articles in The Advocate like Tom's that so powerfully and inspirationally defend "our essential academic mission."

Glenn Ware
Proud AFT Member: Local 4518

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Join the AFT: You can join the union by contacting any of the above officers.



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