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Baton Rouge, Louisiana

AT THE BEAUREGARD CAFÉ, THE NEW LSU CHANCELLOR GOES FROM THE FRYING PAN INTO THE FIRE

The new LSU Chancellor got off to an inauspicious start this week. He spent the first half of the week covering his back from charges of financial mismanagement while serving as the top dog at NASA. The intensity then really heated up when 1400 of the best of the brightest in the state were told they were no longer welcome at LSU. And the new guy he is replacing is being rung through the ringer out west. Tough time to be in the academic catbird seat.

So where do I get all my tidbits of gossip, collegial innuendos, and flat out hard-core opinions from within the academic world? Simple. You can generally pick up some juicy LSU gossip at the Beauregard Café' located towards the southern outskirts of downtown Baton Rouge. It's a gathering point of university-ites from a cross-section of departments within the state's flagship gumbo of higher learning. And there was much fodder for discussion following an active week of collegiate brouhaha.

First, the NASA flap. Undisclosed sources were supposed to have given information to the Government Accountability Office concerning questionable travel and spending policies under NASA when O'Keefe was in charge. One of the allegations was O'Keefe's regular use of agency airplanes. (This one seems a little weak, considering the fact that the guy is in charge of the world's largest flying operation with a number of offices all over the country.)

After lunch and over coffee at the Beauregard, a professor from the physics department suggested: "If there is any 'egg on the face' here, it could better be directed at the LSU Board of Supervisors." Several members of the board feigned ignorance, stating they had a search committee, and that no allegations of misspending had surfaced. This said in spite of questions being raised by several members of Congress months ago. "Hey! Do any of those Board Members know there's something called Google? It's amazing what you can find there, and it's a heck of a lot cheaper than the price paid to some executive headhunter, who obviously missed the boat," one of the group surmised.

Another professor from the School of Fine Arts piped in: "I'm not so sure there's anything of great substance to the various charges being battered around. It's just the idea that the selection group had actually no idea all this was about the surface. It would have been better for the university if all this had been aired out before the new Chancellor was selected."

An English professor posed his reservations: "I'm more concerned about his vision for the future of this university. Doesn't he call himself a bean counter? Of course, you've got to stay on top of the day-in, day-out details. But I was concerned he didn't

seem willing to take any chances. That's part of the definition of obtaining excellence. You have to be a risk taker. I think NASA made a huge mistake, a foolish bureaucratic decision, in deciding to pull the plug on the Hubble space telescope. Goodness sakes, Hubble cracked open the universe and gave us an awe-inspiring view of the world out there. Mankind has never before constructed a scientific instrument, anything like Hubble and our new Chancellor made the decision to shut it all down. I've got some real problems with this type of philosophy.”

“Well, he's supposed to be a bean counter, so I hope he does something about those 1400 beans they tried to run off last week,” another assistant professor commented. He was referring to a decision before O’Keefe took over where the university would no longer host some 1400 high school students who attending Boys and Girls State in Baton Rouge. “You got 1400 of our brightest Louisiana kids who in the past have come from all over the state to the LSU campus and attended a mock legislature at the state capital. What a wonderful recruiting tool to bring these exceptional students to the university campus. Some bureaucrat determines there is a scheduling conflict. A really dumb decision.” (After much outcry, apparently with the intervention of the new chancellor, the decision was rescinded and the students will come to LSU this summer after all.)

Apparently, O’Keefe is not alone in having a bumpy beginning. The Seattle Post reported recently that new University of Washington chancellor Mark Emmert, who preceded O’Keefe at LSU, is involved in his share of controversy in his new position. The headline stated:

'Grace period' over for UW president

Six months on the job, Emmert faces pressure to land more money and improve school's tarnished image

So, in Sean O’Keefe’s defense, maybe there’s something “goin’ around.”

What about the problems the new Chancellor faces at LSU? The group at the Beauregard had much to say and suggest. Lack of community involvement, loyalty, and one department encouraging the other all were discussed.

“The university community at LSU is not part of the overall Baton Rouge community,” a political science professor volunteered. “Rarely do you see people with real talent at LSU being called upon to advise, study, or help city and state officials. It often seems like we’re irrelevant in helping to do any public problem solving. In a number of other states, the university trains public officials, and does extensive consulting and develops better ideas to make government work more effectively. Maybe the public officials should seek out help from the university. Or maybe the top dogs at LSU should be more aggressive in offering their services. But we just don’t seem to be part of the action.”

“You’re right,” someone else chimed in. In a number of states, the flagship university has a School of Public Policy that trains future leaders. Everyone complains about our public officials here. Shouldn’t it be LSU’s role to train those who will govern in the future?”

Another opinion offered: “I’d like to see more loyalty out of those who run LSU. What ever happened to Dr. Stephen Hatfill? He was the guy being investigated during the anthrax scare. Lots of rumors, but nothing turned up to in any way implicating him. Yet LSU dropped him like a hot potato. Looks like the guy did nothing wrong, but the university pulled the rug out from under him.”

“You’re right, and they did the same thing to Edwin Edwards. His family endowed a chair to pay for a professorship. Put up a lot of money in his honor. But when he got into trouble, the LSU law school took the plaque off the wall acknowledging him. A four term former Governor and they take down his plaque. Whatever he did, his family still put up the money and it should be acknowledged. We don’t help ourselves by being fair weather friends.”

I raised a question about rationing the flu vaccine this year. “That didn’t help our image any,” one member of the group volunteered. I agreed. Anyone working or “related” to anyone at LSU got free flu vaccine, when thousands of Louisianans at risk did without. “We should have followed the state guidelines, but we didn’t. It showed a lack of concern for people who really needed a flu shot.”

So what’s the prognosis for the new Chancellor’s success? Actually, not bad if he doesn’t get too bogged down in the minutia of daily problems, and sets out specific long range goals. He’s taken a pretty good hit in the national media over the NASA flap. But there was no personal benefit, and people have short memories. He hopefully has numerous national contacts to call on, particularly in pursuit of private and public grants.

Let’s hope he is a people person who will be an effective fundraiser. LSU’s foundation is still way behind many other universities of its size or smaller. There are just too many alums nation and worldwide out there who are capable of making significant financial contributions to the university. And the Chancellor’s personal plea is the key to raising the big bucks.

The Beauregard group left me with a little continuing skepticism, but high hopes. “We need a strong Chancellor who will set high standards and bring us together as one LSU family. We need to be brought into the Baton Rouge community more and be called on to be of more help. Of course we need to make more money. O’Keefe is our point man. We want him to succeed. We need him to succeed for the university’s sake, for our sake and for the sake of the state. Less bean counting and more vision.” They all seemed to agree.

So when will we know if the new Chancellor gets the message? And how will we know what kind of a job he is doing? I'll drop by the Beauregard Café' in a few months, and will let you know.

I'm a philosophy major. That means I can think deep thoughts about being unemployed."

Bruce Lee.

"We're going to have the best-educated American people in the world."

Dan Quayle.

Peace and Justice.

Jim Brown