

The Opinion Briefs – March 6, 1981

Editor-in-chief - Rich Ruvelson

Associate Editors - Peg Kaiser, George McCormick, Chuck Friedman

Dean's letter lists budget concerns at Mitchell

In a letter to students, Dean Geoffrey Peters told students of the challenges facing William Mitchell. The letter was made available to students several hours before Tuesday's meeting of the school's board of trustees where the administration's proposed 25 percent tuition increase was announced. By unanimous vote the trustees directed the administration to find ways to reduce the increase.

The letter states that a 25 percent increase would be proposed and then names the problems the administration had in budget preparation and trying to decrease expenses.

The letter lists five specific problem categories:

- 1) Faculty: The need for a student-faculty ratio that falls within the accreditation standards of the A.B.A. and A.A.L.S.
- 2) Staff: The school needs enough support staff "to minimally handle the needs of our faculty."
- 3) Fringe Benefits: As of Aug. 1, 1981, they will be increased to a level commensurate with most similarly sized businesses and colleges.
- 4) Unmet Needs: Some unmet needs were not included in the proposed budget, for example: a new development director; a full-time professional admissions and recruitment officer; refurbished classrooms, including central air conditioning; and additional maintenance employees.
- 5) Part-time employees: Will be relying on more part-time help rather than hiring more full-time staff.

The letter ends with a request for help in finding ways to reduce the need for tuition increases. It also contains graphs of tuition comparisons with other colleges as well as comparisons of Mitchell tuition costs in the last five years.

Trustees reject proposal for tuition increase of 25%

By unanimous vote Tuesday night, the Board of Trustees directed Dean Geoffrey Peters and the administrative staff to find ways to reduce the proposed 25 percent hike in the cost of tuition for 1981-1982. In the discussion of the budget, described numerous times as "barebones", several trustees expressed their concern that Mitchell students cannot withstand such a tuition increase.

Peters presented the total package, stating that the school has run a deficit in recent years and that the proposed budget was a means to achieve a more realistic approach to the school's financial affairs.

The reason for the deficit spending is two-fold, according to Peters. While increases in tuition and other revenue have been enough to cover other operating costs, the total revenue has not been enough to meet the reduced faculty-student ratio at the school. That ratio dropped from 50.8:1 in 1976 to 31.3:1 this year.

To maintain accreditation by the A.B.A., Mitchell must show a 30:1 ratio. Next year's proposal includes a ratio of 27.8:1, a commitment made by the college to improve its chances for accreditation by A.A.L.S.

A result of the deficit spending has been the gradual depletion of the "quasi endowment fund." To meet increased faculty costs, this fund has been reduced to an estimated balance of \$1.2 million. One board member termed that figure "dangerously low."

The second reason for the deficit spending and the principal reason for the tuition increase is the college's lack of reserve funds for capital depreciation and fringe expenses. Such a reserve would be gradually built and used to meet unexpected costs in repairs and maintenance. Peters said that it is not sound financial management to operate without such a reserve.

The board's decision to reduce the tuition hike was in part a response to student reaction. When students learned of the proposed increase on Monday, a telephone campaign to members of the board was immediately begun. Several members of the board related that they had received calls from students expressing their concern. Said one member of the board, "We cannot expect students to cover this kind of tuition increase when we know that their salaries will not be increased by that amount."

S.B.A. President Dennis Brown told members of the board that the 25 percent increase did not truly reflect the total increase to students. He pointed out that copies of the law review, student directory and the Opinion would no longer be available to Mitchell students without an additional charge under the proposed budget.

Brown expressed disapproval that the administration had not made plans known to students for the proposed tuition increase.

"We feel as if we are being hit from both ends," Brown said, "because, while tuition increases, the federal government is proposing cuts in the student loan program." Peters responded that he has "confidence" that those loan cuts would not occur.

Prior to Tuesday's meeting, Peters drafted a letter to students explaining his rationale for the increase. The letter was made available to students through the Communications Center the afternoon before the trustees met. In his letter Peters indicated that a meeting would be held with students on March 12 "to discuss the College's budget and the reason for the tuition increase." Referring to the fact that the letter had gone out to students only a few hours before the Board meeting, one trustee commented, "That's a little like the person who said, 'outside of that, Mrs. Lincoln, how did you like the play?'"

Peters assured the trustees that, "Overall, the school is in good shape." While the school has not been operating in the red, he stated that the school can no longer operate on the premise of deficit spending.

Some members of the board expressed their approval for the administration's sense of fiscal responsibility. Said one trustee, "This system of accounting is the most accurate we have seen at Mitchell in recent years."

The board's vote included its intention to convene in a special meeting to vote on the revised budget package and its desire to retain the budget expenses essentially as submitted.

After the discussion of the tuition increase, the board met in executive session and directed Peters to prepare alternative plans for presentation to the board's executive and audit and finance committees. These plans would then be considered by the entire board.

ATTEND THE MARCH 12 MEETING

Image

Illustration shows a "gallows" scene, with a student standing on a table, a noose around their neck, and a school administrator chopping one leg of the table with an ax. On the wall behind the figures is a bar graph that shows tuition increasing each year, the most extreme increase being in '81.

Trustees accomplish what students cannot

William Mitchell's Board of Trustees did what Mitchell students have been unable to do. The board forced the college's administration to make its actions fit its rhetoric.

That rhetoric, since the beginning of the current academic year, has been full of assurances that students will have a voice in the governance of the college, that their needs will be considered, that no important decisions will be made without full consideration of their views. The reality, on the other hand, has been a series of unilateral, arbitrary decisions, some of them coming as complete surprises to the students whose lives they profoundly affect.

Dean Geoffrey Peter's decision to ask the board to approve a 25% increase in tuition reflected the reality rather than the rhetoric. There was no consultation with students, no effort to seek their responses --or to solicit their suggestions for steps that would meet the college's financial needs without such a drastic increase. Instead, students learned of the proposal the week of the board meeting. True, Patel's did schedule is a meeting with students to discuss the move --but he set it for a week after the board meeting, when the increase could (and, Peters apparently hoped, would) be a fait accompli.

But the board, to its credit, wouldn't buy that approach. Instead, the trustees indicated that a 25% tuition increase should be avoided if at all possible and --more important --that no decision on an increase should be made until student responses have been collected.

The board recognized --as the new administration apparently does not --that Mitchell students come from a wide range of backgrounds and possess a wide range of experience.

Some have a considerable amount of administrative and financial experience. Some, in fact, may possess more such experience than the administration itself. To ignore such a resource, to perpetuate such a sham as a meeting on an issue after the issue has been decided, would be shortsighted.

In a letter responding to student protests, the administration complained that only one student had signed up to telephone alumni on the college's behalf. That, apparently, was supposed to be evidence that students had nothing to offer.

Wrong. Students have much to offer. So far, however, they have been given little reason to offer anything.

-George McCormick

Meeting gives students a chance to speak out

Students begin their education at William Mitchell College of Law with a deep sense of gratitude for the institution and its founders who in their own words created a school to "enable students to learn the theory and principles of the law, while during the day they may familiarize themselves with the practical duties of the profession in the various business houses, those in the public service, school teachers and other persons who are engaged during the day, to avail themselves of the privileges of the school. It is by this arrangement that the eminent lawyers and judges, who at other hours are actively engaged with the duties of their profession, can give their services."

It is admirable that the administration is trying to place Mitchell in good fiscal condition. Thus was born the 25% proposed increase. Students are capable of understanding the difficulties facing the school.

Now that we are aware of the school's fiscal problems (ours are readily apparent each time we shop) it is our challenge to help solve those problems, currently, as students, and in a few years as graduates. We must show that we will respond.

Since being made aware of the 25% increase, students have indicated a willingness to help. Some tuition increase is necessary. An increase of 25%, however, is beyond the means of most of us. The meeting that Dean Peters has scheduled on March 12 is a good opportunity for students. If we are dealt with honestly and are treated with respect we will do more than respond in a like manner, we will help the college get through its financial problems. If graduates must be called, if some free labor must be provided or if we must make some other sacrifices, we will do whatever we can so long as we are treated as partners. That partnership will in turn create feelings of loyalty toward William Mitchell.

The March 12th meeting with students was originally planned to occur after the tuition hike was approved. That the tuition hike was not approved was due to the concern on the part of the board of trustees for the students at Mitchell. While the trustees understand that many of us would not be able to pay 25% more tuition next year, they must come up with 25% more money to operate the school next year. It is with this in mind that I urge students to write Mr. Charlton Dietz, president of the board of trustees, thanking the board for their concern and indicating that we students at Mitchell are willing to pitch in to the extent we are able to do so.

Also, students must attend the March 12th meeting. This meeting is our opportunity and we should take advantage of it. If you are unable to submit your ideas in writing before the meeting, bring them to the meeting. Our showing of outrage upon finding out about the tuition proposal served its purpose. Now we must come up with ideas, for we understand that 1122 minds at work solving a problem are better than three.

Finally, I want to remind Dean Peters of a quotation that he himself used in a pamphlet for Mitchell graduates. Dean Peters quoted Henry J. Heid, former president of the Ford Foundation. "New generations of alumni provide the continuity that perpetuates a college. Its officers come and go, its faculties change, its programs and buildings are replaced, but its alumni maintain a life long relationship with the college. They are the keepers of the traditions, preferred stockholders of the enterprise, the mark of its accomplishments."

-Rich Ruvelson