To Be or Not To Be - The Virtual Question
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It had been a very long day, and tomorrow promised to be even longer. Dr. Thelma Miller stepped in and closed the door to her office; she needed time to think. She looked around the room, furnished with the modest trappings of her office—the worn conference table, the executive desk with her ever-present laptop, the bookshelves filled with reports and college memorabilia including a bound copy of the Faculty Constitution, and the plaques on the wall commemorating her long and involved participation in shared governance. That experience, Thelma was certain, had prepared her well for her most recent and challenging appointment.

Her four years as Dean of Instruction at Capital City Community College had been relatively positive. She enjoyed a good relationship with faculty. She had a reputation for fair mindedness and a gift for problem solving. It helped that she had been a respected faculty member of the Business and Information Technology Department for six years prior to moving to the Dean's office.

Capital City, a comprehensive community college enrolling about 20,000 full- and part-time students each semester, serves a mixed rural, suburban, and urban community of about 400,000. Competition for students is becoming a factor to be reckoned with. Several other educational institutions, including private colleges and a large state university, are located within the surrounding seven counties. Recent growth at Capital City is attributable to outreach and off-campus activities at the college's three extension centers.

One of Thelma's responsibilities is monitoring the effectiveness of Capital City's programs of study. Data from its receiving institutions indicates that Capital City has been doing an adequate job with its transfer mission. However, satisfaction surveys of employers in the seven-county area have been increasingly less favorable. Not surprisingly, employers have indicated a need for more highly trained employees in computer networking, microelectronics, and health science areas. Somewhat disconcerting, though, is the fact that employers have also expressed a dire need for employees who possess a higher level of soft skills including improved communication, ethics, and problem-solving abilities.

Thelma straightened the pictures of her two tuxedo cats on her desk and then looked out her window toward the state capitol building. Snow was falling as rush hour traffic clogged the streets. She noted that the student parking lot across the street was already jammed even though the bulk of the evening classes didn't start for another hour. The campus was bursting at the seams, and the college charter didn't include additional property. Given the current campus, there simply wasn't room for new labs needed by the Computer Science Department to say nothing of office space for the increasing numbers of adjunct faculty now teaching at the college.

Leaning back in her chair, she swiveled around to face the oil painting of Harvey Millicent that hung on her wall. He had been one of the "founding fathers" of Capital City, starting as a young faculty member in the English Department and then moving into administration, first as the Dean of Instruction and then as President. Things around the college surely had changed since he retired a year and a half ago, Thelma thought. But at least you couldn't complain that it had been boring—in sharp contrast to the last several years of Harvey's tenure

The trustees were unanimous in believing that the next president of Capital City needed the vision and leadership necessary to revitalize the college. Following a national search, the board selected Patricia Ming, Ph.D, an energetic, articulate Asian American. She had been president of a small 3,000-student

community college in California where alternative delivery systems for growth and expansion had been implemented.

Similarly, Capital City was gaining a reputation for online education, though some wondered if things had moved too fast. The governor's Technology Initiative, introduced in his State of the State address last January, promised additional state funding for distance learning infrastructure. In addition to creating a new "virtual university," he was offering millions in incentive funding for the state's community colleges to offer degree programs online. He was the "Education Governor," after all, and he wanted to ensure that the state's community colleges kept pace with the rapidly growing distance learning movement that was sweeping the country.

Ted Aberfoyle, a trustee at Capital City Community College, had urged the college administration to follow the Governor's lead. He saw an opportunity to take Capital City's distance education program to the next level by offering associate degrees online—and to let the state pay the bill. After all, the Governor had always taken care of Capital City; and he was sure this new initiative would be no different. Ted was a former fraternity brother of the Governor's. He had the Governor's ear and didn't hesitate to use it for important issues. And between the Capital City Board and his own manufacturing company, he had plenty of issues.

Thelma remembered a recent Board of Trustees meeting when Ted spoke enthusiastically about the Governor's initiative and its potential impact on Capital City. "I think the Governor's really on to something here. I know in business that if I don't follow leading trends, I lose business. That's just what will happen here—students have lots of choices these days. The Governor has been good enough to offer start-up funding for this initiative. He'll look to us to take a leadership role. I think we ought to get on board—we could be a leader in distance learning and really put this college on the map. I know the technology isn't cheap, but the college should be able to put together a credible business plan that demonstrates how we'll make this distance education pay for itself—or at least break even. Why, I think people will be clamoring for the opportunity to take classes 'virtually'."

That young fellow that Ming brought with her from California, Chad Korman, was really something, Thelma reflected. His age alone wasn't enough to put her on edge, even though he did look remarkably similar to Doogie Houser, M.D. Even though he had a masters degree in Instructional Technology, he seemed more interested in the "bells and whistles" than in teaching methodologies. Maybe if he spent a little more time listening to faculty talk about what they knew worked with students and a little less time telling them how the new technologies were going to change their lives, he'd have more credibility.

Shortly after President Ming took office, she invited all interested faculty to work with Korman to develop online classes. A number of faculty from departments all over campus had been meeting weekly with Korman and now had a number of online classes up and running. Faculty voiced only a minor protest when interested participants were released from their regular teaching responsibilities to concentrate on the development of online offerings. Predictably, the chair of the English Department had complained that she was already short-staffed, and losing a full-time faculty member meant hiring yet more adjuncts. The union had protested that they hadn't been consulted; but, all in all, the dissent wasn't anything that couldn't be contained, mused Thelma.

It really hadn't been until the start-of-school faculty meeting this past fall when the proverbial excrement hit the fan. In her address to the faculty, Ming announced that by the end of the school year, Capital City would offer the first completely online associates degree in the state. Not only that, Ming went on to say that the new "Virtual College" would be funded by cutting all other budgets by 10 percent. Boy, that really

got their attention, Thelma remembered, smiling in spite of herself. The debate started at that meeting and hadn't stopped since.

Members of the Sociology Department had written a letter of protest and distributed it across campus. In it they argued that Capital City's mission was to serve the students of Capital City, most of whom come from a lower socioeconomic background and don't have the resources—such as access to computers and the Internet—to take online classes. By diverting the college's resources to an online college, they continued, Capital City was reneging on its obligation to provide students with the richest educational experience possible. A virtual college would shift emphasis to those who are already privileged, thereby exacerbating the "digital divide," they argued. The group threatened to send their letter to the local newspaper.

Dennis Harbell, mathematics instructor and president of the union representing full-time faculty, had used every opportunity on campus to voice his concerns about the "Virtual College." At one meeting he declared, "Don't expect everyone to teach online, and don't take 10 percent from my salary or from supplies and equipment for traditional classrooms." In another setting he averred, "Safeguards need to be in place to assure that faculty receive adequate compensation for the development of the classes and that class size of the online classes doesn't exceed that of the regular face-to-face classes." Just last week Thelma had heard him say, "I'm very concerned that faculty maintain control over any classes they develop. The administration has shown a great proclivity for hiring part-time teachers in lieu of maintaining the full-time staffing. The number of full-time faculty has declined from 210 to 180 in the past five years. I think the administration sees this as another opportunity to shift work outside the bargaining unit. Once a faculty member creates the website, the assignments, and the online course content for a class, I'm afraid the administration will take it and give it to adjuncts to teach." He was threatening to begin filing grievances.

When the matter had been brought up at the Faculty Senate meeting last month, the discussion turned quite acrimonious. Myron Green, the senator from the English Department, strongly supported the "Virtual College." "I'm already teaching a literature class online, and it has been a fantastic experience. The challenge of working in this new medium has really got my creative juices going," he had said. "Besides," he added, "because of the work and family obligations of my students, this is the only way that many of them could take my class. Don't we have an obligation to offer different modes of delivery to meet the different needs of our students? I think that a lot of you are just afraid that you will be displaced because you haven't kept up with technology!"

"I'll admit that I'm not as computer literate as I might be, but that isn't my concern," Naomi Jacobson, biology instructor, responded. "I just think that the face-to-face interaction is essential to good education. Online classes will never capture the magic that can occur in a class discussion, to say nothing of the difficulty of having a credible laboratory experience online. Myron, I think that you like the online classes because you can teach them from home. It is already hard enough to get people together to discuss curriculum and policy matters. How will we be able to meet to talk about college issues if no one comes to campus anymore?"

The Senate president finally ended the debate by reminding the members that according to the Faculty Constitution, the online degree would have to get the approval of the Degree Requirements Committee before it could be officially offered. That calmed the Senate members, but increased Thelma's unease. She chaired the Degree Requirements Committee.

The steadily mounting tension on campus had been reflected in the President's Cabinet meeting earlier this afternoon. Thelma winced as she remembered the discussion. Ming announced that Korman's group

had developed an online registration procedure that the "Virtual College" would use. Thelma noted that Mike Mason, Dean of Student Affairs, looked surprised. Apparently he hadn't been informed of this development, even though the Registrar's Office fell within his purview. Ming had also recounted a phone call she received from Trustee Bob Hess, a UAW District Manager, earlier in the day. "Now, I'm all for people getting better educated," Hess had told Ming. "After all, I spent years in night school to earn my business degree. But I'm not going to be led around by the nose every time the Governor waves money at us. Our faculty are already maxed out. We have students coming out our ears—why should we try and recruit more? After all, tuition only pays about a third of the bill here, and higher enrollments are not always a good thing—at least that's what you've been trying to tell us. We need to look at this so-called opportunity from all sides."

Later, when Thelma tried to broach the subject with President Ming, the president was very clear. "Where is this coming from?" Ming had asked. "This is the number one priority of my administration. I made a promise to the Board and to the Governor's Office that Capital City will be one of the first, if not *the first*, institution to have an online degree. This is certainly being done at progressive community colleges across the country. If we don't develop something now, we will lose out. Employers expect this from us, the community expects this from us, and the state is willing to pay for it right now! If our current faculty aren't ready, we should think about finding faculty who are. Remember, you don't have to reside in this area to teach an online course. I expect all of you to get on board and make it happen!"

Now very late and finally back in her office, Thelma replayed the events of the day as she tried to focus on getting ready for the Degree Requirements Committee meeting at 8 a.m. the next morning. The only item on the agenda was the online degree. How could she manage the discussion when the issues surrounding online education had become so divisive? She knew one thing—President Ming was not going to be happy if the online degree did not get approved.