Old School: From the Classroom to the Administration and back again

Dr. Terry Sullivan
April 15, 2025

First, let me say how wonderful it is to see so many colleagues and friends! This is a real treat for me. I retired last summer and relocated to Austin, and there are many of you with whom I have not yet connected. Give me time. Austin seems like a completely different city now!

This talk is frankly autobiographical, but I need to introduce someone who has been with me every step of the way, the bitter with the sweet. Doug Laycock, retired from both UT and UVA Law Schools, is here today and it is a special day because it is his birthday! Happy birthday, Doug! In June we will celebrate our 54th wedding anniversary.

I refer to my career as “old school” because it follows a trajectory that used to be common: going up a ladder of increasing responsibility and careful preparation throughout one’s career: in my case, that was holding teaching ranks from instructor to professor, then department chair, associate dean, vice provost, vice president, vice chancellor, provost and president. I also did a bit of the “back again” after being president, serving one year as the interim provost at my alma mater and then returning to the classroom and research full-time for four years. And at every stage, I learned something that helped me at the next stage. I want to tell you about some of the lessons I learned.

I was hired by the UT Sociology Department in the 1973-74 school year, but I did not begin teaching until January 1975 because I still had dissertation research to do and that work was to be done abroad. Can you imagine any department today hiring someone on the promise of a terminal degree? I have always appreciated UT taking that bet on me.

But that bet almost didn’t pay off for either UT or me. I went to Southeast Asia in 1974 with my dissertation supervisor, and the plan was that the data I would collect there would become my dissertation data. About halfway through the trip, my professor – who was paying my way there and back – told me that he had decided to give the data I was collecting to another graduate student, Bob, but that I would surely find something to write about when I returned to the U.S. in another three months!

That was three months of panic. I returned to the University of Chicago in June with no data and no dissertation topic. My job at UT started in six months. The public use tapes from the 1970 U.S. census had just been unpacked at Chicago – 9 track and 7 track tapes – but no one had used them yet. And I needed money! In those days students did not get an allowance for computer time; you were expected to pay for the time. But June

was the end of the fiscal year and there was leftover capacity, so I was told I could use as much computer time as I wanted, as long as I finished by June 30. I had to debug the tapes. I discovered, to the benefit of the Census Bureau, that the columns for children ever born and all subsequent variables were misplaced by one column. I learned this when I “discovered” that American women were bearing more than ten children each.

I did get my dissertation done and eventually published, but there is a codicil to this story. I was hired back at Chicago in 1977, and the custom was to assign the most junior faculty members to incomplete dissertation committees. Guess who I got to examine? Bob!

But I learned something else that was important: graduate education was too much like feudal Europe, with the students living as the serfs, and it could be desperately bad for the student. This held me in good stead as graduate dean at UT, where I wanted the Office of Graduate Studies to encourage better practices for graduate supervision.

Because I had been a fellowship student at Chicago, I came to UT very green and without teaching experience. My colleagues and the Center for Teaching Effectiveness pulled me through. I learned to teach, and I was given the opportunity to teach a full repertoire of course offerings, from huge lecture sections to small graduate seminars. I worried very much at first about teaching the material; what I learned at this stage was that it is more important to teach the student. The trick to teaching this way is knowing that your understanding of the material isn’t enough; you need to discern how the material can be misunderstood by learners.

After a four-year return to Chicago, Doug and I came back to UT in 1981, and by now I was a new mother. I became department chair in 1990, the first woman to hold that position in sociology here. By the way, for the rest of my career I was usually the first woman to hold the position. What I learned as the department chair is that nothing works without the staff. Good staff are worth their weight in gold even if we don’t pay them like it. Peter Flawn once said that twenty women run the university and the key to getting things done was to know them. I made it a point to start meeting those twenty women. I was lucky to be associated with one of them, Winona Schroeder, for nearly twenty years.

Between 1992 and 1994, I served as both associate dean of graduate studies and vice provost. What I learned here was that my perspective from the sociology department was woefully incomplete. When you have seen one department, you have seen one department. The University itself is much bigger and much more complex, and every college, school, and department has its unique challenges. The Tower isn’t just a tall building; it is also a vast change of perspective.

I became Vice President and Graduate Dean in 1995 – but that did not mean just the graduate programs, it also meant libraries, the Ransom Center, the Briscoe Center for American History, the Michener Center for Writers, the UT Press, and international programs, along with some far-flung properties around Texas. What I learned here was how much can be accomplished with teamwork. I had convening power; I could bring Harold Billings and Tom Staley and Don Carleton together in my office to brainstorm with me on issues of materials and collections. They carried the conversation; they exchanged ideas, and they found areas where they could cooperate and stretch our funds further. I was fortunate then and in my future stops to have great teams.

In 2002 Mark Yudof had become Chancellor of the UT System and he asked me to become the Executive Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs, with oversight over what were then the nine academic institutions spread from Brownsville to El Paso to Odessa to Tyler. What I learned there was a crash course in the politics of higher education. I spent hours in the Texas legislature; I came to understand that the population growth of Texas was such that Austin could not be the ONLY source of academic pride because all legislators who did not represent Travis County wanted THEIR local school to be a school of choice too. It was essential to Austin that San Antonio, El Paso, Arlington and Dallas all become recognized research institutions, and that the quality of every school be upgraded. It was a privilege to work with presidents such as Ricardo Romo, David Daniel, Jim Spaniolo and Diana Natalicio, and I learned from them how to work both with local legislative delegations and with the Board of Regents. It was a good rehearsal for Virginia.

In 2006 I was hired as Provost at Michigan. You can't imagine what a seismic event this was at Michigan. They had not hired an outside provost since 1949. They already had a woman president, so here was another woman administrator, and worse, I had graduated from their arch-rival, Michigan State. Imagine an Aggie being brought here as provost and you will understand the issues. The University of Michigan is immense; nineteen schools, a huge health system, twenty-five varsity sports, and a board that is elected on party lines by the people in the general election. I thought I knew about scale from Texas. I had a lot to learn – and I found out that I could learn. After a year, President Mary Sue Coleman told me I knew more faculty than she did, and she had been there some years before me. I was on the hospital board at Michigan, and this proved very important because the health system comprised half the budget, half the faculty, and more than half the research funding. Michigan reached $1billion in research expenditures while I was there.

Some of you know that in my scholarly work I have written two books and about twenty articles on consumer bankruptcy with two UT law professors: Elizabeth Warren, now the senior Senator from Massachusetts, and Jay Westbrook. When I got to Michigan, I found that cars are what you talk about after you talk about how awful the weather is.

But I wondered how the car industry was doing and began writing a little white paper for myself on the auto industry and its ties to the University of Michigan – auto-related research funds, our health system's HMO with the UAW, and so on. I thought I saw signs of weakness in the industry. Everyone else thought I was nuts, including the auto executives who were alumni. I interviewed some of the journalists who covered the industry and kept digging. Just like UT, Michigan has a triple-A bond rating and really wants to keep it. In April 2009, we were up for reassessment of our bond rating, and one of the rating agencies – I think it was Standard and Poor's – called the CFO to ask how dependent UM was on the auto industry, because the credit committee was going to vote on Michigan at noon. He said, "Just a minute. Let me get the provost on the line." I was conferenced in, I pulled my little white paper from my drawer, and went on to detail all the ways that we had disentangled ourselves from the industry. The credit committee voted to reaffirm our triple A at noon, and that afternoon Chrysler filed for bankruptcy. The Great Recession had come to Michigan with a vengeance.

Six months later Virgina came calling. I wasn't terribly interested at first – after all, I could not have attended Virginia out of high school because they didn't admit women yet – but I became intrigued and interviewed. In January 2010 I was announced as the new president, to take office in August. Everything I had learned up to this point was useful, especially my experience in learning quickly about a new university. What I learned at Virginia was to keep one important question in mind: If I do X, what happens next? I am not impressed with taking action for its own sake.

Here are two examples of this question in action. A dean came to me to say that he thought his school would fall from the top ten in the next US News ranking. If it did, he assured me that he would hand in his resignation. I thought, "What happens next?", and I told him I would refuse the resignation because then I would have two problems to solve and would have just eliminated one of the most talented of the problem-solvers.

Another example was a brand-new board members who had been appointed by the governor – these are like the Texas Regents, but they are called Visitors, and there are no systems in Virginia. The Visitors have only one institution to oversee. So, as I was getting acquainted with this Visitor, a highly accomplished and wealthy businessman in his own industry, he asked me, "Why don't we sell the hospital?", so I asked the question: "what happens next?" - If the General Assembly had even allowed it, which I doubted, we would immediately begin lengthy and costly transactions for our medical and nursing faculty, our residents, our clinical rotations, and so on. We would spend all of our time writing contracts with the new owner. I didn't think the compensation we received could begin to cover the real costs, and if the commercial hospital got itself any bad press, it would be the university that took the reputational hit.

From this experience I learned that I needed to translate our academic jargon into something business people found comprehensible – something similar to teaching the student and not just teaching the material. I found it useful to explain to new Visitors, most of whom were self-made businesspeople, that the University had five distinct product lines: undergraduate education, graduate and professional education, research, health care and athletics. Most of them were familiar with only one or two of these "product" lines, and this analogy helped them to understand just how large and complex the University is.

With the Virgina General Assembly, using my experience at the Texas legislature, I learned to talk not just about UVA but to talk about their districts, which was always top of mind for them anyway. Every year I prepared a one-page handout for them titled, "UVA in your district". It listed the number of students, alumni, employees and patients we served from their district, and our expenditures for financial aid and indigent care for their constituents. My objective was to show them that even if they didn't represent Albemarle County, UVA was serving their constituency too.

Legislative relations are something like playing football – you need to be strong in offense, defense and special teams. These days, defense is the most important. We were unlikely to get much in the way of additional operating funds, but I could quietly advocate against bills such as open-carry on campus. As the culture wars heated up, playing defense became even more important.

Being from the old school had advantages for me. I knew a lot about university operations, health systems, government relations, and advancement – but more importantly, I was confident in my ability to keep learning in new environments. And make no mistake, everyone is now in a new environment. The biological imperative is to change or die, and that applies to our organization too.

I fear that the old school approach is going the way of the dinosaurs, as new administrators are hired who really know very little about our industry and who don't see that as a disadvantage. They reason by analogy from other industries they know. Just as one department at UT is different from another department, one industry is different from another. There is now much less respect for institutional memory, and I worry about the future impact for all universities.

But then, I guess I am a fossil!