

May 6, 2015

In response to the Wichita Eagle article, “VP questions AD Eric Sexton’s dual role at Wichita State”, published May 2, 2015

Like most people who have read the recent Wichita Eagle article about administrative wrongdoing at Wichita State University, I am both concerned and disappointed. But I am not surprised. I am writing this response to chronicle my thoughts and share my perspective on the events and allegations published by the Wichita Eagle.

As an involved student leader since my freshman year, I have been fortunate to participate in discussions affecting the university’s future. My time on campus has spanned from President Beggs’s last year in office to the university’s current pursuit of President Bardo’s vision for Innovation Campus. During the spring semester of my freshman year, I participated on the student panel that interviewed President Bardo for his current role. Like many, I was impressed by his historic tie to campus and his bold vision for enhancing Wichita State’s image.

Serving as student body president this year was the best experience of my collegiate career. I was entrusted with representing the student voice to administration, faculty, and staff, and in the process I was exposed to the inner workings of campus decision-making. My perspective has been shaped by numerous meetings and discussions over the past four years, especially conversations I have had this year with President Bardo and other administration leaders. My monthly individual meetings with President Bardo provided me rare insight and understanding that most students, faculty, and staff do not possess.

First, I want to make it clear my response to the article is in no way fueled by personal allegiances to any Wichita State administrator. Neither am I motivated by retribution. In my role as student body president I embraced the ethos of “Students Come First”. Several community members have commented Dr. Robinson only went public because his contract was not renewed, implying his actions are motivated by revenge. I want to be clear: I have nothing to gain by sharing my thoughts. I simply wish to provide the public with a personal account from my perspective as student body president this year. As children we are taught the importance of speaking up when one sees injustice. In my mind, a series of serious injustices have been committed and I believe the facts speak for themselves. However, the facts are better understood when appropriately contextualized.

The article begins by explaining Dr. Robinson’s grievance regarding the four day delay in receiving notification about the 2013 alleged rape committed by a student athlete. Lou Heldman, vice president for strategic communications, is cited as saying there was no need to notify Dr. Robinson of the situation. The article later includes an account from a student safety expert who clearly rebuts Heldman’s statement. Dr. Robinson, as the supervisor of the Office of Conduct and Community Standards, did need to be notified immediately to begin an objective, thorough investigation. The Student Code of Conduct applies to students whether they are on or off campus, so saying the incident occurred off campus does not mean the alleged perpetrator is immune from university investigation or sanctions. When such incidents occur, it is not uncommon for the conduct office to work alongside law enforcement in assessing the facts, but the two disciplinary processes are independent from each other. I think many readers of the

article could be lost in the subsequent policy explanation and forget Heldman's statement on behalf of the university was proved inaccurate.

Next, the article explains Dr. Robinson intended to fulfill his current contract without making any fuss about the conditions of his removal. It wasn't until Sexton's appointment as his replacement on April 21 that Dr. Robinson decided to go public with his concerns. I can personally verify Dr. Robinson has continued to fulfill his professional responsibilities in a respectable, diligent manner since he learned his contract would not be renewed. I have interacted with Dr. Robinson frequently this past year, as he is the advisor for student government. In all of my interactions with him, he has exhibited a tireless work ethic and strong devotion to student rights and safety. I have heard student affairs staff say he is the best boss they have worked for and he is an admirable leader. The Wichita State Student Senate recently passed a resolution honoring his excellent service to the university and the student body.

A spokeswoman from the Kansas Board of Regents cited in the article indicates inquiries are being made into Dr. Robinson's complaint and they will be visiting with Bardo as a result. While I think that is a necessary step in the right direction, I earnestly hope the regents also reach out to other members of the university with insight into the matter, including student affairs professionals and student leaders with knowledge of the circumstances. For it to be a truly objective, comprehensive inquiry, sufficient information should be gathered so that Bardo's response is not the final say.

Bardo is then cited as saying he can't talk about Dr. Robinson's termination because "it's a personnel matter" but that he wanted a "change in direction" in student affairs. Provost Vizzini also publically declined to comment on the circumstances of Dr. Robinson's termination when Sexton was announced as the new vice president for student affairs. I understand the status of unclassified employees is such that they serve at the pleasure of the university president, but I also believe accountability is needed since Wichita State is a public institution beholden to its public stakeholders.

The following is my knowledge of the reasons for Dr. Robinson's termination based on information disclosed to me by Bardo in one of our constituent head meetings earlier this semester. Once I learned Dr. Robinson's contract was not being renewed after this summer, I thought it best to ask the man who ultimately made the decision. Bardo gave me three reasons. First, he stated the conduct process, which is overseen by Dr. Robinson, is too punitive in nature rather than educational as it should be. Second, he stated the student affairs division had improperly allocated finances in supporting the institution's goals. Third, he stated the student affairs division is too bureaucratic in nature. This was the first time I had learned of those reasons, and it turns out Dr. Robinson was also unaware as he had never been evaluated for his performance as a vice president since Bardo became president. Bardo claims that is not how he does business. He should not have to tell his employees what to do, he believes.

I think it's important to evaluate these three reasons put forward by Bardo to explain Dr. Robinson's termination based on my perspective through working with Dr. Robinson on various university committees and projects during my time as an involved student leader on campus. The only example Bardo ever uses to justify the conduct process is too punitive involves an incident

with a Greek organization resulting in the organization undergoing a conduct hearing. Bardo has previously used this example to justify his intentions for creating a better culture around the conduct process. Based on my involvement in the Greek community and knowledge of the situation, I have learned said incident did not result in the organization being punished for the situation resulting in the conduct process; instead they were praised for cooperating with the process. That is far from punitive. Such a distortion of reality leaves one asking 1) How Bardo learned about said conduct hearing, and 2) Why he continues to cite the situation as evidence for change. I have personally experienced the conduct process through another organizational incident and can verify the process is not punitive but rather intended to ensure the individual or organization corrects the underlying behavior.

Additionally, I have served on the Rhatigan Student Center Union Corporation Board of Directors and the Student Fees Committee for the past two years on behalf of Wichita State's student government. Dr. Robinson is the chair of both committees in his role as vice president for student affairs. In all of the meetings I have attended, including the Union Corporation meeting where the financing of the new Shocker Hall residence facility was approved (at Bardo's request), in addition to lengthy discussions during Student Fees Committee meetings, I have never once witnessed Dr. Robinson act in a negligent or concerning manner when it comes to allocating university and student dollars. It's quite the opposite.

Dr. Robinson asks the difficult questions to guarantee all opinions are considered to achieve an objective and equitable decision. Dr. Robinson personally oversaw the simultaneous completion of the Rhatigan Student Center renovation and construction of Shocker Hall, where he invested countless hours to guarantee both projects were completed on schedule. He was always prepared to answer questions from the Union Corporation Board of Directors and from students at Student Senate meetings. Dr. Robinson attends every weekly Student Senate meeting, including one that lasted until 4am during which students approved the student fee dollars for the Rhatigan Student Center renovation. I am uncertain where criticisms of his improper fiscal oversight originated. I have only witnessed Dr. Robinson make prudent decisions given the uncertainty of higher education funding.

On the topic of fiscal oversight, I am reminded of a situation last fall when Bardo advocated to reduce student input in raising student expenses for capital expenditure projects, meaning the construction of future university buildings for Innovation Campus. This specific instance occurred when Bardo joined his fellow university presidents in advocating to the Kansas Board of Regents to eliminate the requirement for university's to conduct a student referendum to raise money for capital projects. The measure ultimately failed because every Student Senate at Kansas regents universities passed a resolution in opposition to the council of university presidents. Bardo and Andrew Schalpp, executive director for government relations, explained to me they supported eliminating the student referendum because conducting a referendum creates false hope for students when the university intends to move forward with new buildings and increasing student expenses regardless of student opposition. This was the second year in a row the council of university presidents proposed the amendment to eliminate referendums.

Financial oversight is dependent on effective communication. The inclusion of student input in administrative decision-making encourages transparency and accountability, both of which

would be reduced if referendums were eliminated. It is inconsistent to suggest the division of student affairs has engaged in improper fiscal oversight when it has been Bardo and his staff who have sought less accountability in their financial decisions for the university's future.

I understand my perspective as a student leader is not the same as a staff member in the student affairs division, but my perspective includes my experiences working with numerous department directors and staff within the division. I find it difficult to believe the division is so bureaucratic it impedes initiatives and projects from being executed. In fact, I have known Dr. Robinson to respond rapidly to questions and concerns regarding student welfare.

During my freshman year, Dr. Robinson announced the Student Involvement Office would be formed by merging two previously existing offices in an effort to save money. The current department oversees all student organizations and places emphasis on service and leadership development. I know many students have benefited tremendously from its programs and resources. Instead of resembling the bureaucratic structure as Bardo claims, the new office consolidated resources and has since been a successful asset within the student affairs division. It's also important to note Dr. Robinson's decision to consolidate the offices was met with vast opposition, but he addressed all questions and concerns and ultimately made the difficult decision that has paid off for the better.

Now that I have addressed Bardo's three reasons for Dr. Robinson's termination, I will return to the article. Under the section titled "Dual roles", the article describes the unique situation in which Sexton was promoted to vice president for student affairs while continuing his oversight of athletics. Sexton states he can do both jobs because of the staff in place in both departments, and insinuates he wanted to continue working at Wichita State due to his long ties with campus. The vice president for student affairs at Oklahoma State University said she had never heard of a student affairs department being combined with athletics, which speaks to how unprecedented such a decision is.

Former vice president and dean of students Dr. James Rhatigan, who served the university for over 40 years, also said the announcement was surprising. This is a man who is revered in the student affairs world for his work as one of the early pioneers in the profession. I respect and admire Dr. Rhatigan as he has been one of my mentors this past year, and I trust his judgment in questioning the motive behind Sexton's promotion.

The decision to promote Sexton has also been met with significant skepticism on campus. I respect and support Deltha Colvin, associate vice president for campus life, for commenting publically what many on campus have already said but are too intimidated by a culture of retaliation to speak publically. She says the questions and concerns regarding Sexton's promotion are nothing personal against him, but it is widely believed it will take him years to learn the complexities of his new position. Provost Vizzini responded to those concerns when he made the announcement to student affairs staff by clarifying each department in student affairs is expected to teach Sexton how to do his job. It is puzzling to think someone who will make \$210,000 a year is expected to be instructed how to do the job. Additionally, such a mentality contradicts Bardo's philosophy of not having to tell someone how to do his or her job.

Bardo cites three items to consider for those questioning his decision in promoting Sexton. 1) Sexton is a skilled leader, proven by his long history on campus, 2) his prior success in athletics, and 3) no administrator ever possesses all of the desired qualifications to do the job well. This is my take on the aforementioned considerations. Length of tenure does not always qualify skilled leadership. Many factors influence one's job mobility. It is well known athletics has been successful in recent years, but again, there are many factors that contribute to success and failure.

The success of athletics can be seen in its longstanding titles within the conference, but I think one would be kidding themselves to overlook the fact that a majority of the positive attention is due to success in men's basketball. It has been said college athletic programs develop in cycles largely influenced by the success of popular programs in the public eye. If one were to clearly examine the culture and philosophy of athletics under Sexton's leadership, it could be inferred his success and leadership cited by Bardo just so happened to coincide with the rise of a successful program. Obviously such successes are relatively related, but that does not mean it's a dependent relationship.

I think Bardo's last justification for Sexton's promotion is the most interesting. Bardo states he had no experience in crucial areas such as finance, economics, and administration prior to becoming a university president. His explanation is used to compare his career to Sexton's. Before becoming president at Wichita State, Bardo previously served as a professor, dean, provost, vice president, and chancellor at other universities. He has a bachelor's degree in economics in addition to a doctorate in sociology. While he claims his career has largely been academic, serving in those senior administrative roles before becoming chancellor at Western Carolina University provided experience in managing large sums of money and supervising staff. I find it difficult to support his claim that his extensive career in higher education placed him at a disadvantage when assuming his role as president.

Comparing Bardo's job as president to Sexton's promotion to vice president for student affairs does a disservice to the specific education background and experience valued by the student affairs profession. Is Sexton qualified to serve as provost and senior vice president for academic affairs given Bardo's considerations? How would faculty react if they weren't involved in the hiring process for their vice president? Why does it seem like student affairs has been marginalized in the decision making process?

The article then states Sexton's tenure in athletics has included "innovations in how to educate and mentor student athletes". First, I am interested to learn more about such innovations. Second, it is becoming more and more obvious the term "innovation" has become a buzzword on campus employed to justify or encourage success in all areas. One downside to buzzwords is they often lose value and meaning once people begin to misapply or misunderstand its intention. Constantly reiterating "innovation" can convince some to apply its meaning to that in which they were already doing.

The *Sons of Wichita* biographical book on the Koch Brothers details how the culture at Koch Industries suffered from the similar misapplication of Charles Koch's market based management philosophy by those who misunderstood the principles or simply claimed they were already acting on them. I include that comparison as I see similarities in how the article describes some

of Sexton's accomplishments as "innovative" in the greater context of the university's current vision.

In addition to the stated successes in athletics under Sexton, the article describes the bad timing of his promotion in light of concerns expressed publically about the women's basketball team. In this article and others, Sexton is quoted as describing the problems of verbal and physical abuse as ones common during a coaching change. One does not need to read between the lines to see such logic is claiming the end justifies the means. Now if I were to step back from the article and objectively consider Sexton's qualifications for promotion, I think it's appropriate to evaluate his performance as a whole, not just the number of conference titles obtained or certain nationally successful teams throughout the department. It is necessary to include all information, even negative stories such as the NCAA violations in the baseball program and the situation with women's basketball. It is unfair to promote the successes while overlooking negative aspects.

Provost Vizzini admits the announcement of Sexton's promotion was bad timing. Vizzini says the announcement shows they are bad at timing. I question whether he specifically meant they are bad at timing with personnel matters or simply making announcements in general. His statement is confusing because the university has done an impressive job of making announcements and issuing statements about progress with Innovation Campus. Since the official plans for Innovation Campus were announced to the public, the university has appeared to have a refined systematic approach regarding any announcements related to Innovation Campus initiatives.

Aside from the recent news related to athletics, I can't recall seeing a single negative or critical article about the university published by the community's various media outlets, until now. It's easy to get accustomed to the habit of expecting good PR from the media. I believe this article is evidence of many concerning systemic issues that have yet to gain public attention.

Colvin later comments on her objections to how Sexton was hired after being invited to interview candidates for the interim student affairs position and was subsequently notified by Vizzini that Sexton was hired permanently for the position. Bardo told me at our meeting on April 7 he intended to hire an interim for one year while a search would begin this fall for an individual to fill the position permanently. This occurred after I asked him earlier in the semester whether he had plans to replace Dr. Robinson once it became known his contract would not be renewed this summer. Bardo said he didn't know and stated such a decision was up to Vizzini. His response was concerning because it is standard practice to involve student government in interviewing and evaluating such candidates since the vice president for student affairs is the student government advisor and main connection to university administration.

The timeline for hiring Dr. Robinson's replacement is also suspicious. The article states Sexton had informed Bardo of his interest in the position months before the announcement. This coincides within the timeframe in which Bardo told me he didn't know of plans to commence a search to fill an interim or permanent position. It wasn't until April 7 that I learned of Bardo's intentions to begin a search process. Interim candidates were then notified on April 17 that Bardo hired an internal candidate, Sexton. Why not notify the student affairs staff members that were invited to interview the candidates? Why wait until the day of the interviews and walk into the

room to say Sexton was hired permanently? I agree with Colvin. That move was disrespectful and unprofessional.

“Bardo said there were good reasons it happened the way it did.” The article states Bardo felt drawn to the idea of appointing Sexton as the interim hiring process developed. One of the most disappointing comments in the article is when Bardo claimed to be “bothered because he knew the student affairs unit was suffering”. Knowing what I know and having heard what I’ve heard this past year, I cannot sit idle and let that statement go unaddressed.

The student affairs unit is not suffering because of Dr. Robinson or any of its other leaders. It’s suffering because of the culture of hostility and retaliation promoted by Bardo and his circle of advisors. The university’s 2012 – 2013 strategic plan steering committee confirms this challenging reality in the “culture” dataset of community feedback. This document is available on the Wichita State website. Examples of cultural issues included: “A fear of retaliation” and “Wichita State University must overcome personal and departmental jealousies.” It appears such issues weren’t properly addressed.

I’m in the Rhatigan Student Center everyday. I interact with student affairs departments everyday. I have seen the morale and culture change significantly for the worse this year. They can’t speak up or express their concerns because they have seen what’s happened to Dr. Robinson. But despite the increasingly hostile working environment on campus, they continue doing good work. They continue helping students succeed.

I realized earlier this semester student affairs staff and other university professionals believed they could not be publically candid with their concerns. As student body president, I thought it my responsibility to convey my thoughts to Bardo in our individual meetings because I envisioned how this harmful culture could negatively impact students. Bardo was not surprised when I conveyed my concerns to him. When I expressed how I’ve seen a culture develop where people are looking over their shoulders, fearful for their job, he said some should be.

Bardo cited student affairs personnel knew Dr. Robinson was leaving as a reason why he “decided, suddenly, that he did not want an interim student affairs chief”. There was never a public announcement that Dr. Robinson’s contract would not be renewed. Instead, Bardo had lunch with the student affairs department directors. I don’t think it’s realistic to expect anyone who attended that meeting felt comfortable or confident enough to express his or her honest opinion to someone who has turned a blind eye to a culture of vindictiveness.

It may seem Dr. Robinson has been the focus of Bardo’s criticism only this past year, but it’s clear efforts have been made to push Dr. Robinson out over the past two years. I question how Bardo has formed such a critical perception of Dr. Robinson and student affairs considering he has never evaluated his employee. I believe this speaks to a culture of jealousy and retribution resulting in political maneuvering among people with access to Bardo.

Dr. Robinson is an ethical leader. He is a straight shooter. He is not a “yes man” who blindly performs his job without asking critical questions. He owns a farm and lives a simple life. He has nothing to gain from speaking publically. Would he really go to such great lengths for the sake of

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revenge? That is not in his character. He is doing what he believes is right. In writing this response, I am doing what I believe is right. Dr. Robinson expects his employees to be fully informed and unbiased. I think the same should be expected from all of our university's leaders.

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