Bureaucrat in a Strange Land

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By Terry Weidner, Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center

This will be my final commentary as Director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at UM, as I am stepping down after nine years to assume a position as a full-time faculty member. Working at the Mansfield Center has probably been the best personal and professional experience of my life, but, in candor, I am past ready to move on. First, teaching is what I always liked to do best, and it’s been a long time since I’ve been able to do that full time. But as important, who in their right mind likes being a bureaucrat? I’ve always thought that, just as people who want to be president shouldn’t be allowed to run—having failed a fundamental sanity test—those who enjoy being bureaucrats should be objects of deep suspicion.

Given this attitude, I doubt I would have survived at UM—much less really come to love the job at some essential level—without some things that are special about the University and the Mansfield Center itself. Above all, I believe in what we do at the Center. I once told a friend that I would direct the Charles Manson Center if it was fully endowed—but I was just kidding. Not enough of us get to do work we believe in. And the fact is that I’m not only committed to international education but have admired Mike Mansfield since I was in high school—even then, I sensed his dignity, admired the causes he took on, and appreciated the fact he could fight with colleagues over key legislation all day and then go have a beer with them in the evening. To have had the opportunity to serve a Center that represents the Mansfield name and ideals has thus been incredibly satisfying.
Another reason I’ve found UM special: It may sound strange, given the stereotype of bureaucrats as people who push paper and obstruct, obstruct, obstruct, but I got into administration because I wanted to change things. And I’ve had a wonderful opportunity to do that through the Center at UM.

UM’s system has its own issues, of course, but it is far more receptive to the pursuit of “big ideas” than any other institutions with which I’ve been involved. To give an example: A number of years ago, when I left government, I was employed as Associate Director of International Programs at a good Midwest university. I threw myself into the job, grant money poured in, and we created some really innovative language and area studies programs. Then one day, I was called into the Provost’s office and told, in essence, to try doing less: Seems we were getting so many grants it was creating undue matching burdens on the school. Long story short, I became increasingly disillusioned with the slow-down regime and eventually left. I was replaced by a half time person. So much for my idea I was Mr. Indispensable.

Next job, another large state university in the Midwest, this time as the Founding Director of an East Asia Center. The perfect follow-up, I thought: a new Center—no furniture, even—a clean slate, an apparent mandate to get things going. But not so fast my friend. I actually wanted classes on Asian languages and culture, my bosses asked? Couldn’t we just have some nice faculty exchanges? Not surprisingly, I got the same response on anything resembling a big idea, including that of creating a branch campus in China. I didn’t expect them to rush to the barricades in support, of course—this was complicated stuff. But neither did I expect an immediate shake of the head and a dismissive “No, Terry, I don’t think so. . . .”
Flash forward to my early days at UM under then-President George Dennison, when the idea of a potential China campus came up again. A very different response this time. I was immediately dispatched to meet with key players in the U.S. and China—and when the money looked firm and the benefit to UM was apparent, we launched into a full-blown, year-long due diligence process. Ultimately, it didn’t work out, but we gave the idea the serious consideration it deserved. I already knew I liked UM much better than those other places.

Shortly thereafter, I went to the President with another idea: creating a national defense language Center. No shaking of the head on this, either. The President gave it thirty seconds of silent thought and then said, “Hell, go for it. What do you need?” Toto, we really weren’t in Kansas anymore. Five years later, The Defense Critical Language and Culture Program, run by the Mansfield Center, has been funded for $7-8m dollars and become one of the best university-based centers in the country.

And so it has gone: after always being dissuaded from pushing the envelope at other institutions, I have consistently been encouraged to do so at UM—no money mind you, never any money—but a hunting license, the freedom to see if an idea we liked was also good enough for others to fund. And realistically, you can’t ask for much more than that.

The freedom to have a vision—and of course, some absolutely incredible colleagues who share that vision—has allowed us to restore the Mansfield Center to what was intended when it was founded. In the last nine years:

- Fueled by the Defense program, the Center’s funding has increased almost 20 fold, to $3m/year
- Our staff has expanded from me and secretary to 22 full-time employees
• We have built a presence in China, including via a Confucius Institute, which has allowed us to offer Chinese language in Montana’s public schools for the first time

• We have a new and burgeoning academic and training partnerships in Vietnam and elsewhere in the Mekong Delta

• Last but not least, we have moved the UM Center for Ethics to the Mansfield Center to create the Mansfield Ethics and Public Affairs program, thus restoring a key part of the Mansfield Center’s founding legacy.

As some of you know, we have had to extend our search for a new Mansfield Center director, but with a great staff, we’ll do fine until we do identify someone who has the right stuff to bring the Center to the next level. Hopefully, that person will find, as I did, that UM is a place where even a bureaucracy-averse bureaucrat can build things and create change.

This is Terry Weidner, out-going director of the Maureen and Mike Mansfield Center at the University of Montana.