

# **“Lighting the Way for a Brighter Future”**

By

Dr. Willie David Larkin, Chair  
The Auburn University Faculty and Senate

Thank you very much. Before John and Paula ride off into the proverbial sunset, on behalf of the Auburn University Faculty and Senate, I'd like to express my sincere appreciation to both of them for a job well done. Unless you have served as one of our elected officers, you cannot imagine the toll that it takes on the person in these positions. They both have served Auburn University well and should be congratulated for all their hard work and sacrifice. Also, I'd like to give both of them a small token to represent our gratitude for their many hours of long and dedicated service. Please join me in recognizing this dynamic leadership team. Thank you very much!

I also want to recognize Dr. Debra Cobia, who succeeds Paula as Senate Secretary. Debra is very knowledgeable about academic and Senate operations at Auburn. She will make a great member of the leadership team, and she will be instrumental in helping all of us address the business affairs of the faculty and Senate.

As we embark upon this year-long journey, I would be remiss if I did not introduce a very important person in my life, my wife for nearly 31 years, Dr. Vivian M. Larkin. Most of my successes are the direct result of her encouragement and never-ending confidence in my ability. Vivian, for all of the love and support that you've given me over the years, I want to publicly thank you — we have been a great team together and it can only get better from this point on. I regret that our son, Anthony, could not be here today, but he sent me an e-mail last night that said—*“now, you get a chance to practice what you've preached all these years.”* However, our daughter, Stephanie, is home from Purdue University for Spring Break and I appreciate her making an effort to be here for this special occasion. Our grandson, Kenyuan is here as well.

This is a great day for me because at this moment I don't have any enemies sitting in the room — at least, I don't think I do. As we go through this year, I promise not to take any events or situations personally. Just like you, my goals and expectations for this year will be extremely high. My primary goal is to be successful as Senate Chair, but, I am smart enough to know that I cannot do this job alone. I am going to need the help of everyone who loves Auburn University — from faculty, of course, but also from parents, students, staff, and the administration, members of the Board of Trustees, the alumni, the state legislature, and others who have a stake in Auburn's future. I'm convinced that Auburn's future is directly tied to the State of Alabama's future. In all these groups of stakeholders, those who truly love Auburn

University realize that we can accomplish far more together than we can as isolated individuals or groups pursuing a narrow or one dimensional agenda.

After more than 28 years in the arena of education and various leadership positions, I certainly understand leadership and organizations very well. So, let me apologize in advance; because, although I'd like to—I will not be able to satisfy everyone. Furthermore, I have learned that there are no perfect people, organizations or processes. Therefore, my only option is to be completely open, fair, honest, and above all, do what's *right* and *best* for Auburn University's brighter future. I hope all of you will join me in this effort. My role as Senate Chair is to be a voice for and lead the AU faculty. In so doing, I plan to work cooperatively with the university administration, the Board of Trustees, and our other constituent groups. Although I will cooperate and collaborate with these partners in both the principles and practices of shared governance; my primary role is to look after the affairs of the faculty and the Senate.

I have faith in the tripartite system of shared governance. Shared governance is like a tripod: The University Senate, the administration and the Board of Trustees must all work together to elevate the university — and to maintain balance. When the governance structure gets out of balance, everyone loses.

I am a strong believer in the democratic process and feel that truth always rises to the top when rational men and women of purpose and goodwill allow the facts and rules of fair play to reign supreme. So, as long as we abide by the rules established by the Senate, we will do fine. I have no problems with members of the faculty or Senate putting forth their positions and defending them via strong debate. However, I would remind us all of an old Japanese proverb that says *“two men may disagree yet not be enemies.”* My assumption is that everyone in the Auburn Family is striving for the same result — a better Auburn University. Professional respect, decency, and common courtesy should always be part of the shared governance process.

Rosabeth Moss Kanter of Harvard University is one of my favorite business writers. She uses the term *“change master”* to define what I think we as faculty leaders must be if we are to meet the challenges ahead of us. In her writings, Dr. Kanter states: *“The change master is partly historian who knows which pieces of the past to honor and preserve while moving toward a different future, but that is not the same as letting the past define the future.”* At Auburn, we are the change masters of our generation: As a faculty and Senate, we must continue to help define a new future and culture for Auburn University, and not become bogged down in unnecessary gridlock.

This year will be about healing and finding solutions to grave problems. The level of intellect is so great at this university that there should not be any problem or issue which we cannot identify, frame, and eventually conquer in a spirit of friendship and collegiality. We must be open, transparent, and willing to build coalitions and respectful partnerships among the faculty, the administration and the Board of Trustees. I am

optimistic that, especially with the new additions to the Board of Trustees, we will be able to identify clear roles and responsibilities.

During the next 12 months, I will promote the four initiatives that I laid out in my campaign statement more than a year ago. The four goals I listed were: **1)** establishing a standing long-range planning committee to be chaired by the incoming chair-elect; **2)** placing an orange and blue suggestion box in the back of the senate chamber for people to deposit their ideas and suggestions that are not expressed or discussed during the regular senate or faculty meetings; **3)** conducting an orientation for new senators to learn the overall structure, processes, and general rules of the senate and its functions and operations; and **4)** creation of a Mentor of the Professoriate initiative designed to assist junior faculty, particularly women and minorities, with tenure and promotion processes. Unfortunately, Auburn has done a very poor job of attracting and retaining African Americans and people of color — that can not continue to happen. We *must* do a better job in this area. Frankly put, we must demonstrate a stronger commitment to diversity as a practicing core value at every level within the university. To that end, I challenge each of you to join me in tackling this problem. We all have a stake in making this a top priority. I am committed to “standing in the gap” on this and other serious issues that prevent Auburn from becoming her best.

In addition to those issues, we will undoubtedly have to work with the administration and the Board of Trustees to meet the SACS probation demands before the end of this year. SACS and the process of launching a national search for a permanent president have been mentioned as the two most important issues facing Auburn University at this time. And, we could list budget concerns as the third major issue facing this university. So, quite naturally, I want to make sure that the faculty is intricately involved in these and other substantive matters that affect Auburn.

To accomplish all my goals, we must move quickly over the next few weeks. My first task is to organize the leadership team and make major decisions concerning the way faculty and senate business is addressed. Secondly, I will work closely with the Rules Committee to get all our committees appointed and working. Over the years, many of our committees have been underutilized. For the good of the faculty, we cannot allow any of our committees to be idle or unproductive. Committees must accomplish their jobs, which will allow the Senate to be proactive in working with the administration and the Board of Trustees.

Finally, during the next 12 months, I encourage everyone to become fully engaged in the business affairs of the Senate and faculty. I will talk to anyone who is committed to advancing the three-fold mission of teaching, research, and extension/outreach at Auburn University. Once again, my goal is to remain positive, open-minded and fair at all times. Most of all, I will lead by example and use my best judgment to advance the work of the university.

Auburn University has lots of work to do to get its house in order. If we don't, the court of public opinion will continue to tear us down. To the faculty's credit, much of the correcting will need to come from other legs of the shared governance tripod. Fortunately, the Auburn faculty continues to be strong and do its job at the highest level of excellence. As a result, I am very proud to be a tenured member of this faculty.

Throughout the coming year, we will have our share of doubts, disagreements and disputes. However, if we will all keep our eyes on the prize, which is the enrichment, advancement, and betterment of Auburn University; we will achieve the goals that I've alluded to. And, we will achieve another important goal, as well — the betterment of ourselves. Of course, there will be moments of tension, but those moments should be short-lived and not deter us from our larger mission.

During this next year, I pledge my best work, my best thinking and my skills in bringing people of various persuasions together for a common purpose. I promise to listen to all ideas and readily implement those which are timely and have merit. As mentioned before, we will not be able to respond fully to every issue and concern; however, all expressions will be heard and considered. I will be open with you on all issues and will do my best to keep the faculty informed of my efforts on your behalf. Plus, I will consult regularly with the Rules Committee, Steering Committee, the Executive Committee, and the Chairs of the various Senate Committees. We want our leadership efforts to be a true team approach.

In conclusion, the office of Senate Chair is without a doubt the most formidable challenge I have ever undertaken. But I accept this challenge and all that goes along with it — the long hours, the many meetings, the cheers, and yes, occasionally the boos. I invite you to join me on this continuous journey to make Auburn University the best that it's ever been.

Again, thank you very much for placing your trust in me and I pledge to do my very best at all times. War Eagle!!!