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Notes on the Sicuro Era at PSU (9/86 – 10/88)

Clarence Hein

From 1978 to 2001 I served in news and community relations positions at Portland State, working directly with five different presidents. The following are my personal recollections and opinions regarding Natale Sicuro's two years as President of Portland State University and the controversies surrounding his tenure which ultimately led to his removal from office.

It Started With His First Convocation

The failure of Natale Sicuro's presidency can be attributed to several causes: alleged misspending of foundation money; interference with student publications; an adversarial relationship with faculty; an arrogant, possibly megalomaniacal leadership style; an ignorance or naivete regarding the campus culture and academic politics; and the mishandling of relationships with outside media. All of these factors sprang from the character of the man himself. They were discernible from his very first days on campus and became ever more obvious as time passed.

Dr. Sicuro came to PSU from Southern Oregon State University, basically a small college in a small southern Oregon town with about one-fifth the enrollment of PSU. The faculty and students at SOU were more "traditional" than those in the metropolitan region. PSU, an urban research university, was and is a different institution than SOU or, for that matter, UO and OSU. I wouldn't say the PSU folks are more sophisticated but rather more cynical and less isolated from the daily life of the surrounding community. His situation was not helped by the rumors circulating that, while Sicuro had not made the list of search committee finalists, his name had been added back in by then Chancellor William "Bud" Davis, who championed his candidacy. There also was present at PSU a deeply rooted sense that the university had been unfairly held back and short changed in its quest to develop in order to protect the older institutions in the valley.

One need only read through his first convocation speech in Fall, 1986, his first opportunity to introduce himself to the majority of faculty and staff, to sense the danger signals. The speech indicates a level of misunderstanding regarding PSU, its history, its faculty, staff, and its studentsⁱ.

His opening remarks to that convocation illustrated a tendency to hyperbole that would not serve him well in an academic setting. For example, he read from a paragraph he had inserted into an advertisement of the PSU Provost position in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. He wrote, “the university is entering a new era of dynamic growth and development as a partner with the beautiful and vibrant city of Portland in the distinctly different State of Oregon in leading the nation in its 21st century ...” This kind of advertising/puffery jargon would find its way into many of Dr. Sicuro’s statements over the next two years. Later in the speech he refers to planned “centers of excellence” at PSU as basically an advertising gimmick, although he would support them. These programs had been fought for by some faculty and administrators as a way of recognizing achievements at PSU.

About two-thirds of the way into the speech Dr. Sicuro lays out his particular preferences for communicating with faculty and staff. Again, this policy indicated a lack of respect for the traditional lines of communication at the university and was seen as a unilaterally imposed change in the status of faculty/staff. He said, “It’s very simple – I have a difficult time with ... too many people coming in and talking to me when they are speaking for just one faculty.” He proposed “streamlining” the governance structure, moving from a faculty senate, an advisory council, an educational policy council and a campus planning council to create one overall group. In addition, he wanted to identify one faculty member as his “advisor” to speak for the faculty. “That doesn’t mean I don’t have an open door,” he said, “but if you want to come in and talk business with me, I am going to ask you if it has gone through the channels.” In addition, he said, “I have a very difficult time with negativism ... I simply try to turn it off.” In other words, no complaints.

Finally, in what many observers, including outside media, highlighted from his speech, he addressed what he termed PSU’s “inferiority complex.” He said he was a “magician” and with one wave of his magic wand he would make the complex disappear. This comment was seen by some as clever, by others as corny, and by still others as ridiculous. The latter group believed there was no “inferiority complex” at PSU to begin with. What there had been since the 1950s and remained at least through the 1990s was the absolute certainty that forces within the state higher education system had, through a series of policy decisions over the years, unfairly limited the growth and development of public higher education in the state’s leading metropolitan region. There is an old saying that suggests it isn’t paranoia if they really are trying to kill you. That was what Dr. Sicuro mistakenly saw as an “inferiority complex.”

There are indications in this opening address to the university community that Dr. Sicuro leaned toward an “imperial presidency,” that only a select few individuals and groups would be allowed to communicate with him and that what he decided would be final. This attitude was reaffirmed later at his first Faculty Senate meeting when he told the senators that he would not attend their meetings because it would be “a waste” of his timeⁱⁱ.

During the first ten months of Dr. Sicuro’s presidency he enjoyed, if not particularly enthusiastic support, at least the general impression that positive things were happening and that Portland State was more on people’s minds in the community. His personal quirks and administrative style were not seen as serious problems. There were positive stories in local media, including *The Vanguard*, and particular attention was given to his leadership role in a national higher education advocacy groupⁱⁱⁱ. By the spring of 1987, however, there were signs that the relationship was changing. Sicuro’s reluctance to meet with reporters, particularly those with the campus newspaper, contributed to his reputation as an arrogant, strong willed administrator. In July, 1987, we saw the first gusty headwinds of a perfect storm of media and faculty criticism that eventually would engulf Sicuro’s presidency.

Arguments with *The Vanguard*

July 8, 1987, brought the first serious tear in the fabric of his presidency. *The Vanguard*, probably responding to a tip from someone in the University Physical Plant, ran a story about costs incurred in making renovations to the President’s Residence. The paper had asked to see documents related to the project and were directed to Vice President Roger Edgington. He gave them a figure of \$51,374 which appeared in the article. Immediately after that publication, *The Vanguard* received numerous additional tips regarding expenses at the house which prompted a second story on August 5 suggesting that the costs could be as high as \$140,000, a figure later revealed to be significantly inflated. However, as the newspaper’s editor pointed out, if the administration had been more forthcoming with documentation the story could have been more accurate from the beginning. The continuing coverage by *The Vanguard* led to subsequent stories in local media which became a major concern for the administration^{iv}.

Dr. Sicuro’s response to the media uproar only served to escalate the situation. First, he ordered a “review” of the Publications Board operations and policies. Whether the review

actually was tied directly to the renovation article or had been in the works prior to it made no difference because the connection was assumed by most people. Additionally, the timing of the review was criticized, taking place in July and August, when the majority of students and faculty, including some Publications Board members, were not on campus.

In September, 1987, Vice President for Finance Roger Edgington was told to issue a memo to his administrative team which, in effect, instructed them not to talk to the press. This became widely known as, “the gag order.” Then, as press criticism continued into the fall, he fired Jerry Penk, *The Vanguard* faculty advisor. This unilateral personnel move, combined with the earlier order to review the Publication Board charter and operations, was immediately seen as a naked attempt to censor the campus newspaper. If there ever had been a chance for Dr. Sicuro to muster broad public support this single, ill-considered move had eliminated it.

The response, both on and off campus, was swift and vocal with several major newspaper columnists and broadcasters actively fanning the flames^v. His attempt to explain his actions, in a long and somewhat rambling memo to Provost Frank Martino, the Publications Board, and Vice Provost Orcilia Forbes^{vi} only served to deepen the resentment on campus.

The growing negative publicity surrounding him did not deter Dr. Sicuro from pushing his agenda. In December, 1987, he announced that PSU Athletics would move up to NCAA Division I, even in the face of a \$1 million deficit. This move was advanced in spite of wide spread opposition on campus^{vii}. The following month, Athletic Director Dave Coffee announced that he was resigning at the end of the school year, citing, “Philosophical, professional, and personal differences with the University’s administration”^{viii}. He indicated that he might remain at PSU until his contract expired in August, 1988. However, within a few days, Sicuro terminated his contract immediately, further enhancing his reputation as a “my way or the highway” administrator. With regard to the \$1 million deficit, he told a February student forum that he would use excess student fees to prop up the Athletics Department, suggesting that students had better get used to it whether they liked it or not. Not surprisingly, a “No Sicuro” movement sprang up among the student body. Little stickers saying “Sicuro” with a red line slashed through it showed up on bulletin boards, back packs, doorways and lockers all over campus (**See Folder 3**). Negative articles regarding Sicuro, probably prompted by disgruntled faculty or staff, continued to pop up from time to time.

Financial “Improprieties” and a New Chancellor

At the beginning of 1988 Governor Neil Goldschmidt asked Chancellor William “Bud” Davis to step down, suggesting that they did not see eye to eye on the future of Oregon higher education. The Governor was roundly criticized for usurping the State Board’s responsibility in the matter but, more importantly for Natale Sicuro, the removal of Davis also meant the removal of a significant center of support for the PSU President. In fact, it was widely reported that Davis had “rigged” the appointment process to get the job for Sicuro^{ix}. Davis remained in office through May but his lame duck status blunted any influence he may have had in the coming debate over Sicuro’s administration.

Then in March, 1988, the first serious questions of financial impropriety were raised. It was alleged that some restricted funds within the PSU Foundation (that is, funds donated and dedicated to a specific purpose) had been diverted to cover fund raising expenses^x. The Oregon Department of Justice launched an investigation and by the end of June, Judith Nichols, PSU Vice President for Development, had resigned, the Attorney General had asked the Secretary of State to investigate the relationship between the Foundation and the University, *The Oregonian* reported that Sicuro had misled the IRS regarding income taxes, and a majority of Academic Department Chairs had petitioned Sicuro for a meeting to discuss their concerns with his administration^{xi}. In June, an internal audit by PSU of Foundation finances was released with more than 40 recommendations^{xii}. Sicuro refused to comment, suggesting that Vice President for Finance Roger Edgington release the report. Edgington passed the ball to the News and Information Office which released the audit at a news conference on June 9.

During that same period, Dr. Sicuro had presented to the State Board the “PSU Plan for the 90s,” an ambitious ten year plan for development and expansion of PSU. He also presided over the dedication of the new School of Business Administration building, constructed with State Lottery funds. Both of these actions, while receiving positive press coverage, were pretty much lost in the maze of the growing controversy surrounding the use of Foundation money. In fact, by the end of June, a survey of faculty showed that more than 80 percent disapproved of Sicuro’s administration. The Senate President, on behalf of the Senate, asked the State Board for an immediate review of Dr. Sicuro’s leadership^{xiii}.

Dr. Sicuro, never really comfortable working with news media, became even more difficult to reach. Passersby in Cramer Hall were treated to a daily spectacle of television and newspaper reporters camped in the Third Floor hallway, waiting for a Sicuro sighting. At one point, he was shown shutting the door in the face of a TV reporter.

In July, the Department of Justice issued a report saying the University “inappropriately controlled” the PSU Foundation^{xiv}. Bill Lemman had been appointed Interim Chancellor following Bud Davis’ resignation. This was significant because Lemman had a long and close relationship with PSU, having attended Vanport following WWII and he had served on the early college business and financial staff. He was very concerned that the situation should be resolved as quickly and cleanly as possible. He appointed a five member committee to review Sicuro’s performance. He asked for public input and hoped the process would be completed in early fall^{xv}.

By September, the majority of PSU Academic Department Chairs had signed a petition urging Sicuro to resign. So many individuals requested time to speak to the special committee it was forced to expand its initial schedule from two days to four. During the weeks leading up to the hearings no fewer than eleven outside media organizations had publicly called for Sicuro to resign. There was virtually no media support for him other than a column by Fred Stickle, publisher of *The Oregonian*, even though his own newspaper had publicly urged Sicuro to go.

The review panel finished its interviews on September 28. On October 6, the panel made its report to Chancellor Lemman who then met with Sicuro. On October 10, Sicuro resigned^{xvi}. His resignation statement reads, in part, “The Special Review Committee ... has concluded that the differences between (sic) the President and the faculty at PSU are such that re-establishing a satisfactory working relationship is problematical. I have concluded that it is in the best interest of PSU to resign as President.” In its statement, the State Board said, in part, “The review panel found no evidence of misuse of university or foundation funds or of any other wrongdoing Nor does the Board believe that controversy at PSU reflects on the qualifications or performance of Dr. Sicuro as an educator.... The resignation is based on our mutual recognition of the differences between Dr. Sicuro and the university faculty.”

Conclusion

So, what really happened here? If, as the Board said, there was no financial impropriety or “wrong doing,” was he, in fact, ridden out of town on a rail by an obstreperous faculty complete with pitchforks and torches? According to the Board, the situation was akin to a pair of fighting spouses seeking a divorce due to “irreconcilable differences,” with the only questions left being who gets the house and who gets the car. Certainly, by the time Sicuro had been at PSU for less than a year there was little evidence of faculty support for him and there were signs of growing discontent. But, what evolved was more than a simple lack of support. For some, by the summer of 1988, it had become outright hostility and included demands for his resignation.

The reasons for this evolution of faculty attitude were nicely summarized by Arthur Emlen, then Director of the Regional Research Institute at PSU, in a letter to the special review panel^{xvii}. Emlen says in part, “Unfortunately, (Sicuro’s) potential for effectiveness was undone by a complicated unfolding of decisions, administrative style, events, and the machinations of interest groups both inside and out.” He says in the letter that Sicuro enjoyed early support but, “(Sicuro’s) unresponsiveness regarding the issues became an issue itself.”

Regarding the president’s “inferiority complex” statement at the 1986 convocation, Emlen says, “It didn’t play well to imply that we needed exhortation rather than resources in order to move ahead. There is a quality of magical thinking, of administration by pronouncement, as a substitute for getting to know, respect, use and build on the very real strengths of the faculty.” Emlen points to a continuing lack of communication as a major factor in the growing discontent. “(Sicuro) was his own worst enemy. Impervious to criticism or to legitimate questions, his responses were not believable and questions about his probity persisted.”

To remain in a position of leadership one must command the respect and support of both those who are subordinate and those to whom the leader reports. As we have seen in the recent case of the University of Oregon presidency, respect and support of subordinates by itself is not enough. In the case of Natale Sicuro, he failed to win over the university faculty and staff through both his lack of understanding of the university community and his arrogant management style. With the resignation of Chancellor William Davis he also lost his support in

the central administration. At the end, there was no one, other than Sicuro himself, to act in his defense.

It would be nearly two years before Portland State would inaugurate a new, permanent president, Judith Ramaley. By that time both the faculty and the State Board were eager for real academic leadership which Ramaley provided, not without her own controversies along the way. However, that's another story.

ⁱ (Box 731, folder 1 The speech copy in the folder apparently is a typed transcript from an audio recording which may account for some of the odd syntax and blank spaces.)

ⁱⁱ (Faculty Senate Minutes, January 12, 1987, page 14. Folder 2.).

ⁱⁱⁱ (See news articles, including *Chronicle of Higher Ed*, and Congressional testimony in Folders 1 and 2)

^{iv} (News articles, memos, etc. Folder 3)

^v (See Folder 3

^{vi} (PSU Currently, Nov. 6, 1987, Folder 3)

^{vii} (See Folder 3)

^{viii} (Sports News Release, Folder 3)

^{ix} (News article in Folder 1)

^x (See many news articles, memos, etc. in Folders 3,4,5)

^{xi} See Department Heads memo Folder 2).

^{xii} (See PSU News Release and audit report, Folder 5

^{xiii} (See many items in Folders 4, 5

^{xiv} (See folders 2 and 4)

^{xv} (There are many copies of Lemman's announcement in various folders)

^{xvi} (See Resignation Document Folder 1)

^{xvii} (Arthur Emlen letter, Folder 4)