Abayateye: A tribute to a visionary leader—giving praise where it’s due

Mark Twain’s inspiring counsel is this: Focus on doing right because that both gratifies and surprises people. We all need this, but one person that is living this goal, in my opinion, is President Sharon Gaber, University of Toledo’s 17th and first female president. My four-year studentship at this university gives me a good idea of what UT expects of its “president of the people.” This is not a socialist cliché but a recognition of how Gaber’s actions embody the aspirations of this community. Let’s be fast to criticize, but even faster to praise.

Flashback. My excitement about Gaber’s appointment in July 2015 was mainly because she was going to be the first female president of the university. Then I attended a public seminar at University Hall where her mentor and a colleague, I believe from Boston and UCLA, respectively, spoke about her work and character.

Then I read her resume—a city and regional planning expert, an accomplished well-published academic and the provost and vice chancellor for academic affairs at the University of Arkansas. At that point I knew UT had the real deal; I came to appreciate these qualifications better than her being the first female president.

Then came the time to work. Some say you can judge the outcome of a person by the goals she sets and I agree. Among her goals, Gaber wants to enhance the national reputation of the university, increase student enrollment and graduation rates, hire high-quality faculty, administrators and staff, increase the share of externally-funded research and to increase the
University’s philanthropic support.

It’s one thing to set goals and another to implement. So, like others, I was particularly interested in how Gaber could increase student enrollment and enhance the university’s national reputation.

Intelligently and quickly, she figured out the role of social media, especially among a growing millennial population. It’s no secret that in this age when universities are fighting over dwindling student populations, he who can play the social media game better stands to win greater.

One of her admirable strategies, therefore, is to directly reach out to prospective students on social media. She is quick to extend congratulations and warmly welcome students to campus. Among that long list are Lindsay Haynes, Cara Asanbekova, Taylor Coronado and Kiertin Tutt. She personally told Taylor that, “We look forward to having you join the Rockets. You are going to love UT. Happy 2017!” Then to Cara she said, “We can’t wait to see you at UToledo!” These genuine interactions will go a long way to assure these people of a vibrantly welcoming environment here on campus, and make that decision process easier for UT’s benefit.

The ability to have programs to keep students involved and satisfied is important for improving graduation rates. This is also the strength of our president. When a student, Joshua Hill, for example, wanted to know when Steak ‘n Shake would finally start operating on campus, she responded, “I hear they think it will be March! Can’t wait.” Gaber also takes so much joy in interacting with and helping students move into their residences, hanging out with students during pep rallies and taking part in events like Zeta Phi Eta’s #PikeFiremansChallenge to raise awareness and funds for the Toledo Fire & Rescue Foundation.

It’s always a proud moment to read her emails updating the
campus community on developments and to what her administration is doing about these issues. Whether it is asking inputs for a strategic development plan or just reassuring the community about safety measures and the university’s commitment to a diverse campus, she does it so well.

It doesn’t matter what the incidence is or whether it has potential of impugning the image of the school and her administration, she still reaches out to us.

Consider when she had to deal with the racially-charged assault on Rayshawn Watkins at the Pi Kappa Phi fraternity, she was very open and measured in her actions. That reaction effectively minimized any adverse implications the event may pose to the university’s reputation. She also made clear that sexual assault will not be tolerated on campus and her commitment to ending sex trafficking in our region is also exemplary.

In one of our darkest moments, when UT third-year Logan Green went missing and was later found dead, Gaber provided both comfort and emphasized the university community’s commitment to the principle of “One for all, all for one.”

Somehow, we expect all these to produce results and yes, we’re experiencing them. For instance, for the first time in six years, last fall the university recorded an increased enrollment. There’s very little limit to what we can do when everyone feels involved in the process.

So President Gaber, this is just a tribute from a student who admires what you’re doing to enhance the reputation and value of his college. You’ve taken Kenneth W. Thomas’ encouragement to heart when he said to make sure we’re not just waiting for someone else to fix things, or hoping that things will improve, but to figure out what’s going on and make a plan to improve them. Whatever is left to be done I’m confident you’ll
continue to rely on the valuable contributions of everyone. Good job so far.

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