

IAN A. FAIR AS ACADEMIC DEAN PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

JACK R. REESE

Abilene Christian University

Tim Sensing's excellent article in this issue provides a framework for assessing Ian Fair as an academic leader within the College of Biblical Studies at Abilene Christian University. His overview of the historical development of the academic dean's role in university life and his descriptive categories of a dean's work will serve as touch points for sharing my personal experiences as a professor for nine years under Ian Fair's leadership. Especially useful are the notions of dean as cultural representative, planner/analyst, and advocate.

Few people I know have excelled in as many roles as Ian Fair, any one of which would be considered a successful career. For example, he was a first-rate mechanical engineer in South Africa, though far more people in that country know him as a church planter and missionary. He is a professor of NT texts and theology, an expert in the theology of Wolfhart Pannenberg, and an engaging classroom teacher. He is a passionate preacher, beloved Bible class teacher, long-time elder, and author. He is an innovator in the use of technology in teaching, especially in the use of the internet. Many know him as a specialist in church leadership who has written an important book on that subject and who now serves as a consultant for numerous churches. His competence and influence in all of these areas are noteworthy, but, arguably, his most profound contribution has been made as an academic dean.

Fair joined the ACU faculty in 1978 and was appointed chair of the Bible Department in 1983. The department became a college in 1985. Fair served as its dean until 1997. His fourteen years as chair and academic dean were years of significant transformation. When he retired from that role, the faculty had changed substantially with new faces, new emphases, and new programs. Baby Boomer students in 1978 soon gave way to Gen Xers with significantly different questions and issues. Churches of Christ experienced profound changes during those years, creating opportunities for Dean Fair to exercise both diplomacy and courage. Moreover, during these years, not only did the university reorganize into colleges, but the Southern Association for Colleges and Schools, the regional accrediting organization for the university, raised its expectations and changed its standards of assessment. In 1989, the Bible faculty, whose offices

were scattered around the Hardin Administration Building and across Campus Court in the missions house, moved into the newly constructed Biblical Studies Building, a project overseen in detail by Dean Fair.

Sensing indicates that most institutions see the primary responsibility of the chief academic officer as overseeing the teaching and research functions of their institutions. This function is undoubtedly the case for most schools, but it misses the mark regarding Dean Fair for two reasons—first, because of the nature and mission of Christian universities and, second, because of Fair’s passions and commitments. I am not suggesting he was uninterested in teaching and research. On the contrary, he pushed his faculty in these directions. He did not tolerate poorly taught classes or second-rate faculty. He sought and obtained extra-budgetary funding for research. Rather, Fair saw teaching and research more as means than ends. His goal was not merely to encourage excellent teaching and competent research but to produce ministers and missionaries, to help the church become more theologically reflective. During his years as dean, Ian Fair never took his eyes off the larger goal, nor did he allow his faculty to forget what was truly important.

Cultural Representative of the College

Among the qualities of effective academic deans that Sensing mentions are several that are especially characteristic of Dr. Fair. One is the role of cultural representative. When Fair was first appointed chair of the Bible Department, not everyone expected him to function in this way. He was a relatively new faculty member. At the time he was not widely known as a teacher or administrator. There were quiet questions of concern and expressions of disappointment among some. These questions did not linger long, however. Within weeks it was clear that Fair was a whirlwind of ideas, a thinker and a doer. By the end of his first year as chair, the only question was whether the other faculty could stay up with him.

Fair embodied the ideals of the college. He was larger than life—teaching, preaching, writing, consulting, mentoring, managing finances, fundraising, creating new initiatives—all for a clear purpose. He fought publicly for the values of the college. These values include the following.

1. *The Bible should be at the center of the curriculum.* Dean Fair was unbudging in his commitment to protect the central place of Scripture within the department and, later, the college. However valuable a course or program might be, it must find its place as an outgrowth of biblical study, not as a replacement of it. For Dean Fair, everything begins with a broad grasp of Scripture. This includes facility with the biblical languages and skills in exegesis, but it also means theological sensitivity. A scholar/minister must allow the text to inform out of a theological center.

2. *The curriculum should primarily focus on the training of ministers.* Dean Fair’s greatest legacy may be the transformation of the department, which had

long produced fine scholars and teachers, into a college whose passion is equipping ministers and missionaries. He was able to accomplish these changes without undermining the importance of research and scholarship. During his fourteen years of leadership, the number of graduates who went on to do doctoral research never decreased. The number of students training for ministry and missions, however, increased more than fivefold. In 1983, the reputation of the Bible Department at ACU was primarily that of excellence in research and scholarship. By 1997, the College of Biblical Studies was the largest training ground for ministers and missionaries within Churches of Christ, with over 550 undergraduate and graduate majors.

As cultural representative of the college, Fair embodied its ideals. He engaged the faculty and students in rethinking ministry. He changed the culture. He challenged our ways of doing things. He fought for things he thought were most important. And he was humble enough to praise others when he did not get his way.

Planner/Analyst

Sensing's research also reveals the role of planner/analyst as common for effective academic deans. Dean Fair was unequalled in this role. He combined the ability to see the big picture with an eye for fine details. He was both visionary and manager, both prophet and priest.

Fair's vision of the college was more expansive than what most of us could imagine. He envisioned a cocurriculum of ministry opportunities, the integration of disciplines, the churches as classrooms, and learning as a lifelong opportunity. He saw multiple departments, not narrow disciplines, and ministry as the locus of theology, history, and praxis. The department he entered would hardly have recognized the college he left behind.

His attention to detail was often seen in the planning of the Biblical Studies Building. At first, the contractors had no idea why this dean came to the construction site with his hard hat, asking questions, making suggestions, and providing critique. They soon discovered that the combination of his training as an engineer and his attention to detail made him a formidable academic overseer in the process of building construction. It is difficult to imagine that any other person could have envisioned how teachers and students would use a building such as this and at the same time talk to electricians, carpenters, and engineers as one of them.

This combination of micro- and macromanager made Dean Fair particularly qualified to serve as leader during these years of change and growth. Most of us who served under him believe he was called by God to this position at this time.

Advocate

As Sensing indicated, faculty and other administrators often discern the role of advocate as of greater value than other supervisory responsibilities. This was

clearly the case with the College of Biblical Studies. During a time of significant transition, in the university and within Churches of Christ, faculty and students needed an environment in which to ask questions, explore, think, challenge, and grow. The faculty especially needed someone not only to protect them from irresponsible critics but to serve as an advocate for the causes we shared. This Dean Fair did with remarkable courage and tenacity.

Occasionally, faculty spoke or wrote things unwisely. Even in the face of substantial criticism, Fair was pointed and strong in their defense. In his early years as department chair, the university faced accusations of teaching evolution in science classes. As the religious right wing attacked the university, Dean Fair served as one of the primary respondents even though the criticism did not target, at least at first, his own faculty or curriculum. His ability to formulate responses, hold critics accountable for their own actions, and articulate the university's position became the foundation for defense of his own faculty and curriculum in later years.

In the early 1990s, Fair met often with accusers, one-on-one or in preachers' meetings. He met with elders. He talked on the phone to people all over the world. He never backed away from attacks. He listened, he challenged, he refuted. He reframed the arguments and redefined the issues. He spoke out of a well-studied theology. Anything less than such tenacious advocacy would have led to widely different results.

Fair's role as college advocate, however, was not confined to "brotherhood politics." At the academic deans' table, he was outspoken and passionate. Fair was able to see the needs of the whole university, but he championed the college, fought for increased scholarships, pushed for new programs, and lobbied for increased attention for financial development. He created the position of development officer for the college. He argued successfully for substantial increases in unfunded scholarships to the college, a move that greatly increased the number of majors in a very short time. When university budget figures differed from his, he camped in administration offices arguing his case.

His bulldoggedness did not always win him friends, but it always won him admirers. He knew who he was. He knew what was important. He knew how to get things done. His language was plain when nuancing would only obscure. He carved out a space for expansive ministry preparation, which could come only in the wake of such aggressiveness and tenacity.

Many other stories could be told—his advocacy of missions, his championing of computer-assisted teaching, his promotion of off-campus teaching and learning. All who have known him have their stories to tell. But all would agree, Ian Fair was an extraordinary dean at an extraordinary time. He not only served the mission of the College of Biblical Studies, he largely defined it.

For me, moving into his office as his successor was daunting, but his graciousness and encouragement made my transition a joy. His advice has

always been welcome though it has come only when invited. His expertise is helpful, but it is his friendship I cherish most. Along with all those who served with him during his leadership years, I am grateful.