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Lessons from a Philosopher-Provost

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Lessons from a Philosopher-Provost

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Wednesday May 17, 2023

By Eric F. Spina

It's never about Paul.

After a barrage of praise and gratitude for his stellar 38-year University of Dayton career, Dr. Paul Benson, true to character, turned the tables on a standing-room-only Kennedy Union ballroom crowd of well-wishers by saying, “You’ve been teachers for me.”

“UD,” the thoughtful and admired retiring provost told us, “has a core set of values, aspirations, and hopes that holds us together. UD is a place that fosters reflection on who we are called to be and what we are called to do.”

Paul found his calling at UD, and the University is a far better place because of the gifts he shared during an unparalleled career that started in the classroom as an assistant professor of philosophy and will end with what many consider to be the most demanding and difficult job on campus. When he steps down as provost and executive vice president of academic

affairs at the end of the academic year, he will leave a legacy as a brilliant faculty member and administrator, exquisite communicator, skilled strategist, fierce advocate for faculty and staff, and a values-based leader who people admire, respect — and follow.

During his nine-year tenure as our chief academic officer, he led the faculty through a once-in-a-hundred years pandemic, while helping to achieve new undergraduate records in socio-economic diversity as well as graduation and retention rates. He dramatically grew the number of full-time faculty while increasing racial and ethnic diversity. He also improved gender diversity in the highest ranks of UD's academic leadership.

To laughter and with “apologies to Rodgers and Hammerstein,” emcee Deb Bickford kicked off Paul's retirement celebration with her musical twist on a familiar “Sound of Music” refrain, *“How do you describe a person like Paul Benson?”*

The retired associate provost and professor emerita of management then proceeded to do just that, offering a host of remembrances and stories from colleagues. Here's just a sampling:

From Sean Wilkinson, retired photography professor: “No one better embodies humility, fair-mindedness, integrity, empathy, sincerity, generosity, sensitivity, clear thinking, good judgment, and innate goodness than Paul.”

From Donna Cox, music professor: “You have been a large part of making UD my home. Your support was never wavering; I will always be grateful for that. I can honestly say, Paul, that you saw me. ...It is this seeing and caring that empowers people to be courageous.”

From Mary Ann Recker, his former student and now vice president and general counsel: “Paul is the one to help quiet the storm, to navigate uncharted waters with finesse, to speak clarity into a complex situation, to see the long arc of higher education.”

Ro Nita Hawes-Saunders, retired CEO of the Dayton Contemporary Dance Company, called Paul “a man of honor and purpose” and “the architect” behind UD's partnership with the world-renowned, culturally diverse troupe. Father Jim Fitz, S.M., vice president for mission and rector, praised him for being “a powerful supporter” of UD's Catholic, Marianist mission.

For me, he is “Mr. UD,” the ultimate servant-leader. He truly models the Marianist charism in the way he treats others, how he thinks about his vocation, and in how much of himself he gives to others.

So, on this day, we made it all about Paul (despite his desire that we not!). Personally, I will *always* treasure his friendship and partnership — as will a grateful UD community.

(In Paul Benson's honor, the University of Dayton will establish the Paul Benson Opportunity Scholarship in the Arts for Flyer Promise and UD Sinclair Academy students and dedicate a sculpture created by Kyle and Kelly Phelps that will greet visitors to the Roger Glass Center

for the Arts.)