

Introduction of Dr. John F. Schwaller as the Fifteenth President of The State  
University of New York at Potsdam, April 20, 2007

Cathryn and I have known Fritz and Anne Schwaller for a long time. Long enough to understand who they are and what they can do; long enough for us to see them through the changing times and circumstances that define the trajectories of our lives; and long enough to appreciate the people they have become. You who have begun to know the pair have surely recognized the quality and the focused integrity that define them. You have searched, reviewed, and captured Fritz and Anne for this university community, and I come before you today to recognize the wisdom of your choice

We who live the life of the American university know that exceptional academic leadership is much discussed but less frequently found. We sometimes serve with the self-promoting and autocratic, the devious and vacillating, the glib and slick; but sometimes we have the good fortune to work with leaders for whom the enterprise is more important than their image.

You have found one of these rare talents in academic life, someone whose commitment to the substance of the university is consistent, enduring, and constantly productive; whose work always displays quality of imagination, high standards of scholarship, and generosity of spirit. And to find these qualities and this achievement in someone who knows how to manage the enterprise, well, that is a treasure.

Although these characteristics became evident as you searched for and found your new president, we saw them from the beginning of his academic career. No ordinary graduate student, Fritz moved beyond the mundane rituals of Ph.D. preparation and leapt at every opportunity to expand his engagement with the field. He could have settled for the ordinary stuff of a history Ph.D., the manuscripts and books, the bibliography and narrow specialized text, but not Fritz. He extended his explorations of his topic, expanding outward in scope and inward in depth, and followed this model from dissertation to books to scholarly articles and leadership in his field. He has made of himself one of the world's premier scholars of Spanish American Church history, an expert in the formation and operation of the Spanish colonial empire, and a linguist whose command of and contributions to our understanding of Nahuatl is internationally recognized. Early in his career, when computers seemed new and strange for historians, Fritz thought they might offer a useful set of tools and learned various computer languages to see if they could be adapted to analyze his texts. Unnecessary perhaps, endlessly complicated and time consuming for sure, but in his mind, the work would be incomplete without the additional exploration. From the very beginning of his career until today, this is an unusually creative and engaged academic.

Ever since his days as a graduate student--where we all, faculty and students found support and encouragement from a university inspired by the visionary leadership of President John W. Ryan (who anticipated attending today representing Indiana University as its President Emeritus and, not all that coincidentally, as a predecessor Chancellor to

your current Chancellor John R. Ryan)--Fritz has continued with a consistency and clarity of purpose to develop both his remarkable achievement in scholarship and his fine record of academic leadership at various institutions throughout the country, each place benefiting from his keen understanding of the substance and the process of exceptional teaching, outstanding research, and inspired creative activity. The man reads and writes with clarity and precision, he listens carefully and responds thoughtfully. He has the patience to wait for the right time, the wisdom to know the right thing to do, and the courage to act as circumstances and principle require.

Now, managing a university is a serious thing. It involves identifying strengths and reinforcing and enhancing them, finding problems and resolving them, seeing opportunities and capturing them, and always engaging those people with the talents to make the best out of every situation. Fritz learned early to calibrate the structure and interconnections that define our academic worlds, to accommodate the often complicated and highly personal relationships that make a university community function and that often reflect a generation of interactions barely visible on the surface. He can see the sometimes indirect path to the right objective that permits success without requiring destructive confrontation, and he never loses sight of the principles and values that define the quality of the academic enterprise.

Fitz also delights in putting things in context, a trait that helps define his academic leadership but appears in just about everything. Fritz, a computer geek in his own right, owns and contributes to various on-line discussion lists or what today we would call blogs, and he appears in these informal forums in classic style. I went out on the Internet to check up on him and found the following wonderfully characteristic entry he contributed some years ago to a list devoted to food recipes.

Apparently, he could not resist educating the list members about that remarkable delicacy—Gaspacho:

“Please note,” he began in the voice of the true teacher, “that Gazpacho is a Spanish and not a Mexican dish. It is especially popular in the southern part of Spain known as Andalucía, the region where Cordoba, Granada, and Seville are located. Since nearly all of the colonists of the Americas had to pass through Andalucía on their way to the New World, they tended to pick up the regional dishes.”

But such basic history was not enough to frame the Gazpacho recipe for Fritz, so he continued with a lesson in contemporary cultural context and wrote: “When it reaches 44-46~ C in ... Andalucía ... in July, the population literally lives on gazpacho. For 12-14 hours a day it is just too hot to eat, much less chew or cook.” And so he continued, “Between noon and 6 PM you retreat to the privacy of your home, ... lie on the cool floors to read or nap, take cold showers or baths, and sip gazpacho straight from the frig to keep up your strength. Maybe around midnight, you'll quick fry a chop or fish and eat cold potato salad for ‘cena,’ then go out for a constitutional stroll. But thank God you had gazpacho for lunch and tea time. Out in the parks and sidewalks of the city you'll find most of your neighbors at 1 or 2 AM doing the same thing.”

Then, returning to the main point of the entry he concludes, “By the way, we've never had the same gazpacho twice, each one is slightly different. Don't bother to try for consistency, just enjoy each for its uniqueness. One might be a little garlicky, another thinner, or more peppery. They are all incredibly nutritious and refreshing.” The wonderful recipe follows but you will have to ask Anne or Fritz for a copy.

This is the Fritz Schwaller we know: charming, thorough, wise, sensitive, accurate; aware of his surroundings, understanding of culture and context, and dedicated to providing the right answers to the right questions within the right framework.

He is a scholar of international renown, he is an academic leader of proven vision and effectiveness, he is a person of demonstrated integrity and wisdom, and he is, now, your President.

John V. Lombardi  
Chancellor  
University of Massachusetts Amherst  
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