



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

November 9, 2011

The Big Questions (Part II): Last week I posed few questions that I felt were important enough for our University community to start thinking about as we search for a new president, and did I get an earful! I am trying to read the many detailed and conflicting answers I have received so far. As I suspected, there is no shortage of opinions at UNM. I am working on a more efficient framework to better engage the faculty, staff, and students, but as a complementary effort, we will kick off our public discussions with a lecture and open forum by Dr. Don Michael Randel, the president of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, on January 23, 2012. Dr. Randel is an experienced academic leader having served as the provost of Cornell University and the president of the University of Chicago.

The Power of the Network: In an earlier message, I have discussed how better solutions to some problems emerge when you engage a diverse network of collaborators. One UNM colleague called my attention to a recent book by Michael Nielsen titled, "Reinventing Discovery: The New Era of Networked Science." Reading the book, I came across two interesting examples of successful collaborations: The polymath project and the Kasparov versus the World chess match. The second of these examples in particular, illustrate how the collective capabilities of a network of collaborators may surpass those of a grand master.

Why Do We Have A Brain? According to the neuroscientist Daniel Wolpert (http://www.ted.com/talks/daniel_wolpert_the_real_reason_for_brains.html), we have a brain so that we can control our movement. In order to support his thesis, Wolpert gives the example of tunicates more commonly known as sea squirts or sea pork. According to Wikipedia, "The larval form of a tunicate ends when it finds a suitable rock to affix to and cements itself in place. The larval form is not capable of feeding, though it may have a digestive system, and is only a dispersal mechanism. Many physical changes occur to the tunicate's body, one of the most interesting being the digestion of the cerebral ganglion, which controls movement and is the equivalent of the human brain. From this comes the common saying that the sea squirt 'eats its own brain.'" Once the sea squirts stops moving, it no longer needs a brain! (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tunicate>)

Very Short Introductions: A few years ago, I came across a series of books published by Oxford University Press titled, "Very Short Introduction: Stimulating Ways into New Subjects." I liked the concept of the series very much, and more so, I liked the fact that the books were VERY short. One of my favorites so far, is the one titled, "Nothing: A Very Short Introduction by Frank Close." The series now covers almost every topic of interest and has become my to-go-to when Wikipedia just won't do.

A PDF version of this communiqué is available at: <http://provost.unm.edu/communique/index.html>.

Your feedback and input is welcome at: provost@unm.edu.

Sincerely,

Chaouki Abdallah , Interim Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs