



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

October 22, 2014

Prediction is difficult, especially if it's about the future.

— Neils Bohr

Retrospect: Looking back at the accuracy of earlier predictions, and the interpretation of current events they were based on, can be a beneficial way to temper expectations for our own foresight. Looking back, for instance, at [the descriptions](#) of current events made by Peter Drucker in 1967 shows how difficult it was to gauge the impact of developing technology:

“The computers, despite all the excitement they have been generating, are not yet economically important. It’s only now that IBM is shipping them out at a rate of a thousand a month that they’re even beginning to have an impact. But we haven’t begun to use the potential of the computer. So far we are using it only for clerical chores, which are unimportant by definition. To be sure, the computer has created something that had never existed in the history of the world — namely, paying jobs for mathematicians. But that is hardly a major economic contribution, no matter what the graduate dean thinks.”

Another favorite passage states: “As late as the mid-forties, General Motors carefully concealed the fact that one of its three top men, Albert Bradley, had a Ph.D. It was even concealed that he had gone to college, because, quite obviously, a respectable man went to work as a water boy at age 14. A Ph.D. was an embarrassing thing to have around.” The advantage of retrospect makes the differences between our times striking. In 1967, Drucker praised the prospects of the plastics, steel, and automotive industries; cautioned against the enthusiasm surrounding computers; and pointed out the comical absurdity of employing Ph.D.s in the 1940s. It is worth reflecting on the transitory nature of industry when we are encouraged to teach specific and immediately applicable workforce skills rather than the transferable knowledge and skills to which we are committed. While it is easy to have fun with dated descriptions, it is equally easy to appreciate Drucker’s assertion that “knowledge is king,” and that “the computer is a moron. And the stupider the tool, the brighter the master must be.”

Assessment: As many of you are aware, we are currently engaged in the examination and selection of quality metrics for our Results Oriented Management (ROM) budgeting process. I have received multiple comments and proposals for such metrics that have focused on the quality of our programs, faculty, and student learning. We are challenged to also look at how the outside world measures the quality of our learning, namely, to predict how our graduates will fare in the society of tomorrow. Mindful of the previous item in this Communiqué, the task has been even more difficult than choosing internal quality metrics. It turns out, however, that the Organization for Economic Cooperation & Development (OECD) has launched the [Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies](#) (PIAAC) to assess literacy, numeracy, and problem solving in technology-rich environments. “These represent cross-cutting cognitive skills that provide a foundation for effective and successful participation in the social and economic life of advanced economies.”

Nobel Prize Recipient Visiting UNM: John Mather is an American astrophysicist, cosmologist, and Nobel laureate. He won the Nobel Prize in Physics in 2006 for his work on the Cosmic Background Explorer Satellite (COBE), which revolutionized and refined our understanding of the early cosmos. Dr. Mather is a senior astrophysicist at the U.S. space agency's (NASA) Goddard Space Flight Center (GSFC) and is the project scientist for the James Webb Space Telescope (JWST), the next-generation space telescope to be launched within the decade. Dr. Mather will discuss what we've learned from studying the Cosmic Microwave Background, and what breakthroughs might be expected from the James Webb Space Telescope. [This talk](#) is Wednesday, Oct. 22 at 7 p.m. in Keller Hall. It is free and open to the public.

Chaouki Abdallah

Provost & Executive Vice President for Academic Affairs

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