**Termination**

*Holds lessons to people not in this situation*

*Elsewhere, not in crisis, warning signs, it’s the time to take action now and not wait, before they get to crisis, prioritize modernizing NOW.*

*Not a lot of STEM examples.*

Eight and a half months after COVID upended my work as a Geology Professor, I logged into Teams for probably the thousandth time. There was my Dean’s familiar voice. The first words I heard were “I am sorry”. They were followed quickly by “I’ve proposed to terminate” and then that stomach-dropping feeling – like when my dad died after two months alone in lockdown. Twenty years after tenure and the assumption I had a job for life, it hit me. This all might be over.

A couple years ago, the same Dean asked us for help. His budget was in the red because the University changed how it supported each college. A budget based on algorithms and the illusion of neutrality conspired with falling enrollments to increase our college’s deficit. Many of our hands-on science classes were too small and too costly. We needed to attract more majors and to do that, needed to teach more relevant material. We began to change, incrementally. We added classes in Climate, Medical Geology, and Extraterrestrial Life. We brought in 400 new students last year, but few new majors. We didn’t change our major and we weren’t allowed to change our name.

COVID didn’t help. Even though we stayed open and had students on campus, enrollments fell, and the budget issues got worse. I was exhausted, moving a course on-line that I’d taught in the field for two decades took every spare moment and then there was surgery for back pain that flared up while teaching summer classes on-line. A couple days after our students went home for Thanksgiving, Geology faculty got an email. The Dean wants to talk, tomorrow. Don’t worry if you can’t make it. We will fill you in. I was 4 weeks post-surgery and had physical therapy scheduled. I asked if the call could be recorded and when the associate dean said he’d have to ask, I changed my appointment.

The meeting was a blur. We were great faculty but had too few majors. The Dean was proposing to dissolve our Department and end our MS program where we take 5 students each year from 25 to 35 applicants. It didn’t matter that between the five faculty who were not retiring, we ran national labs funded by NSF, published hundreds of papers, and brought in millions of Federal research dollars. The metric was not quality but quantity. This went against everything I had learned about how to succeed and survive in academia. We needed to find another department on campus to take us in. If we didn’t, then, without a department, tenure meant nothing.

After two sleepless nights, I started typing. I tried to imagine a wholly new campus unit focused on Earth. I envisioned a curriculum that would serve students and their employers in 2025 rather than the 1980s curriculum we were offering. I sketched out classes our majors would take but so would majors across campus. Every class focused on Earth’s interaction with people. Students would learn that deformed rocks were a critical control on the flow of groundwater laced with PFOAs and that plate tectonics determined who lived and died in earthquakes and eruptions. Faculty expectations needed to change. Everyone would teach enough students to cover their salary and every lab would bring in enough funding to be self-sufficient.

One by one, I shared this vision with faculty colleagues and administrators who were worried about losing us, our research, our funding, and our teaching skills. Each added valuable ideas and perspectives. Now we have a plan to move forward. Fleshing out the plan gives us a way to work together and focus on the positive in dark times. Perhaps it is a pipe dream to think we can create a new program from a terminated department. We could still lose everything, including our jobs. But I’d argue there is a silver lining to this uncertainty. We created a vision that looks to the future and leaves the past behind, something we could never quite bring ourselves to do before termination. Moving forward took COVID, a crisis, and people willing to take risks and look beyond their academic past.