

Palmer Upheaval

VOTES OF NO CONFIDENCE FORCE REASSESSMENT AND RESIGNATION

Editorial Staff

The malaise that had been building for some time at Palmer College in Davenport, Iowa came to a head August 8, 1997 when the college's International Alumni Association, headed by Frank Bemis, DC, unanimously approved a vote of "no confidence" in the Palmer leadership.

The vote of no confidence was in response to the increasing amount of the budget being spent on managing the university system, as opposed to educational support. The focal point of the concern fell on Larry Patten, the chief operating officer of Palmer University.

Shortly thereafter, similar no confidence resolutions were passed by the Palmer Student Alumni Foundation, and the Palmer Student Council. With these three resolutions came the scrutiny of the local media, the Quad City Times:

A front page article (August 24) questioned spending practices, particularly as they related to Mr. Patten and Chancellor Michael Crawford.

A second front page article (August 26) reported that Palmer College President Virgil Strang stood by Mr. Crawford and Patten, and asked students, faculty and alumni to keep their disputes within "the family."

The next days' edition (August 27) featured a story of Palmer College demanding an apology from the International Alumni Association, and the alumni stating they had no intention of apologizing.

The next article (August 28) announced that the Palmer College Board of Trustees would hold a "closed session" meeting on August 29. At that meeting, the Alumni Association's Council of Past Presidents added their own expressions of no confidence; that same day Larry Patten resigned.

But the front-page articles continued. Friday's headline (August 29) announced Mr. Patten's resignation. After Mr. Patten's resignation, the Palmer faculty announced their vote of dissatisfaction. Saturday's (August 30, 1997) Quad-City headline spoke of the fourth and fifth votes of "no confidence."

It isn't unusual to hear about a certain amount of dissatisfaction on any college campus. Chiropractic students, often under heavy debt and scholastic pressures, tend to be vocal about additional fees, or question the validity of various courses. Chiropractic faculty have also been known to criticize administrators over educational issues. Alumni are also concerned about the direction of their alma mater.

But for one college to have all three constituencies up in arms at the same time is notable, and

suggests significant underlying issues. While the resignation of Larry Patten seems integral to addressing some of the concerns, most suggest that he was more a symptom than the cause.

The Palmer International Alumni Assoc., which started the chain reaction, is as diverse as the chiropractic profession: its members include virtually every point on the philosophical spectrum. Added to these challenges is the mantle of being the "Fountainhead," the college that not too long ago was dominated by B.J. Palmer.

After Mr. Patten's resignation, the principal parties made statements. These comments are presented in chronological order, beginning with Vicki Palmer's on August 28, 1997, just after Larry Patten resigned.

Vicki A. Palmer, Chairwoman, Palmer Board of Trustees:

"What the board desires is for all in the Palmer chiropractic family to work harder to create a more open climate of communication in which all constituencies can feel comfortable, and in which we can be about the business of improving the Palmer educational program. We will direct all Palmer administrators to work diligently to that end.

"The Board commends Mr. Patten for his years of hard work, and expresses its sincere appreciation for his contribution to stabilizing and improving business operations throughout both of the Palmer colleges. There is a long string of accomplishments of the Palmer administration during the last several years, and Mr. Patten shares in the credit for those advances.

"Of course, the Palmer Board continues to evaluate Chancellor Crawford's performance as a Palmer administrator. The Board presently has full confidence in his ability to work with President Strang and other administrators to overcome the damage done by the negative publicity.

"With the resignation of Mr. Patten as Chief Operating Officer, those executives who reported to him will now report directly to Chancellor Crawford. Day-to-day decisions at the Palmer College level will be made under the direction of President Virgil Strang and Dr. Don Betz, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs.

"President Strang is developing a list of issues to be addressed at the college level. He will gather that list with input from alumni, students, faculty and staff in a variety of forums. While this time and energy will be somewhat distracting from the core mission of providing chiropractic education, it is appropriate under the present circumstances. All administrators, deans and department heads will similarly be called on to emphasize clear and open communications. In the weeks ahead, Palmer constituencies can look forward to many hours of discussion as part of the implementation of a college-wide planning process."

Palmer University Chancellor Michael Crawford:

"B.J. Palmer said, 'Conflicts clarify,' and the history of chiropractic proves that disagreements, even turmoil, offer opportunity to clarify understanding, refocus vision

and instill new energy to make progress. Palmer College, and the Palmer Chiropractic University system that supports it, have that opportunity now.

"The Palmer board of trustees created the university system to advance the growth and quality of chiropractic education, research and patient care by developing a shared vision and focused voice for Palmer Chiropractic. Serving both Palmer College of Chiropractic and Palmer College of Chiropractic West, the university system endeavors to eliminate duplication of effort and maximize the use of resources. The board remains fully committed to a system that continues to expand on its successes.

"However, the present conflicts have clarified the need to further define the role of the university system at this point in time. Accreditation, fiscal stability, improved human resources management, effective governmental relations, strong development efforts, supportive information services, more efficient facilities management and joint marketing -- support services that are provided by the university system and vital to both colleges -- are not to be regretted or rolled back.

"While the original intent in the creation of the university system -- to develop a shared vision and a focused voice for Palmer chiropractic -- remains intact, that original purpose was not involvement in the routine operations of the two colleges. While the university system will continue to provide leadership, guidance and support on behalf of the board's long-term objectives, it is primarily the responsibility of the administration at the two colleges to address their mission of continuing to provide the best possible chiropractic education.

"Toward that end, it is the resolve of both the board and the chancellor not only that communications be improved throughout every level of the two colleges but also that communications about university system activities likewise be thorough and straightforward.

"With the foregoing in view, I am today announcing the following:

1. The position of chief operating officer will be eliminated.
2. University system support staff will be reduced.
3. Budgets in all areas will be clarified, and college administrators will have full knowledge and control of their respective college budgets.
4. The office of the chancellor will be moved to a smaller facility."

Dr. Frank Bemis, President, Palmer International Alumni Association:

"The events of the past few weeks in the Palmer administration has begun the process of 'sending a message' about the need for a fresh look at administrative policies and spending priorities; the importance of renewed strong leadership on behalf of students , faculty and staff; and the desire for a renewed spirit of cooperation between the Palmer administration and the PCC International Alumni Association.

"The resignation of Palmer's chief operating officer meets the immediate objective of the alumni association's original resolution. We are satisfied that the road has been sufficiently cleared for Palmer alumni and other constituencies to make progress together.

"Although there are many issues to address and, we believe, changes to be made, we should all now allow time for the Palmer administration to mend what was broken. Recent statements from the board of trustees and Chancellor Michael Crawford, we believe, signal a new commitment on behalf of the best college in chiropractic education. I call upon all constituencies to now allow some breathing room so that new life and energy can invigorate our school."

The student unrest at U.S. colleges and universities from the mid '60s to the early '70s was a protest of military policy in Vietnam. But those protests also empowered students to begin to question how they were being educated; to demand more control and more say in their education.

Students began to perceive that education shouldn't be left solely to the administrators: that colleges and universities could reflect the combined voices of students, faculty, and alumni.

The Palmer administrators seem dedicated to resolving the issues under question. The no confidence vote was acted upon, and the chancellor has outlined the preliminary steps he'll take to address some of the budget and personnel concerns. Many chiropractic organizations are finding they have to redefine themselves in light of the changing health care climate. Venerable Palmer College is finding out there's some redefining in its own future.

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