

Open Letter to Moshe Vardi from Carol Quillen

Dear Moshe,

After a lot of thought, I have chosen to reflect on your public lecture in the form of an open letter. Here I speak only for myself. You and I are more than colleagues who care about Rice. We are friends bound by loss. It seems right that I speak personally to you but, given the subject, in a form open to others. My letter is long. It lacks the fonts, exclamation points, and oratorical flourishes that made your lecture so entertaining. Nonetheless, I hope you will distribute this letter as widely as you have your presentation, and I hope that you and others take the time to read it.

I have tried, throughout this long process, to maintain a tone that reflects the respect and gratitude that I feel for you. Yet when forced to choose between maintaining that tone and speaking the truth, I have chosen the latter. I know as your friend that you would want nothing less.

I. Your Lecture

If everything you said or implied in your lecture were true and unvarnished, I would be worried, not only about the context in which this potential merger is being evaluated but also more generally about the intellectual culture at Rice. Fortunately, key building blocks of your artfully constructed argument are false or misleading. Here I can point out only three.

1. You place your lecture in a context of academic freedom and you imply some administrative attempt to muffle faculty debate (slides 1 through 3).

At no time during this process has anyone at Rice ever questioned the institution's foundational commitment to academic freedom, nor has anyone tried (as if this were possible) to inhibit debate. Furthermore, David, Gene, and others sought faculty engagement on the merger. For example, David requested and received extensive feedback from departments that included, in addition to clear reservations, many ideas for collaborative work, joint hires, new programs, and new undergraduate courses. Departments also identified problems that should be resolved, including calendar issues and access to core facilities. This feedback has been widely shared with BCM and with the Rice Board.

David also set up a website that contained background information, including information on programs at other universities and case studies of opportunities and challenges at other medical schools. This website specifically asks for ideas on issues that you yourself raise, for example (and here I quote from the website): "How can we continue to assure the appropriate balance in both student body and research commitment if a major medical school becomes an integral part of Rice?" So, for you to suggest somehow that anyone has tried to stifle debate is simply false. Some of us (including you) have access to confidential information and we of course are legally and ethically bound not to disclose this, but this in no way interferes with the faculty's right to discuss the merger in any context we wish.

At the end of your lecture (slide 55), you state that the faculty is the university. I agree, but what does this mean? It means that in most cases top administrators start as faculty and

remain members of the faculty. It means that the faculty carry out the university's core mission of creating and disseminating knowledge and that the reputation of any university derives primarily from its faculty's research and teaching. It means that the institution protects the faculty's right and ability to pursue inquiry and to express views as each sees fit, uninhibited by politics or external pressures. It does not mean that we own the university or that we make all of the decisions. In fact, as faculty we make virtually none of the major financial or legal decisions. We also can be wrong. At Rice, for example, many faculty opposed changes that have proven enormously beneficial (adding the Shepherd School and the Baker Institute, for example).

The faculty is also BCM. The BCM faculty includes internationally renowned scientists and clinicians who, in addition to research, remain deeply committed both to teaching and to improving the lives and health of people in Houston and around the world. Many of them are as dedicated to BCM as you and I are to Rice. We at Rice would be fortunate and privileged to work more closely with them.

2. You consistently misrepresent "the administration's" enthusiasm for the potential opportunities a merger might present as a determination to merge no matter what the risks.

"The Administration" is vague and also without independent volition. David Leebron, Gene Levy, Kevin Kirby, Kathy Collins, Jim Coleman, Ron Long, Linda Thrane, Darrow Zeidenstein, Richard Zansitis, and I are the people you mean. Like you (slide 37), we believe there are potential academic benefits. We believe that these obligate us to explore this merger opportunity thoroughly.

As a group, we ask, can we create the academic, financial, legal, clinical and cultural conditions under which it would clearly be in Rice's interest to merge? We are NOT trying to merge at all costs and not one of us would say we should merge no matter what. In fact, and as you know, we share most of the concerns that were enumerated in the FMRC report. As a member of the FMRC, you have seen the conditions we believe we must meet to consider a merger. You have seen a document prepared by us and shared with the Board that describes a range of important faculty concerns that we say need to be addressed. Furthermore, each of us has his or her own concerns (I, for example, care deeply about the humanities and want to insure that those departments thrive.) So, when you quote a single sentence out of context to represent "the administration's" views about this merger (slide 7) and when you imply that we are suffering from "confirmation bias," (slide 59) you knowingly do us a disservice in the interest of promoting your point of view.

3. You misstate facts about Rice's financial situation to induce fear and suspicion.

I have asked several people with degrees in finance and business if there is any context in which the statement, "Rice's investments now have leverage of over 120%. Both ups and downs are amplified!" (slide 24) could be either true or meaningful. Their answer is no. In your lecture, this statement, which is neither true nor meaningful, immediately follows a slide that outlines Rice's financial exigency policy (slide 23), which to my knowledge has never come up in any administrative discussions about the merger or in any other context. This is clever oratory and a pretty good scare tactic ("Only the paranoid survive!" slide 32) but hardly the unvarnished truth.

Because of these and other false or misleading statements, your lecture creates a framework that skews the facts you do present. I found it, as a friend used to say about many a French theorist, dazzling but not enlightening and, in light of the topic, irresponsible.

II. Substantive Agreement and Disagreement

My profound reservations about your preliminary claims, rhetorical strategy, and conclusions aside, we agree on many important facts. BCM is under very considerable financial stress due to operating budget deficits, debt, and the overall financial downturn. To thrive, BCM needs an adult private clinical partner to complement its existing, successful partnerships with Texas Children's Hospital, the DeBakey VA Medical Center, and Ben Taub. Rice faces budget cuts due to the financial downturn, and managing these while also moving forward with pressing ongoing initiatives (like key recruitments and the Physics Building) is a challenge (one that we are meeting). A successful merger between Rice and BCM will require resources well beyond what Rice and BCM will provide. If Rice chooses to merge, we will give up some financial flexibility and we will assume the risks that a medical school brings to a university. For all of these reasons, certain financial and clinical conditions should be met before we agree to merge.

We disagree on whether a merger would enable important research and educational opportunities that do not now exist, and we disagree about whether Rice is equipped to execute a merger so as to take advantage of these opportunities. Your lecture states (slide 42), "There is a large gap between glossy brochures and fancy websites, on one hand, and the reality on the ground, on the other hand. Medical schools tend to be "academic islands", separated from their campus by cultural barriers." This statement overly simplifies a very nuanced landscape. The medical school is decidedly not an island at the University of Chicago, and many universities, including Harvard, Yale, and Pittsburgh, have real joint programs that go beyond glossy brochures and websites. That is not to say that all faculty at these universities express enthusiasm for such programs (were this to happen about any program it would be a miracle). It does mean that there is no two-sentence formulation that accurately characterizes relationships between medical schools and other parts of their universities.

Instead of looking to make generalizations, Jim Coleman, Gene, and I looked at specific programs at other institutions that might prove instructive. We found several and Rice departments have made additional suggestions. Rice departments have also suggested mechanisms (joint appointments and recruiting, joint MD/PhD programs, new courses) through which we might build new collaborations. For this reason, the SAM committees, which in my view you ridicule unfairly, asked how, if we were to merge, we would turn so many potential opportunities into some actual benefits. And let's be honest about who wrote the report. Jim Coleman and Adam Kuspa led an effort that included 32 scholars (deans and faculty members) from Rice and BCM, 5 of whom are also members of the Rice FMRC.

Because I and others have determined that we could, in fact, turn potential opportunities into some significant new collaborations, we are working to see if we can create the financial, cultural, academic, and clinical conditions under which a merger would be in Rice's interest. Until we do this work, no one can reasonably answer the question, "should we merge?"

because no one knows what the terms of such a merger would be. Unless you are prepared to say, we should not merge under any circumstances or, we should merge no matter what, you cannot yet have a defensible definitive view.

We also disagree on how this kind of opportunity should be approached. Your lecture treated the merger as if it were an academic argument in the marketplace of ideas. Documents pertaining to it should be, like scholarly papers, subject to peer review. Counter arguments should be presented with rhetorical flourish, humor, eye-catching fonts and exclamations points. But the merger discussion is not an academic argument in the marketplace of ideas. The merger discussion is a real-world series of complex negotiations involving multiple institutions and multiple individuals. Every statement about it has potential real-world, rippling effects. This is NOT a reason to shut down discussion. But it does mean that when you claim to speak the unvarnished truth you should live up to that promise by scrupulously avoiding innuendo, unsubstantiated ominous suggestions, oversimplification and scare tactics. Your words have consequences for people other than you and beyond Rice.

III. Concluding Thoughts

Since this process began, you have chosen to interweave your public discussions of the merger with ominous, veiled suggestions about David and “the administration.” I am not sure why you have chosen to do this. You could have used your considerable authority and intellect to generate serious discussion about the merits and liabilities of a medical school for Rice. Instead, you contributed to an atmosphere of suspicion, fear, and finger pointing that makes open discussion practically impossible. Over the coming weeks, I would ask, please, that you try honestly to live up to your own stated aims and that you remember that you too could be wrong.

Sincerely,

Carol

Carol Quillen
31 October 2009