
Ad Astra

with Michael Shonrock



Just Call me Michael

Let me tell you about the time, in my early days as president, when I tried to hire a student and was told, “We do not hire students in the president’s office.” This was not policy but rather tradition passed along from one administration to the next. Like the friend-of-a-friend stories this one began, “Once there was this president who hired a student and...”

This led me to wonder about the worst that could happen if we hired a few students. Replies came swift and decisive, “Well, to start, they might call you Michael.” Silently I thought, “That’s my name; we’re off to a good start.”

Campus traditions, academic folklore and student customs make fascinating study. Tall tales can take hold of a campus culture, grow and shape our daily routines. Take for example the arch — an art installation — between King Hall and Beach Hall on the Emporia State campus. Built in 2002, it stands about 8 feet high and 6 feet wide, small by comparison to most arches of note. Made of native limestone, brick and aluminum, the asymmetrical base is filled with a mosaic of found objects. When walking beneath the portal, even the casual passerby will notice bits of tile, glass, metal and other bobbles pressed into the foundation.

The arch is not the least bit ominous. I recently learned, however, that our students believe walking beneath the arch will add at least a year to their planned graduation date. And, indeed, upon close inspection I found a well-worn path around the east side of the arch. Apparently walking around to the west is a bad omen, as well.

Perhaps you are familiar with the many versions of the myth about how long a student must wait in a classroom for a late professor. These stories, collected by noted scholar and folklorist Jan Harold Brunvand, range anywhere from five minutes for a graduate teaching assistant to a full hour for the department chair. This story is passed universally among college students via word of mouth and conveyed as a cam-

pus policy. I’ve been at a number of schools in my career and have found no such rule to exist. Yet ask any new student on our campus and you will be immediately informed of the required wait time for the class in question.

Recently I learned that during the 1990s and into the early part of this century, upperclassmen at Emporia State created great financial fear in the hearts of new freshmen by telling them that each flower picked on campus would result in a \$50 fine. One can only imagine how such a story might originate. It is, of course, not true — but please don’t pick our flowers.

A former student, in my early days as president, tweeted to me about being unable to enroll because of a \$5 parking fine. We nearly lost a student and several thousand dollars in tuition because of a single episode of parking mishap. It doesn’t take much imagination to think how such an incident could grow into a great campus yarn. Fines are a never-ending source of lore on the college campus.

All of this is not to say that these stories don’t serve a purpose. Campus folklore can teach us about respectful and caring environments. It is important to pay our fines, for example.

I find it equally important, however, to create a culture of learning where we can let go of traditions, tales and customs that no longer serve our needs. I want to create an environment where we call each other by first name. Let’s save the pomp and circumstance for graduation.

I answer to a lot of names — Dr. Shonrock, President, Doc Rock, Prez — but like the students who now work in my office, just call me Michael.

Michael Shonrock is the 16th president of Emporia State University, an undying optimist, and self-described futurist. He welcomes reader comments at adastra@emporia.edu
