

**THE NIGHT SOMEONE SLIPPED THE TRUTH
SERUM IN THE PUNCH BOWL AT THE
DEPARTMENT HEAD'S CHRISTMAS PARTY***

Richard M. Felder

Scene. Saturday, December 20, 8:45 p.m. The annual Bilgewater University Materials Engineering Department Christmas party is in full swing at the home of Ray, the department head. This year is unusual because Don (the Provost) and Harry (the Dean of Engineering) have shown up. Also attending are Eddie (the Assistant Dean for Academics) and most of the department faculty. Several people have commented that the punch tastes a bit strange.

Don: "Hello there, young man—I don't believe we've met."

George: "I'm George Murchison, joint in biomedical and materials—just finished my dissertation at Berkeley and started here this fall."

D: "Ah yes—aren't you the one who's been working on truth serum? Fascinating stuff—doubt that it works, of course."

G: "Oh, it works—I've got some graduate students testing sodium pentathol and I could tell you some stories that would..."

D: "Yes yes, I'm sure you could—anyway, I'm pleased you chose to join the Bilgewater family."

G: "Well, it wasn't exactly a choice—I sent out resumes to 65 schools and only got interviews at two and this is the only one that offered me a job."

D: "I know what you mean—I send my resume out whenever a chancellorship comes up anywhere but I never make it past the first interview."

* * *

Eddie: "Hey, Joe. There's something I just learned about E.C. 2000 that I'd like to run by you."

Joe: "E.C. 2000. That's when all the computers crash, right?"

E: "No, that's Y2K—E.C. 2000 is the new system they're going to use for..."

J: "I'm spellbound, Eddie, I truly am, but I need to grab Harry while he's here so I can tap some of his discretionary money for a lab renovation I've been needing for three years—catch me up on it later."

* * *

Harry: "So, Al, how's life going for the assistant professors these days?"

Al: "What life—this semester I taught two new courses and turned out three proposals and Ray and a couple of the other full professors told me that I've got to get more focused if I want to make tenure. Last week my wife mailed me a postcard at work to ask me how I've been and whether I have any spots on my calendar for her next year."

H: "Ha ha—that's cute. So Ray doesn't think you're working hard enough?"

* Chemical Engineering Education, 32(4), 278-279 (Fall 1998).

A: "He has no clue about what I'm doing—I said something about it the other day and he told me to stop whining."

H: "Yeah, that's Ray for you...anyway, I heard you got great teaching evaluations last semester and—oh, hello, Bill. I was just commenting on Al's teaching evaluations. Right up there, they tell me."

B: "Yeah, they're almost obscene. If he keeps doing that, he'll end up with a University Outstanding Teacher Award."

H: "Whoa, don't want that! I'd hate to see you wind up like most of the other untenured professors who won one of those things."

B: "No joke. Take it from me, kid—if you're spending that much time on your teaching, you're not paying enough attention to the things that will get you where you want to go."

A: "But...."

* * *

Irv: "Nice party, Ray—better than your usual snoozers. What made Harry and Don decide to show up?"

Ray: "They know I'm looking to get out of this dump, and if I go my \$12 million scanning electron microscope project goes with me and the overhead on it is keeping them alive."

I: "I thought all the grumbling about you at the last department head review might have had something to do with it—aren't the assistant professors on your case about dumping all those new course preparations on them while you're pushing them to crank out ten proposals a year."

R: "Ah, they're just a bunch of whiners. Besides, who would Harry get to replace me? Jones? Frobish? Daffy Duck? Bring Eddie back from the Dean's office?"

I: "How about me. I could get drunk every day before breakfast and do a better job than you."

R: "Well, you've been practicing the first part for 15 years—the only question in my mind is whether they'd catch you first for mismanaging funds or working your way through the secretary pool."

* * *

Eddie: "Hey, Gene—I was just looking at the E.C. 2000 Web site the other day, and I noticed that it..."

Gene: "Oh yeah—that's where they have those porno pictures of movie stars, isn't it?"

E: "No, it's where they define the criteria for..."

G: "Right...good talking to you, Eddie, but I need to talk to Don about something—later."

* * *

Don: "Larry, my boy. How are things in the polymer business these days?"

Larry: "Couldn't be better—I brought in another \$2 million in industrial support last month with a few well-placed phone calls."

D: "Splendid—I don't know how you keep doing it with the same old results year after year.

L: "Nothing to it. The companies don't do research any more and I just have to mention 'polymers' and 'profits' in the same paragraph and they throw the keys to the safe at me. It's just a crying shame that almost half of it gets skimmed off by that army of bean counters you keep employed."

D (chuckling): "Now now, you know how hard it would be to get anything done on this campus without my hard-working staff—besides, at the Council of Provosts in Maui last month I was the envy of all of those bozos when I told them Bilgewater has a bigger Provost's staff than Harvard.

* * *

Charlie: "So the blond says, 'I don't know—which one was the horse?'"

Joe: "Ha ha ha—that's a good one. You guys hear the one about the blond who went to a hockey game and asked the usher..."

Eddie: "Hi, guys. Did any of you know that E.C. 2000 says..."

J: "E.C. 2000—that's the real estate company I listed our house with three years ago...let me tell you, that agent I had couldn't sell flies to a frog—he was so..."

C: "No, you dummy—E.C. is that hospital program...like the other day this woman was rushed in with a liver infection caused by contaminated tofu that some beef producers were slipping into health food stores, and then the doctor got into an argument with this priest who said..."

E: "No, no—E.C. 2000 is this outcome-based assessment system where you have to..."

C: "Oh yeah, Eddie—I remember now...excuse me, I need to freshen my drink."

J: "Hey, Harry is free—I better grab him before Ray snatches him. Later, Eddie."

* * *

Harry: "How's it going, Ray?"

Ray: "Just peachy. I've got maybe three faculty members pulling their weight and the others are total losers—tiny grants, no release time...I've got endless dumb committee meetings to go to where nothing ever gets done or decided—you run most of those, now that I think of it...I've got undergraduates griping about huge lecture sections and professors who keep canceling classes and advisors they can never find and TA's who can't speak English, and I tell them to grow up and quit whining but they keep coming...and I have to deal with Don siphoning my overhead money to those crybabies in liberal arts...plus, my wife is giving me a hard time about my working nights and weekends, my kid just got her nose and God knows what else pierced, and I've got killer hemorrhoids. Thanks for asking."

H: "Boy, I'd really find all that distressing if it weren't for the fact that I couldn't possibly care less. I've got much more heavy stuff on my plate than you could dream of."

R: "Oh yeah—like what. They won't let you add three new associate deans to the five you already have?"

H: "Well, for starters the trustees are talking about instituting post-tenure review, including for administrators."

A sudden silence envelops the room, and no tenured faculty member says another word for the rest of the evening.