Why I Stepped Out as the Provost & Senior Vice President of Academic Affairs, San Diego State University



October 10, 2022: *Interview with Distinguished Emeritus Professor Chukuka Sam Enwemeka, former Provost and Senior Vice-President for Academic Affairs at San Diego State University, by Emmanuel B. John, Executive Director of the Nigeria Physiotherapy Network, and Professor & Dean, Myers School of Nursing and Health Professions, York College of Pennsylvania, York, PA.*

John: Professor Enwemeka, what a distinguished pleasure and honor to welcome you to this interview with me on behalf of the Nigeria Physiotherapy Network. It looks so surreal that you 'found me', or I 'found you', but somehow we connected in 2001 when I reached out to you for assistance to attend a Master degree program in Canada, but as fate would have it, you recommended and invited me instead to the University of Kansas Medical Center (KUMC) for the PhD in Rehabilitation Science program. What a success story that has been, as the rest is history. I had only a Bachelor's degree in Physiotherapy from Nigeria when I arrived at KUMC in April 2002, today I have acquired additional 4 academic degrees. All these made possible, partly because you were my primary mentor. Hence effective November 1, 2022, I will be Professor and Dean of the School of Nursing and Health Professions at York College of Pennsylvania, York, PA. As a leader, you saw so much potential in me, and you took a chance; how does this make you feel?

Enwemeka: I am elated by your meteoric achievements and jubilant for the small role I played in your professional journey.

John: That is quite interesting. I would like to have an overview of the multitude of people you have mentored to greatness in your academic career. Would you like to talk about this, and mention some of them by name, if possible? Not to put you on the spot, but to get a sense of how you have been a great leader and mentor that many of us revere and took a lot of inspiration from?

Enwemeka: It would be difficult to name the highly successful number of students and scholars that I

mentored over the years without missing some of their names. Were I to list a dozen or two, that would not do justice to the question because several high achievers still would be missing from the short list. Suffice it to say that among them are a few university leaders like you, dozens of professors and aspiring professors, renowned researchers, hospital CEOs, master clinicians–including dentists, physicians, physical therapists, occupational therapists, nurses and other healthcare professionals, and business leaders.

John: As a follow up to that, perhaps, you would like to take us on a brief journey of how you came to this country (USA), completed your M.S. and PhD degrees in a record time, climbed the academic leadership and administrative ladder until your most recent position at San Diego State University as Provost and Senior Vice President.

Enwemeka: I came to the US in August 1981 with a full ride scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. in Physical Therapy. I started my studies at the University of Southern California, Los Angeles, earned my Master of Science degree in early 1983, and immediately joined New York University, New York, for my Ph.D. studies. I completed my studies in October 1984 and received my Ph.D. in February 1985. After a brief period of post-doctoral studies at Howard Rusk Institute of Rehabilitation Medicine, NYU Medical Center, I was hired as Assistant Professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio, San Antonio Texas. From there, I joined the Division of Physical Therapy, Department of Orthopaedics and Rehabilitation at the University of Miami School of Medicine as Associate Professor for a short while before my appointment as Professor and Chairman of Physical Therapy and Rehabilitation Science at the University of Kansas Medical Center, Kansas City, KS, in March 1993. I have to say that I consider myself one of the most fortunate people in this world because looking back today, it took less than twelve years for me to earn two graduate degrees and rise through the academic ranks to become Professor and Academic Chairperson. I served as Chairperson for exactly ten years before I was appointed Professor and Dean of the School of Health Professions at New York Institute of Technology, Old Westbury, NY. I held the position for over six years before joining the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee (UWM), as Professor and Dean of the College of Health Science. I served UWM for five years before I was appointed Provost and Senior Vice President of San Diego State University (SDSU) in June 2014, a position I held for almost four years before returning to the faculty. At present, I wear two "hats." Since I retired from UWM, I am Emeritus UWM Distinguished Professor and Emeritus Dean, and following my decision to join SDSU's Faculty Early Retirement Program in 2021, I became an Emeritus Professor in the College of Health and Human Services. The latter position has enabled me to continue with my research work, which has resulted in scores of peer-reviewed publications and several US and international patents.

John: That is so wonderful and so inspiring. Do you want to give us a summary of your achievements as Provost? It seems that you had a very impactful four years as Provost at SDSU.

Enwemeka: Yes, indeed. As the Chief Academic Officer of SDSU, I led a public research university with more than 35,000 students, over 191 baccalaureate, masters and doctoral degree programs, nearly $130 million in research expenditure, 7,700 faculty and staff, 18 athletic teams and nearly 300,000 alumni. (My direct reports included The Vice President for Research, 10 Deans, four Associate Vice Presidents, and others. Under my leadership as Provost and Senior VP, the university achieved a lot. Here are a few examples:

- I shepherded the establishment of seven Areas of Research Excellence campus wide. This and other initiatives resulted in remarkable annual increases in external grants and research expenditure.
- I spearheaded the university's Student Success effort and led a team, including the VP for Student Affairs and several Associate VPs, to strategically advance a multitude of student success initiatives and foster student retention and graduation rates. This effort, together with improvements in advising and a few other initiatives catapulted students' graduation rate to 75.3%. As a part of this Student Success initiative, I instituted a Provost's Advisor's Forum designed to enhance advising, train advisors, solicit feedback from stakeholders, and refine advising throughout the university. Moreover, I established Provost's Undergraduate Mentoring Program (PUMP), designed to foster faculty and staff

voluntary mentoring of students, particularly those in need of guidance.

- Similarly, I provided supervision and oversight over student enrollment and admission. Each year, we met or exceeded enrollment targets while admitting higher achieving students.
- In collaboration with shared governance groups, I oversaw university-wide faculty hires, faculty diversity, faculty retention and faculty tenure and promotion. In four years, we hired about 240 high achieving faculty with terminal degrees and emerging or clearly defined track records of publications.
- In terms of finance, I oversaw a budget of over $350 million and successfully balanced the budget every year.
- Under my leadership, the Division of Academic Affairs raised more than $150m in philanthropic funds.
- Similarly, I oversaw the development and deployment of the highly successful SDSU STEM degree programs in Tbilisi, Georgia. This $30 million nationally funded program, which was designed to advance science and technology education in the Nation of Georgia, has been graduating top-notch engineers and scientists in the past few years.
- In my time as the university's Senior Vice President, the leadership team advanced SDSU on several fronts. For example, we raised philanthropic funds, and then designed, built, and opened several multi-million dollar facilities, including a new Engineering and Interdisciplinary Science Complex, a multiplex of student dormitories, a university gateway, and other campus beautification projects.

These are just a few examples that I can think of right now.

John: Wow! Wow!! And Wow!!! What an impact, and what a series of achievements in very short period! I wonder what motivated you to accomplish so much? Could you please share some of your driving force with me, and our audience?

Enwemeka: As an immigrant to the US, I have always relied on hard work, setting the bar as high as possible, prompt execution of assigned responsibilities, and achieving at extraordinary levels to advance my career. I believe that this personal commitment to excellence was a major driving force in my successes as Provost and Senior VP.

John: Let me pick on some of the achievements: Graduation rate. Since the pandemic, it has been reported that higher education has lost 1.3 million students who did not return to school to complete their degree programs across the country. Even though you were Provost pre-pandemic, nonetheless, similar strategies can be used to (1) increase graduation rate, and (2) reduce attrition rate, especially for undergraduate education. What are your thoughts?

Enwemeka: You are right about this. Pandemic or no pandemic, the same strategies we used pre-pandemic can be used to keep students engaged academically, particularly at the undergraduate level.

John: Let me come back to your personal achievements as a leader and administrator at San Diego State University. How were you able to continue publishing, and continue to conduct breakthrough research studies, even as Provost? Provosts are very busy, but somehow, you found time to continue as a research scholar. What is the "magic"?

Enwemeka: You are right! The busy schedule of a university Provost and Senior VP does not typically permit one to engage in bench research. For me, the key was to garner research funds from both external and internal sources to support my research personnel. I have been quite fortunate to have strong Research Associates in my Photomedicine Research Lab over the years, as Dean and as Provost and Senior VP. Other important factors that helped me are: (1) Being well organized. (2) Putting in the extra time needed to write grants, publish research papers, and present at major national and international conferences. (3) And more importantly, having strong dedication and passion for research and discovery. My passion for discovery was, indeed, a major motivating factor.

John : Having said and done all these, looking at your four or more decades of giving yourself and life to

academia, let me put you on the spot a little bit, about the way and manner you stepped out of the Provost position. Those of us who know you were very skeptical about the stories making the rounds in the media about why you stepped out as the Provost. The stories raised more questions in our minds, particularly as you did not respond to them. Are you at liberty to share your side of the story? Perhaps, this could put some of the speculations to rest.

Enwemeka: I greatly appreciate the opportunity to set the record straight. As you rightly guessed, the reason insinuated for my departure from the Provost and Senior VP position cannot be farther from the truth. The reports I saw alluded to an email I wrote to a faculty member as the reason that I left the position and returned to the faculty. Indeed, one of the news reports even described the email as “bizarre,” another published a doctored version of the original email deliberately to make it look bad.

It does not take rocket science to figure out that it would be unusual for a Provost and Senior VP to be removed from office just because of one email, as insinuated by the reports. In the course of the day-to-day demands of the job, the Provost writes scores of emails, and in my case, I wrote thousands of emails over four years. Therefore, it would not only be unusual, but unfair to single out one email as a basis for terminating my appointment as Provost and Senior VP, unless of course the email was not just “bizarre” but horrendous, which was not the case here.

Without going into details, your readers should know that, the aggrieved faculty person filed a grievance with the university. At his request the original email in question—not the doctored version that was published—was reviewed within the university totally unbeknownst to me. The grievance was dismissed for lack of merit. Unsatisfied with the outcome of his grievance review, the faculty person stepped up his grievance to the California State University System for another round of review—again unbeknownst to me. The CSU, which oversees each of the 23 universities in the State System, engaged an independent person, a lawyer, to handle the grievance. The independent reviewer found no merit with the grievance. Losing the grievance at the highest level of review within the CSU prompted the embittered faculty person and his associates to resort to the court of public opinion, i.e., the press. Worthy of note is that the two reviews were handled without hearing from me, and even without letting me know that a grievance was filed against me, yet the faculty person lost his case at each level.

The truth is that before the President who hired me left the university, I had expressed a willingness to return to the faculty to pursue my research work, and that request was honored with the understanding that I could do so whenever I wanted to. The agreement was signed one full year before I left the Provost position, and the much-publicized email was written nearly six months later. Had this information been included in the sensational ill-informed press reports, the public would not have been so surprised that I left the position, neither would they have been misled into thinking that I was fired because of one email.

After the President who hired me as Provost left the university, tension on campus was not just high, but at its zenith. At the same time, the university was under the leadership of an Interim President and in the process of having a new President. Under normal circumstances, the incoming President would prefer to choose his/her Provost and Senior VP, consistent with the age-old adage that, *“As the President goes, so goes the Provost.”* These facts were totally missed by the obsessional news reporters. It is noteworthy that two news organizations that did not blunder and slander were the two independent news media within the university. These are *“The Daily Aztec,”* SDSU’s Student Newspaper, and the university-based National Public Radio and TV Station, KPBS. KPBS did not consider my departure from the position newsworthy. The Daily Aztec reported it without reference to the purported email. One can only assume that they knew better. I hope this is sufficient to dispel the erroneous impression left by the unfortunate news reports without going into further details.

John: Thank you, Professor Chukuka Samuel Enwemeka, for giving me the privilege to interview you for this piece.

Enwemeka: You are welcome.

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