



White House Fellows Foundation Association

“The White House Fellowship experience and thinking like a university president before your time.”

By Francisco J. Leija

Dr. Martin Jischke is the former President of Purdue University, the former President of Iowa State University, the former Chancellor of the University of Missouri, and Interim President of the University of Oklahoma. He was a White House Fellow in the class of 1975-76. Prior to his fellowship, he was a faculty member at the University of Oklahoma.



In 1974, Jischke realized that in order to achieve his goal of becoming a university president, he needed to grow as a leader. He had several sabbatical opportunities including a NATO fellowship to study at Imperial College, Cambridge University, or Harvard University. While contemplating which of these three universities to attend for his fellowship, the Dean of Engineering at University of Oklahoma suggested Jischke consider the White House Fellowship. At a previous university, the dean had worked with a former White House Fellow and had been extremely impressed by his senior executive leadership skills at such a young point in his career.

Jischke learned more about the WHF program and was intrigued by the opportunity and the essay requirement. During this time, there was only one essay, as opposed to the six essays of today. The essay in 1975 was only 500 words, solely focused on why an applicant wanted to become a White House Fellow. Jischke cycled through 20 versions of his essay before his submission. Through that process, he concluded that the WHF program was not just an opportunity to learn more about the federal government, it was a real chance to give back to America. Jischke was the first person in his family to attend college, the first to attain a Ph.D., and the first to be a university educator. Jischke realized that these achievements were made possible through government-funded scholarships, and he saw the WHF as both a growth opportunity and a way to repay his country for this support. Given the time period, you can appreciate how and why serving America meant so much. Over the previous 35 years, America had been in some form of war almost perpetually. Even in 1975, the country still found itself in the middle of the Cold War. Little did Jischke know at the time that he would go on to be selected as a WHF in a class of 14 members. His class included professionals from various sectors of American industry and one member of each major military service. Each military member would go on to become a general or admiral, with the exception of the Marine Corps member, who would go on to be the president of the New York Stock Exchange. One of these generals would become the Supreme Allied Commander of Europe. However, Jischke did not know that yet. What he



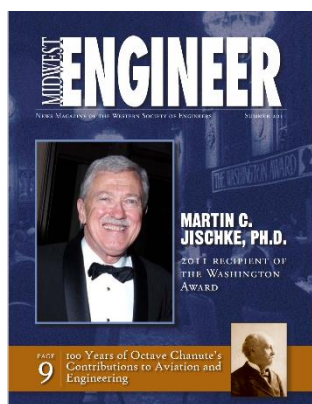
knew at the time was that he was intrigued at the possibility of becoming a WHF, that the WHF program could help him grow as a leader, and that the WHF program could be his form of public service back to a nation that had provided so much opportunity to him.

The next chapter of his journey would be the WHF competition itself. The WHF selection process consisted of a written application, selection as a Regional Finalist, selection as a National Finalist, and eventual selection to the class of White House Fellows. “There were roughly 2,300 applicants the year I applied...roughly 100 regional finalists, and I was interviewed in Dallas, Texas. The Chairman of my regional panel was Edward Marcus of the famous Neiman Marcus stores. I remember the panel’s questions were broad and diverse. However, what I remember most of those interviews was one of the regional finalists who was a very sharp naval officer who attended the interview in his white dress uniform. He was very impressive. But I remember observing him in action as he destroyed his candidacy by answering the questions directed at him and then interrupting other candidates as they answered their questions. What that experience taught me was that I was in a very competitive environment, in an extremely high-pressure situation. It taught me that how I behaved or responded to this pressure was as important as the answers I gave. When I was selected as one of 30 National Finalists, the pressure only got higher. You could feel everyone’s anxiety grow as we read each other’s biographies. These were very competitive people in an extremely competitive contest. At nationals, one of the judges was William Scranton, the Governor of Pennsylvania. He had a distinctive way of interviewing candidates. In the middle of your interview, he would call in the next candidate to sit-in during your interview. Answering questions in front of one of your competitors was memorable for me. Not only were there formal interviews, but there were also cocktail parties to observe you interacting socially with the Commissioners and other competitors. At the end of the National competition, we each received a small envelope informing you if you had or had not been selected as a White House Fellow. The next day we were with President Ford, in the Rose Garden, being introduced to the national press. The entire interview process was a unique and remarkable experience for me.”

His year as a WHF brought on many more such unusual and remarkable experiences. Jischke was especially impressed with what he called the “enrichment” part of his experience. The tremendous talent of so many of the people he met during the various educational opportunities provided by the program left a deep impression on Jischke. The WHF year consisted of a work “placement” directly with a major cabinet level officer, an educational program consisting of bi-weekly luncheons with senior leaders from all walks of life, and several national and international policy trips. “One of the key lessons I took away from the educational program of the fellowship was how much talent there was across America.” Being able to step out of his academic circles to meet and share learning experiences with talented professionals from the military, business world, legal world, medical world, and others, was truly enriching for Jischke. To him, an amazing part of the Fellowship was the sheer number of extraordinary leaders he was able to meet from almost every major sector of American life in only one year. He also learned that the communication and interpersonal skills of leaders are as important as their knowledge, if they are to rise to the very top of their professions. “You began to get the sense of what lies behind people who become significant leaders. It was quite enlightening to see the range and diversity of both skills and talent, but also to see the skills that they had in common, this ability to integrate ideas and information to create a larger picture or vision of what they are

trying to accomplish.” He was even inspired to take a public speaking course after the fellowship to aide in his journey to the top of the university education world. He believed that he would have missed this lesson in how to relate to people outside of the university, had he remained within academia and never had exposure to such a diverse set of professionals and senior leaders. “I frankly don’t know how I could have gained such insights without the fellowship. I will never forget meeting Senator Ted Kennedy and realizing that he was like a professional athlete who brought this amazing energy to his discussion. When he answered a question, he brought intensity and an amazing presence to the room.”

His fellowship placement at the Department of Transportation, under William T. Coleman, also left a deep impact on Jischke. During his placement, Jischke worked on four projects: Creating regulations for motor vehicle safety across America; responding to sensitive policy requests, like the state of Illinois request to build an airport which would circumvent the St. Louis Airport during an election year; international policy on supersonic landing rights for the French/British Concorde; and pioneering seatbelt regulations. He learned a great deal through his WHF placement at DoT, yet the theme which kept coming back to him was of



critical thinking, relevance, and perspective from the top office of an institution. “An important idea emerged from one of my exchanges at the department with Judith Conner, Assistant Secretary for the Environment at the department. She asked my thoughts on how we should respond to the Secretary, on the issue of Concorde supersonic landing rights. Being an engineer, I began to give technical suggestions to her for the response. She had a very different opinion all together. She believed that we should not focus on the technical answers, but on giving the Secretary options so that he can ultimately make a choice on how to respond to President Ford which fit what the Secretary was trying to accomplish overall

for the department. It was a completely different approach to solving the supersonic landing rights issue and to me, it was an eye-opening experience. The ability to think of problems from the perspective of the Secretary, instead of the perspective of Martin Jischke, the Engineer, was what turned the light on for me. Being able to understand the issues from the perspective of others, in my view is a critical skill for senior leadership. It does not mean you don’t have your own views, but if you can’t appreciate the perspective of others, you will be a lesser leader.”

Within a decade after his WHF year, Jischke would rise to lead his first university. Many of the lessons for running large organizations came from his WHF year. “We had a leader at DoT, who was a seasoned civil servant, the Assistant Secretary for Administration named Bill Heffelfinger. He was one of the most gifted administrators I had ever watched. He knew where everything was in the Department. He could make things happen! When the Secretary needed something done, he would say to him: Bill, I’d like to get this done, but I don’t know how to do it? Heffelfinger would somehow figure out a way to do it. He was the oil that kept the wheels of government going at the Department of Transportation. An amazingly able guy, I think people like him are quite invisible to the average citizen. Even the more informed citizen doesn’t have much sense of the civil servants who work in these bureaucracies, these large government organizations. But Heffelfinger and others that I had a chance to work with, gave me a kind of reassurance that whether they are Republicans or

Democrats is less important than if they were really, really capable of carrying out their functions in these organizations.”

Jischke’s ability to gain this backstage pass to experiences and insights which resulted in conclusions such as the value of the “invisible executives” of large organizations, or the power of effectively communicating with intensity, or of learning to appreciate the perspective of a decision from another’s point of view, is what proved to be critical in ascending to the top of his profession. The timing of these experiences, lessons, and conclusions in the beginning or middle of a career, are critical for growth when you aspire to get to the very top of your profession. When pressed on how the WHF helped him on daily duties as president of a university, Jischke provided a long list of additional experiences which he believed were unique to the fellowship. “I have used one of the lessons which Donald Rumsfeld shared with the White House Fellows that year, throughout my entire life, to help me manage media engagements. When we asked him how he dealt with the media, Rumsfeld replied, ‘It’s simple. There are only three answers to a question: I know the answer and I will tell you that answer; a second answer is I do not know the answer to the question and therefore I cannot give you an answer; and a third is I know the answer to the question but I am not going to tell you.’ His point was that you can control the interaction with the press, and you are not obligated to answer every question. And don’t be so foolish as to make up an answer if you don’t know the answer. It is fabulous advice for anyone who interacts with the press. And as president of a major university, you interact with the press a lot. I’ve had several fellowships, but I can’t imagine another fellowship that comes close to the White House Fellowship in providing exposure to leadership across a broad range of professional sectors including, in particular, our national government.” He went on to conclude that not only was the WHF program invaluable to his success as university president, but that the people and classmates he was able to meet that year impacted him in such a way that it took the rest of his life to unpack the lessons and meanings of that one year. He closed by providing a question to potential future WHF candidates: “What are you going to do next and how can you use the White House Fellowship experience to do it better for our nation?”

