

The Carver School of Business at Alderton University

A Short Story
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The email arrived on a Tuesday in February 2029, as most consequential things at Alderton did, buried between a reminder about the faculty parking lottery and a message from Facilities about the third-floor men's room.

Dean's Office — Carver School of Business Re: AI Curriculum Working Group — Inaugural Meeting Please join us Thursday, 12:00–1:30, Hartwick Conference Room. Lunch will be provided.

Dean Sandra Okafor had appointed the working group in October. It had taken four months to schedule the first meeting because Professor Delacroix in Finance had a teaching conflict on Tuesdays and Thursdays, Professor Yuen in Strategy was on sabbatical until January and felt it was inappropriate to join a committee before she had fully re-engaged with campus life, and Professor Moretti in Accounting, the only member who had actually used an AI tool in his classroom (a fact Sandra had specifically cited in her announcement), had spent three weeks replying to the calendar invitation with questions about whether attendance was mandatory.

It was the third working group Sandra had convened since joining Alderton as Dean in 2026. The first had examined the MBA curriculum's "relevance architecture," a phrase she had borrowed from a conference in Phoenix and which had meant, in practice, that they added a half-credit module on data visualization and renamed two existing courses. The second had explored "pedagogical innovation pathways," which had produced a 12-page report recommending that faculty be encouraged to experiment and that a small grant fund be established for course redesign. The grant fund had been established. Two proposals had been submitted. One had been funded. The course had been redesigned. Three students had enrolled in it.

She had learned, in three years at Alderton, that the working group was the institution's immune response. Not to problems. To urgency.

Thursday came. Six of the nine members appeared. Professor Delacroix sent his apologies, a rescheduled doctoral defense. Professor Yuen had a visitor from Hong Kong. Professor Chen from Operations simply did not come and did not explain why; this was consistent with his approach to most optional activities, and Sandra had stopped finding it remarkable.

She had asked the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs, a compact and permanently tired man named Gary Siebert, to run the meeting. Gary had prepared slides.

The first slide said: "The AI Moment: Challenges and Opportunities for Business Education."

The second slide said: "What Are Leading Schools Doing?"

"I want to start," Gary said, "by acknowledging that there's a lot of noise out there. A lot of pronouncements. We want to be thoughtful. We don't want to chase trends." He said this in the tone of a man who had been saying it for three years and found it increasingly difficult to

remember what the alternative to chasing trends was supposed to be. Professor Moretti, who had spent 40 minutes the previous week watching a student present a DCF analysis he could not explain and could not have built and had received a B-plus on, looked at his phone.

The slides continued. Stanford was doing something. Wharton was doing something. The something was described in language that made it sound significant and was, Gary noted, still quite early-stage. "What I'd like us to think about," Sandra said, from the end of the table, "is what's right for Carver. Our students. Our context." She believed this when she said it. That was perhaps the most important thing to understand about Sandra Okafor. She consistently believed the things she said at the moment she said them.

From the back of the room, Professor Alan Whitfield — tenured since 2003, author of a textbook in its fourth edition that 11 schools still required, and teacher of Introduction to Management for 21 consecutive years — raised a careful hand. "I think it's worth noting," Alan said, "that our students are actually doing quite well. Placement is strong. The firms that hire us are satisfied." He paused. "I'm not saying there's nothing to discuss. I'm just saying we should be careful about solving problems we don't have."

Sandra smiled at him. Gary clicked to the next slide, which showed a bar chart of MBA enrollment trends. The bar for Carver was not the shortest bar on the chart. It was the bar whose slope, extended three years forward, arrived somewhere nobody in the room wanted to discuss. "We're down 11 percent over four years," Gary said, in the voice of a man reporting the weather in a city he didn't live in. "Which is consistent with national trends." "National trends among schools not in the top 20," Moretti said, without looking up from his phone. No one responded. This was also consistent with a pattern.

The working group agreed to meet again in six weeks. A subcommittee would be formed to examine assessment practices. Gary would reach out to a consultant who had helped three other schools in the conference develop AI policy frameworks. The cost would be in the range of \$40,000, pending budget review.

Lunch was sandwiches. The turkey was dry. Most people left by 1:15 p.m.

That Thursday, Carver received 17 applications for the following fall's MBA program. It was, Gary would note in a spreadsheet Sandra had not yet asked for, a number consistent with recent trends, which was the kind of observation that was technically accurate and practically useless in the way that many technically accurate observations were.

In the same 24 hours, a former tech executive named Priya Venkatraman, sitting in a rented office in Redwood City, filed the incorporation papers for something she was calling "The Meridian Institute." She had no faculty. She had no accreditation. She had a list of 43 companies that had told her, in so many words, that they would consider her graduates if she could prove, in a way they could actually test, that her graduates could think. She was working on the proof.

Sandra did not know this. She was preparing remarks for the Advisory Board meeting in May, which she had been told by three separate people was an important opportunity to demonstrate momentum. She intended to demonstrate momentum. She was also, in the part of her mind she had learned to keep separate from the part that prepared remarks, beginning to understand that momentum and direction were not the same thing.

The Carver School of Business Advisory Board met twice a year, in May and November, and had done so for 41 years. Its 22 members were organized, in the unspoken taxonomy that governed all such bodies, into three categories: the Useful, meaning those who gave money or would give money or knew people who gave money; the Legitimate, meaning those whose titles — Managing Director, Chief Financial Officer, Senior Partner — gave the proceedings an air of professional relevance; and the Loyal, meaning Carver alumni who had achieved enough to be invited and were grateful enough to keep coming back, and who could be relied upon to say, at some point in the afternoon, that their two years at Alderton had been among the most formative of their lives.

The May 2029 meeting had 17 members present, which was good for May, when the Useful tended to have conflicts on the coasts. Sandra had prepared remarks on enrollment trends. She used the phrase "enrollment optimization opportunity" and had spent 40 minutes the previous evening deciding whether it was too much, concluding it was not. Gary had prepared a presentation on the new data analytics concentration that was scheduled to launch in the fall and which, he noted, positioned Carver well relative to peer institutions.

Everything was proceeding in the way that Advisory Board meetings at Carver had always proceeded — the catered lunch, the genuine warmth, and the polite divergence between what was said and what was meant — until James Whitmore spoke. Whitmore was Legitimate-trending-Useful: a 23-year veteran of a mid-size private equity firm in Chicago, a Carver MBA from 1998 who had stayed connected out of something that appeared to be actual affection for the institution rather than strategic calculation. He had the quality, rare in Advisory Board members, of saying plainly what he thought. It had occasionally made Sandra uncomfortable, and she had never quite decided whether to consider this a problem or not.

"I want to ask something," James said, during the open discussion portion of the afternoon, "and I want to ask it in a spirit of genuine curiosity rather than criticism." He paused in the way of someone who had learned, over decades, that this framing did not entirely prevent what followed from landing as criticism. "When we hire a Carver MBA, and we do, we've hired six in the past four years, we've started doing something we didn't used to do."

He looked around the table.

"We've started testing them. Specifically. Before they get anywhere near a client. We sit them down with an analysis, not a trick, a real one, something we'd actually use, and we ask them to walk us through it. To explain the assumptions. To tell us what could be wrong." He picked up his water glass and put it down again. "Three of the last six couldn't do it. Not partially. Not with some gaps. They looked at something they had probably built themselves, or something very like it, and they could not tell us if it was right."

The room was quiet in the way of rooms where everyone has a thought they are deciding whether to express. "That's useful feedback, James," Sandra said. "That's exactly the kind of..."

"I'm not finished," he said, without particular edge. "I'm telling you this because the other three were extraordinary. Better than anything we'd hired in years. So, it's not a Carver problem, exactly. It's a variance problem. And what I find myself wondering, as I sit here, is whether your

curriculum can tell the difference. Whether your grades can tell the difference." He looked at Sandra. "Because ours can."

The drinks reception afterward was on the terrace, which in May was genuinely pleasant, and Sandra stood near the railing with a glass of white wine she was not drinking and watched Richard Hollenbeck work the room. Richard — the James F. Kellerman Professor of Finance, the chair endowed by a Carver alum whose family's manufacturing business Whitmore's own firm had taken to market a decade earlier, a fact Richard had noted once and never mentioned again — was good at Advisory Board receptions in the specific way of someone who attended them as an anthropological exercise. He listened attentively. He asked questions that were interesting enough to be flattering. He remembered the names of children. He had, Sandra knew, approximately no use for the opinions of the people he was charming, but he was charming them anyway because he understood that institutional relationships required maintenance regardless of their epistemic value.

He appeared at her elbow 20 minutes later.

"Whitmore," he said.

"Yes."

"He's not wrong about the variance." He sipped his drink. "He's wrong about what it means."

This was the thing about Richard that Sandra had spent three years learning to work with. He was usually willing to tell you exactly what he thought, and what he thought was usually precise, and what it was precisely was usually inconvenient. "Tell me," she said. Richard replied, "He's describing a selection problem, not a curriculum problem. Some students engage with the material, and some don't, and the ones who don't have always existed and have always gotten through. AI has made their output look better, which means our grades look less useful. That's real." He paused. "But the answer isn't to redesign the curriculum. The answer is to redesign the assessment. Which is a much smaller problem."

"Gary's working group—" Sandra began. Richard said, with the patience of a man who had watched 17 working groups, "will produce a report. The report will recommend three things. One of them will be implemented. It will not be the important one." He looked out at the terrace. "What Whitmore is actually asking for is an oral examination. The Oxford tutorial model. Fine. We do more oral examinations. We don't need a working group for that. We need three faculty members willing to spend an extra four hours a semester per student." He turned back to her. "And the reason we don't have them isn't structural. It's that nobody's asked them directly and made it clear it matters."

Sandra looked at him. "And you'd be one of the three?" Richard was quiet for a moment. "I'm already doing it," he said. "Informally. I've been doing it for 11 years." He finished his drink. "The students who come to my office hours and can't explain their models get a conversation they don't forget. The ones who never come get the grade the model deserves." He set down his glass. "The system works fine for the students who engage with it. The question you're not asking, Sandra, is whether a school ranked 29th in the country can afford to be only fine."

He said it without cruelty and without particular emphasis, the way you state a geometric proof. She looked at her wine glass. "The question I'm asking," she said, carefully, "is whether Carver can change fast enough." "No," Richard said. "That's not the question either." He picked up a passing crab cake, examined it briefly, and put it back on the tray. "The question is whether the thing that would have to change is the thing we're actually willing to change. And I think we both know the answer." He nodded at the terrace, at the Useful and the Legitimate and the Loyal, at Gary explaining the data analytics concentration to a man in a Patagonia vest who was nodding with the specific vacancy of someone thinking about something else. "Which is why I'll keep doing what I'm doing. Informally. For the students who find their way to the office." He excused himself to speak to an alumnus from 2004 whose daughter was applying to Carver in the fall and who needed, Richard had gathered, some light reassurance that the investment was sound.

Sandra stood at the railing a while longer. Below her, across the quad, the Carver building — Herbert T. Carver Hall, named for a plastics manufacturer who had died in 1987 — caught the late afternoon light in the particular way of buildings that were built to impress and were now simply large. In her office on the fourth floor, her inbox contained 47 unread messages, 11 of which were flagged. One of them was from the Provost, sent at 6:47 that morning, with a subject line that said: Enrollment projections, when you have a moment. She had not opened it.

Sandra finished her wine and walked to her car. She had been offered a reserved space in the faculty lot when she took the job and had declined it, which at the time had seemed like the right signal to send. She drove home from the Advisory Board reception with the windows down, which she did not usually do, and which she could not have explained if asked why. Whitmore's question had the particular quality of questions that continue after the conversation ends, not because they are unanswerable but because the answer is inconvenient and the person who asked has made it temporarily impossible to pretend otherwise.

She had known about the variance problem for at least two years. She had known it in the way that deans know things that are not yet formally documented: in the placement numbers that were strong overall and uneven in ways nobody was measuring, in the recruiting visits where the firms were polite and the questions they asked were slightly different from the questions they used to ask. What she had not done — what she found herself thinking about on the drive home, and again the following morning, and again the week after that — was to say it out loud in a room where it could not be absorbed into a subcommittee. That was what the October faculty meeting was for. She had spent six weeks preparing for it. She was not certain it would be enough.

The Faculty Meeting of October 14, 2029 was called for 3:00 p.m. in the Hargrove Room and began at 3:11 because the projector required the attention of a man named Phil from IT who was also, it emerged, required simultaneously in the Economics department, and whose arrival was preceded by a nine-minute interval during which 17 tenured and tenure-track faculty members of the Carver School sat with their laptops open in the specific posture of people who are working and would like that to be noted.

Sandra had circulated the agenda four days earlier. It contained six items. Item Four was listed as: "Curriculum and Assessment: Discussion of Working Group Preliminary Findings and

Proposed Pilot Initiative." She had spent considerable time on the word "pilot." It implied modesty. It implied reversibility. It implied that nothing was being decided, only tried, and that trying was not the same as changing, and that changing was not what anyone was proposing, exactly.

The first three items took 40 minutes. Item One was the approval of minutes from the previous meeting, which passed after Professor Nguyen noted a transcription error on page four that had rendered her position on the library budget as supportive when it had in fact been conditional. Item Two was a facilities update from Gary, who reported that the third-floor renovation was on schedule for completion in March, which was what he had reported in May. Item Three was a brief presentation from the Director of Admissions, a careful young woman named Theresa Park, who reported that early applications for the incoming class were "tracking closely with last year," which everyone in the room understood to mean they were not tracking closely with the year before last, or the year before that.

Richard Hollenbeck, in his customary seat at the left side of the table, near enough to the door to suggest optionality, far enough from Sandra to suggest independence, was reading something on his laptop that was not the agenda. He had the quality, something Sandra had noticed over the past three years, of being simultaneously the most present and most absent person in any meeting; he missed nothing yet appeared to be elsewhere. On his phone, unread since the facilities update, was an email from a former student — now a decade out, running something significant — who had heard about an interesting project in business education and wondered if Richard might be willing to have a conversation about it sometime. Early stages, the email said, but genuinely intriguing. He had read it once before Item Two began and put his phone away. He would think about it tonight.

Item Four arrived.

Gary presented the working group's preliminary findings in 11 slides. The findings were: AI had changed the relationship between student output and student learning; leading institutions were responding with a range of interventions; and Carver had an opportunity to demonstrate leadership in this space. The word "opportunity" appeared six times. The phrase "student learning outcomes" appeared nine times. The word "threat" did not appear.

The proposed pilot was modest by design. One course per department (volunteer instructors only) would add a single oral assessment component in the spring semester. Students would be asked to discuss their work with the instructor for 15 minutes following submission of one major assignment. The results would be evaluated by the working group over the summer. No grades would change. No syllabi would be formally altered. The pilot would inform future discussion.

Gary finished. Sandra opened the floor. Professor Moretti said he thought it was worth trying. He had the tone of a man who had watched a student fail to explain a materiality judgment for the fourth time in a month and had arrived at a state beyond frustration, which was a kind of bleak clarity. Professor Adeyemi from Marketing said she was supportive in principle but wanted to understand the workload implications, specifically whether the 15 minutes per student would be considered load-bearing for the purposes of the spring teaching calculation. Gary said that was a good question and he would look into it. Professor Chen from Operations said nothing. This was consistent.

Professor Alan Whitfield, with his Introduction to Management textbook in its fourth edition, said, in the measured tone of someone who had prepared what he was about to say, that he wanted to express some concern about the framing. "I'm not opposed to oral assessment," he said. "I use it myself, informally. What concerns me is the signal we send if we formalize it as a response to AI. We're essentially telling students that we don't trust them. And I think that changes the relationship in ways that are," he paused for the right word, "pedagogically counterproductive." Sandra said she understood the concern and thought the pilot was specifically designed to be low-stakes and trust-building rather than punitive. Alan nodded in a way that indicated he had heard this.

Then Richard Hollenbeck closed his laptop. The room, in some collective and unspoken way, adjusted. "I want to make sure I understand the proposal," Richard said. He had the quality, when he chose to engage, of someone turning a spotlight rather than a flashlight; the beam was narrow and very bright. "We're asking volunteer faculty to add 15 minutes per student to one assignment in one course, with no grade implications, no formal curriculum change, and no binding recommendations from the results." Gary said that was correct. "And the goal is to assess whether students can explain their own work." Gary said that was correct as well.

Richard nodded slowly. "I'll be direct," he said. "The pilot as designed will tell us what we already know, which is that some students can and some can't, and that the ones who can't are distributed randomly enough across our grade distribution to constitute a validity problem we've had for years and chosen not to measure because measuring it would require us to do something about it." He paused. "The question isn't whether to pilot oral assessment. It's whether we're willing to make it consequential. And I think the reason it's not consequential in this proposal is that making it consequential would require changes to how we grade, which would require changes to how we teach, which is a different conversation from the one Gary has prepared slides for."

The room was quiet.

"So, I'd support the pilot," Richard continued, "with one amendment. The working group's summer evaluation should include a specific recommendation on whether oral assessment should become a graded component of at least one required course. Not another pilot. A recommendation, up or down, that comes back to this body in the fall for a vote." Sandra felt, briefly, that this was good. That Richard had just done something useful.

Then Professor Whitfield said: "I'd like to propose a friendly amendment to the amendment." What Alan Whitfield understood, from 26 years on faculties and 11 years on curriculum committees, was that the most effective way to stop a motion was not to oppose it but to improve it. Opposition created martyrs. Improvement created process. "I think Richard's instinct is right," Alan said warmly, "that we should be working toward a concrete recommendation. But I want to make sure we get it right. The pilot data from one semester in a handful of volunteer courses may not give us enough to make a school-wide grading recommendation. What I'd propose is that the working group be asked to return in the fall not with a binary recommendation but with a range of options, including the option Richard describes, but also including other models, and that we take a proper vote on the full range at that point." He looked around the table. "I think that gives us the rigor the decision deserves."

There was a murmur that was not disagreement. Gary said that seemed like a reasonable approach. Professor Adeyemi said she appreciated the thoughtfulness. Richard looked at Alan for a moment with the expression of a man watching a card trick he had seen before and still found technically impressive. "I'll accept that," he said. "With the understanding that 'a range of options' includes a concrete proposal for consequential assessment, not just a menu of further studies." Alan said of course, naturally, that went without saying.

The motion passed 14 to 0, with three abstentions, one of which was Professor Chen, whose abstention may have reflected a principled position on the pilot or may have reflected the fact that he had been on a call for the previous 20 minutes and had not followed the amendment. The meeting ended at 5:23 p.m.

In the parking lot afterward, Richard walked to his car alone. He had parked, as he always did, at the far end of the lot — a habit from years ago that he had never examined and never changed. The October light was going fast. Across the quad the Carver building caught it and held it for a moment the way old institutional brick does, warmly and without particular feeling.

He sat in his car for a while without starting it. Richard had attempted this three times before — not this meeting but this specific maneuver, the forcing amendment, the attempt to make the body commit to something real before the process absorbed it. In 2018 over the curriculum redesign. In 2022 over grade inflation. In 2024 over the online program. Each time Alan Whitfield had accepted the amendment, each time the range of options had come back in the fall, and each time the vote on the range of options had produced a working group. Richard did not think Alan did this deliberately. That was almost the more troubling possibility.

He started the car. He had a place in Maine he had been meaning to get to for five years. He thought about it on the drive home, as he sometimes did after meetings like this one, and found the thought increasingly less hypothetical.

The fall semester proceeded in the way that semesters proceed when the important things have been deferred — with considerable activity and a strange absence of consequence. The subcommittee met. Gary corresponded with the consultant, whose initial proposal came in at \$42,000 and whose revised proposal, after negotiation, came in at \$39,000 and covered essentially the same scope.

The data analytics concentration launched with 11 students enrolled, which the Director of Admissions described as a promising start and which Richard, in the one conversation he and Sandra had about it, described as 11 students who would have enrolled anyway. Sandra had not argued with this. She had filed it under the category of things she knew and could not yet act on, a category that was, she had noticed, growing faster than the category of things she knew and had acted on.

The email from the Provost had sat in Sandra's inbox for 11 days before she opened it. This was not avoidance exactly. She had developed, over three years as Dean, a finely calibrated sense of which messages required immediate attention and which required the particular kind of mental preparation that was best accomplished by not thinking about them directly. The Provost's email had belonged to the second category. She had known, from the subject line, approximately what

it contained, and had found it useful to know this in the abstract while remaining, technically, uninformed.

She opened it on a Wednesday morning in March 2030, before her assistant arrived, with a cup of coffee she had made herself in the small kitchen off the main office suite. The coffee was not good. The kitchen had a machine that required pods and the pods available were a brand she did not recognize and suspected had been purchased on the basis of price rather than quality. She had been meaning to mention this for two years.

The email was three paragraphs. The first paragraph expressed confidence in Sandra's leadership and enthusiasm for Carver's strategic direction. The second paragraph noted that the university's budget modeling for the next planning cycle required updated enrollment projections from each school, and that the Provost's office would appreciate receiving Carver's figures by the end of the month, along with — this was new, and this was what had required 11 days of oblique preparation — a brief scenario analysis covering optimistic, baseline, and, the email said, conservative projections. The third paragraph said the Provost looked forward to a productive conversation.

Sandra put down her coffee and opened the spreadsheet Gary had sent her in January, the one she had reviewed twice and closed without responding to and which had been sitting in a folder she had labeled, with the optimism of someone who believes that naming a thing controls it, "Planning: Active." The spreadsheet was Gary's work, and it had Gary's qualities — thorough, accurate, and organized in a way that made the conclusions difficult to avoid while providing, through sheer density of data, the momentary illusion that there was more to examine before deciding anything.

The numbers told a story that was not complicated. Carver's MBA program had enrolled 287 students in the fall of 2025. In 2026 it had enrolled 271. In 2027, 264. In 2028, 248. The fall 2029 class had come in at 231, which Theresa Park had described to the faculty as tracking closely with the previous year, which was true in the sense that 231 was not dramatically different from 248 if you did not look at the line they formed together. The tuition revenue implications were straightforward arithmetic that Gary had performed and Sandra had read and neither of them had discussed directly, in the way that people who work closely together sometimes develop a mutual agreement to approach certain facts only in writing and only when required.

Below the enrollment table was a second table Gary had labeled, with uncharacteristic bluntness, *Break-Even Analysis*. Carver's fixed costs — faculty salaries, staff, facilities, and debt service on the 2019 renovation — required the equivalent of 241 enrolled students to cover without drawing on reserves. The fall 2029 class had been 231. The working model for fall 2030, based on application trends and yield rates, was 209 to 218. Below that, in a font slightly smaller than the rest of the spreadsheet, as if Gary had typed it quietly, was a single line: *At current trajectory, reserves sufficient for approximately 3.4 years of operational shortfall at projected 2030 enrollment.*

Sandra looked at this number for a long time. Three point four years was not nothing. It was also not a runway. It was the length of time between now and a conversation she would not be able to postpone, defer, or pilot.

She called Gary at 8:15 a.m.

"The Provost wants scenario analysis," she said.

"I know." A pause. "I was waiting for you to open it."

"How long have you had the scenarios drafted?"

A shorter pause. "February."

She almost laughed. "Send them."

The scenarios arrived in her inbox four minutes later, which meant Gary had been ready to send them for weeks and had been waiting with the specific patience of someone who understands that the timing of information delivery is as important as the information itself. Sandra had always known Gary was good at his job. She was finding, this morning, that she had underestimated the particular nature of his competence.

The optimistic scenario assumed an aggressive recruitment initiative in three new international markets, a successful launch of two new specialized master's programs, and an Exec Ed revenue increase of 22 percent driven by expanded corporate partnerships. It produced break-even in 2032. The baseline scenario assumed modest recruitment gains, one new specialized program, and flat Exec Ed revenue. It produced a structural deficit beginning in 2031 that consumed the reserves by 2034. The conservative scenario assumed continued enrollment decline at the current rate, no new programs, and Exec Ed revenue declining slightly as corporate training budgets tightened. It produced a number at the bottom of the page that was not labeled closure because Gary had not written that word, but which pointed to a conversation with the Provost about the university's options regarding a school that could no longer cover its costs from a university that was, itself, not in a position to subsidize it indefinitely.

Sandra closed the laptop. Through her office window she could see the quad, and Herbert T. Carver Hall catching the thin March light, and a handful of students crossing between buildings with the purposeful walk of people who were late for something. They were paying \$50,000 a year for the experience of being late for something at Carver, and they did not know — could not know, because she had not told them and would not tell them — that the institution they had chosen was running the mathematics of its own continuation and finding the results, as Gary had put it in his smallest font, approximately 3.4 years from a conversation nobody wanted to have.

She picked up her phone and called Richard Hollenbeck. He answered on the second ring, which was unusual. Richard typically answered on the fourth ring, a habit she had eventually concluded was not affectation, but the time required to decide whether to answer at all. "I need to talk to you," she said. "Not as a colleague. As someone who has been here longer than I have and understands what we're actually dealing with."

A pause. "I've been waiting for this call," he said, "since the May board meeting." Another pause, shorter. "Come to my office. Not yours."

Richard's office was on the third floor of Carver Hall, in the corner that caught afternoon light and which he had occupied for 19 years, through two office reassignment initiatives that had

somehow left him undisturbed. The walls held three framed photographs: his dissertation committee at Chicago in 1996, a sailboat on a Maine lake in what appeared to be August, and a single index card in a simple frame that said, in his own handwriting: "The map is not the territory."

He had made tea, which Sandra had not expected, and which suggested he had known she was coming before she called. She laid out the numbers. He listened without interrupting, which was how she knew he had already done the arithmetic himself.

"The optimistic scenario," he said, when she finished. Sandra finished the sentence for him: "Requires things that aren't in our control." He nodded. "All optimistic scenarios do." He looked at his tea and continued. "The baseline gets us to 2034. Long enough for several people in this building to retire gracefully, and short enough that the people who can't retire have a problem." He looked up. "You included." She said she knew. He said simply, "The conservative scenario." She knew where he was going. "I don't think it's conservative. I think it's the baseline, and the baseline is the optimistic scenario." He was quiet for a moment. Outside, a maintenance vehicle crossed the quad slowly, the way institutional vehicles always moved, as if urgency were a concept that applied to other organizations.

"There are three things that could change the trajectory," Richard said. "A substantial gift that funds a new program with genuine market demand. A merger with an institution that has complementary strengths and the goodwill to treat Carver as a partner rather than an acquisition. Or a fundamental redesign of what we're selling and to whom." He paused. "The first requires a donor we don't have. The second requires a partner who would be taking on our liabilities. The third requires the faculty vote we couldn't get in October."

Sandra looked at him. "Which means."

"Which means we are most likely going to have the conversation with the Provost that neither of you wants to have, and the outcome of that conversation is going to be described in language chosen to make it sound like strategy." He said this without bitterness, just with the same flat precision he brought to everything. "Alderton absorbs Carver's programs into the business department of the College of Arts and Sciences. The MBA continues in reduced form. Most of the faculty land softly because tenured faculty always land softly. The staff do not." He picked up his tea. "Herbert T. Carver Hall gets renamed for the next donor. The plaque comes down. In 10 years nobody remembers there was a business school here."

The room was very quiet. "You've thought about this for a while," Sandra said. "Since February 2028." He set down his cup. "I hoped I was wrong. I'm not wrong very often, which is a quality that sounds more pleasant than it is." She looked at the index card on the wall.

The map is not the territory.

"What are you going to do?" she asked.

He looked at her steadily. "I've been approached to serve on an external review panel for a curriculum design project," he said. "An interesting one. I'll tell you about it when there's more to tell." A pause. "After that I think I'm going to spend some time in Maine." He did not say the name of the project. She did not ask. There were things, she was learning, that became real in a

different way once they were spoken aloud in an institutional context, and both of them understood, without discussing it, that this was not yet the moment for that.

She drove home in the early dark of March, the numbers running in her head with the persistence of arithmetic that has nowhere left to go. In the morning she would begin drafting the scenario analysis for the Provost. She would use Gary's numbers. She would use careful language. She would not use the word closure. Not yet.

The conversation that followed was held in the office of David Marsh, who had been Provost for 11 years and at Alderton for 34. Marsh was an Alderton graduate who got his Ph.D. in sociology from Wisconsin, came back to Alderton and got tenure, and went into administration a decade later in the way that happens to people who turn out to be good at it and stop minding the meetings. He was in his early sixties now, careful and kind in the way of people who have had this conversation before and have learned that careful and kind is the register that allows everyone to maintain the posture of having acted responsibly. His office had better furniture than Sandra's and a view of the main quad that in early April was briefly, genuinely beautiful.

They discussed the optimistic scenario at some length. They discussed the baseline scenario. The conservative scenario was not discussed by name, but it was present in the room in the way that unsaid things are present — occupying space, affecting the air pressure, requiring a certain amount of energy to work around. By the end Sandra had agreed to develop two new program proposals for June review. She drafted them. She submitted them. She received comments in July and revised them in August. The memo went to faculty on a Thursday morning in September.

The subject line said: Carver School — Important Update Regarding Strategic Direction.

The memo ran four paragraphs. The first expressed gratitude for the faculty's dedication and the community's resilience. The second noted that higher education was navigating a period of profound structural change, and that Alderton University, after careful consideration and extensive consultation, had determined that the most responsible path forward for the Carver School's programs and students was a deep integration with the university's broader academic mission. The third announced that the MBA program would continue, reduced in size and restructured around the university's existing strengths, under the administrative umbrella of the Alderton College of Business and Economics, a new entity that would incorporate Carver's programs alongside the undergraduate business offerings of the College of Arts and Sciences. The fourth thanked everyone for their service and invited questions, which could be directed to Gary Siebert, who had been named interim director of transition operations.

It did not use the word closure.

It did not need to.

What followed was not dramatic. This was, Sandra would reflect afterward, the thing that surprised her most. Not the difficulty of it but the absence of drama, the way an institution could come apart with the same procedural texture it had used to govern itself. There were meetings. There were memos. There were conversations in offices that began formally and ended with long silences that neither party moved to fill.

The Carver School had employed, at its recent peak, 60 tenure and tenure-track faculty — 36 tenured full and associate professors, 24 untenured assistant and junior associate professors who had come to Alderton on the implicit promise of a future that was now being renegotiated. There were also 26 adjunct and non-tenure-track instructors who taught the courses the ladder faculty considered beneath their scheduling preferences, and a staff of 46 that had grown, over the previous decade, at roughly twice the rate of faculty hiring and at roughly 3 times the rate of enrollment. Nobody had planned this. It had happened the way institutional bloat always happens. One position justified by a genuine need, another by a grant that required its own coordinator, until the coordinator had an associate and the associate had an assistant. Everyone was very busy. The memos were excellent. Many meetings were held.

Of the 46 staff positions, 39 were eliminated. Seven were absorbed into the university's central administration. The email informing them of the change thanked them for their flexibility. The adjunct faculty were informed by email that their contracts would not be renewed. Several had been teaching at Carver for more than a decade. The email thanked them for their contributions. The 24 untenured ladder faculty were offered settlement packages that reflected, as the HR language put it, the university's appreciation for their circumstances. Two had been on the market already. The others had not, and now were, with the added complexity of explaining in cover letters and job talks what had happened at their previous institution in terms that were accurate without being fatal.

The 36 tenured faculty were offered three options, presented by a senior administrator from the Provost's office at a meeting that 31 of them attended. This was the highest attendance at any faculty meeting in Sandra's tenure, a fact she noted and chose not to remark upon. The options: a buyout at two years of salary; a transfer to the new College of Business and Economics with a guaranteed teaching load that included a significant undergraduate component; or continued employment in a role to be determined through a process to be completed in the spring.

The tenured faculty, as the tenured faculty do, landed softly. Richard Hollenbeck had taken the buyout without ceremony months earlier, cleaned out his office over a single weekend, and was gone before the memo reached anyone. His departure, like most of his positions, was communicated once and not revisited. He had a place in Maine, and he was already there.

Alan Whitfield was not at the faculty meeting. He had not been at Carver for two years. He had resigned quietly in the spring of 2028. No farewell lunch, no forwarding address offered to the colleagues who asked. His office on the second floor had been reassigned to a junior faculty member who had since accepted a position elsewhere and whose own office was now also empty.

Alan had not left for somewhere better in the way people mean when they say that. He had left for something different, something he had been thinking about since a Tuesday afternoon in October when he had watched a process he recognized absorb an amendment he had made and felt, for the first time in 26 years, that he was on the wrong side of it. Nobody at Carver knew where he had gone. The general assumption was that he had found a quieter place. They were wrong.

Herbert T. Carver Hall was renamed the following February, after a gift of two million dollars from Robert C. Briggs, chairman and chief executive of Briggs Regional Insurance Group of

Columbus, Ohio, whose connection to Alderton was, as the press release noted, longstanding and deep. The naming ceremony was attended by the university president, the new Dean of the College of Business and Economics, and approximately 30 people, several of whom appeared to be there because the parking was free and lunch was served. Two million dollars had once been the kind of gift that named a classroom. Now it named a building.

Sandra cleared her office on a Tuesday in October. She had been at Carver four years and three months, long enough to have accumulated the sediment of institutional life, which included three versions of the strategic plan in binders of descending thickness, a coffee mug from a conference in 2027, a framed photograph from her inauguration in which she and the Provost were smiling with the specific energy of people who believed, at that moment, that what they were beginning would go differently. She put the photograph in a box.

Sandra had conversations scheduled in November, two with schools in circumstances not entirely unlike the one she was leaving, and one with a firm that advised universities on strategic positioning. She was not certain which of the three she hoped would lead somewhere. She was not certain any of them was what she was actually looking for.

Sandra locked the office and left the key with the administrative assistant who had been assigned, in the new structure, to cover both the fourth floor and the second floor simultaneously. She did not look back at the building as she crossed the quad. This was not stoicism. She had found, in the preceding months, that looking back at buildings did not change what they contained. She walked across the quad in the October light and thought, once, clearly, a thought that surprised her with its simplicity:

there has to be something that actually works.

This story was inspired by the work the author is doing with Professors Trevor Harris and Shivaram Rajgopal of Columbia Business School on the implications of AI for business school education. The story was written collaboratively with Claude.