Dr. Curtis J. Tompkins

U.S. Department of Transportation

Outstanding Organizational Achievements

Dr. Curtis J. Tompkins’s public service has included a four-decades-long career in public higher education followed by Senior Executive Service (SES) assignments with the

U.S. Department of Transportation (DOT). He has provided leadership through his roles as University President, Dean, Department Chair and faculty member; President of two national engineering-related societies; Associate Administrator of the DOT Research and Innovative Technology Administration (RITA); and several other leadership assignments with DOT. In all of these varied roles, the organizations for which he has had responsibility have demonstrably improved because of his leadership.

The Volpe Center: Of particular note was the turnaround leadership Dr. Tompkins exercised at DOT’s John A. Volpe National Transportation Systems Center during 2004-07. During the two years prior to his appointment as Volpe Center Director, DOT’s Office of the Inspector General (OIG) published three critical reports about the Center’s financial, project and overall management, and DOT’s Office of the Secretary of Transportation (OST) conducted a critical management assessment of the Center’s leadership. DOT Secretary Norman Mineta determined that a fresh approach was needed to correct the various problems identified at the Volpe Center; Dr. Tompkins was chosen to bring that fresh approach to the 35-year old Center.

All of the concerns about the Volpe Center raised in 2004 by the OIG and the OST were successfully addressed by the end of Fiscal Year 2007. During his three years at the Center,

Dr. Tompkins led several initiatives:

1. Development and implementation of effective strategic and business planning
   1. Dr. Tompkins collaboratively involved all of the Volpe Center managers and eventually all staff members in developing and communicating Center vision, mission and goals statements which supported DOT’s strategic goals and to which each and every one of the 550 Federal employees at the Volpe Center aligned their annual performance plans;
   2. Dr. Tompkins worked with the leadership of the National Association of Government Employees (NAGE) which represents all non-supervisory employees to form the Volpe Center Human Capital Advisory Group (HCAG) which systematically prioritized and addressed employee concerns by building action plans that were incorporated into the Volpe Center Annual Business Plan and Budget with responsibility assignments incorporated into individual performance plans; as a result, employee satisfaction surveys showed significant improvements in 2006 over previous years;
   3. Dr. Tompkins created and published the annual Volpe Center “Points of Pride” report, which highlighted dozens of major accomplishments by the Center staff in the context of DOT strategic goals and the Center’s strategic and business plans.

Dr. Curtis J. Tompkins

U.S. Department of Transportation

Outstanding Organizational Achievements

1. Development and implementation of a required formal project management training program:
   1. All Volpe Center employees who were acting as project managers or aspired to become project managers were required to participate in several formal project management courses and to become certified by the national Project Management Institute (PMI) as qualified Project Managers;
   2. All Volpe Center employees involved with project management were required to learn and use a common electronic project management system to manage and communicate;
   3. An internal Senior Executive Review Board was established, chaired by the Center Deputy Director, to review all major projects early in their development to assure that adequate risk assessment had been conducted and communicated to the leadership of customer agencies served by the Volpe Center; (This was in direct response to Office of Inspector General (OIG) and Office of the Secretary (OST) concerns that the Center had made some commitments to DOT Operating Administrations that were not feasible to satisfy.)
2. Improvement of customer satisfaction regarding Volpe Center performance

The Volpe Center has been a fee-for-service operation with no direct appropriations since it was established by then DOT Secretary John A. Volpe in 1970. Its sustainability is entirely dependent on the satisfaction of its customers (which includes all of the operating administrations of DOT as well as several other Federal agencies). Dr. Tompkins challenged the entire Volpe Center team to establish measures of customer satisfaction, set annual improvement targets, have an independent review mechanism to track customer satisfaction, and include customer satisfaction metrics in the Center Director’s own performance plan as well as in the plans of all staff directly involved with customers. Customer satisfaction increased annually beginning in 2006.

1. Improvement of Internal Communications at the Volpe Center

Dr. Tompkins stated his belief that the level of customer satisfaction that could be sustained over time was a derivative of Volpe Center employee satisfaction, which in turn was a function of internal communications with particular attention to listening and following up on suggestions and concerns. The HCAG mentioned in (1) b above was one of Dr. Tompkins’ creations based on his belief in involving all employees in a systematic, deliberate fashion. From the day that he arrived at the Center in October 2004, he was available to listen to any of the 550 Federal employees from 8:30 a.m. to 8:55 a.m. every morning in the Center cafeteria. He often joined employees at their lunch tables for informal conversations. He sent all employees an e-mail message every Friday afternoon, informing them about his activities and other happenings during the week and upcoming activities in which he planned to be engaged in the coming week. He usually included a brief description at the end

Dr. Curtis J. Tompkins

U.S. Department of Transportation

Outstanding Organizational Achievements

of his weekly e-mails of some factoid about the history of transportation; many employees said that they shared Dr. Tompkins’ Friday e-mails with their families on Friday nights at dinner because they found the brief history lessons to be quite interesting.

University Transportation Centers (UTC) Program: The UTC Program was established in 1987 to foster transportation-related education, research and technology transfer at U.S. Universities and Colleges and grew from ten UTCs in 1987 to 60 UTCs involving 125 Universities in 2005. With an annual Federal appropriation of approximately $84 million in grants, which is matched 1:1 by the recipient universities, the $160 million Program has supported vital transportation research and education of thousands of transportation students. It was determined by the Acting Administrator of RITA that the Program needed someone with extensive academic world experience and knowledge to serve as director of the program, and he turned to Dr. Tompkins to provide that leadership in September 2007. The extensive knowledge of DOT gained through his service at the Volpe Center combined with his years in academia prepared Dr. Tompkins quite well to lead the excellent Program staff and to interface with the university personnel.

One of the most significant organizational accomplishments led by Dr. Tompkins since January 2009 has been the development of a comprehensive National Transportation Workforce Development Strategy involving all of the Operating Administrations of DOT. In collaboration with the Council of UTCs, the Department of Education, and the Department of Labor, a National Summit on Transportation Workforce Development is being planned for Spring 2012; ten regional summits have already been held. This initiative will be one of the most significant legacies of Dr. Tompkins’ public service.

Dr. Tompkins has been called upon to play many ancillary roles for RITA in addition to his UTC Program responsibilities. During a transition in leadership at DOT’s Transportation Safety Institute (TSI) in Oklahoma City for four months in 2010, Dr. Tompkins served as TSI’s Acting Director, providing stability and direction in Oklahoma City while continuing his UTC Program duties. Likewise, when RITA’s Associate Administrator (AA) for Research, Development, and Technology (RD&T) departed Washington to an assignment in Afghanistan, Dr. Tompkins was asked to serve as Acting Associate Administrator (AA) until a permanent AA is found. When President Obama directed each Federal agency to develop a Scientific Integrity Policy,

Dr. Tompkins was asked to serve as the DOT Scientific Integrity Officer and to lead the development of DOT’s policy. This latter contribution to the health and integrity of DOT will be long lasting.