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EDUCATION

UK looks to change role of faculty senate. Employees worry it will take away authority

BY **MONICA KAST**
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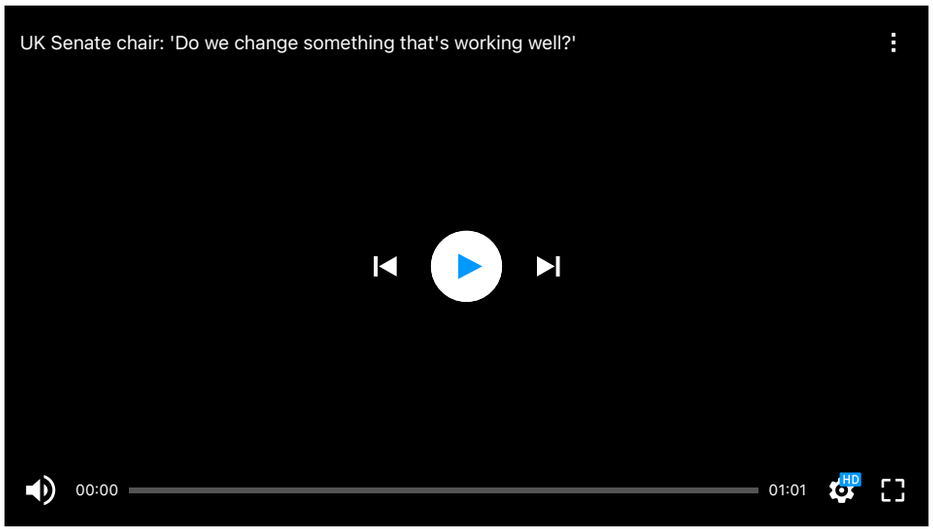

DeShana Collett, chair of the University Senate Council at the University of Kentucky, reacts to a new report released Feb. 23, 2024, that proposes changing the faculty senate's role on campus. The report, presented at a university Board of Trustees meeting at the Gatton Student Center, could change the senate's authority to create policy. BY RYAN C. HERMENS

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The University of Kentucky board of trustees approved a resolution Friday that could result in changes to how the university senate — a committee made up of faculty, students and administrators that helps set academic policies for the university — operates.

It's a move administrators say would make the university more "nimble," and streamline the decision-making process. But some faculty members say it could ultimately take power away from them.

The university senate has the authority to create broad educational policy and academic standards for UK. By changing the structure of the senate, it could change how policies are set at at the university, and change the amount of input faculty has in the decision-making process, faculty members said.

The resolution “directs President Capilouto to move quickly to formulate recommended changes to our Governing Regulations for this Board’s consideration at the next meeting.” Faculty trustee Hollie Swanson was the only trustee to vote against the resolution, saying there was a lack of evidence to support it and there had not been enough time to review it.

The vote came Friday afternoon at the board meeting, after a report was shared in morning meetings about UK’s governance. Around 50 faculty and staff members showed up early Friday morning to express their concerns with the proposed resolution.

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The resolution has five points, including a directive to define “a clear and appropriate distinction” between the roles of the board, president and faculty, and recommend changes to regulations that “define and clearly articulate a shared governance structure that is in greater alignment with institutional benchmarks and that clearly recognizes the Board’s primacy as the institution’s policymaking body.”

The resolution also affirms that faculty members will retain responsibility over curriculum.

The proposal is part of Project Accelerate, which was approved by the board last fall to look at UK’s priorities and focus on five areas, which are creating more:

- Educated Kentuckians
- Readiness
- Partnerships
- Employee recruitment and retention
- Responsiveness.

Part of Senate Joint Resolution 98, passed last year, instructed the Council on Postsecondary Education to review governance structures and regulations at Kentucky post-secondary educations. As a result, UK began to review its policies.

The university senate proposal falls under “more responsiveness,” and a working group reviewed UK’s “policies, procedures and financing strategies to ensure the institution is aligned with the state’s needs.” In the process of reviewing the university senate, the working group found that UK’s senate operates differently from 26 other institutions reviewed.

Attendees listen to a presentation during a University of Kentucky Board of Trustees meeting at the Gatton Student Center on the UK campus in Lexington, Ky., on Friday, Feb. 23, 2024. Ryan C. Hermens *rhermens@herald-leader.com*

UK's senate, which was first established in 1917, not only has an advisory role, but also holds policy-making power. For example, the senate approves academic programs and sets admissions standards at UK.

Senate Council Chair DeShana Collett said she was not consulted by the work group, and her office was not asked to provide data throughout the process. Collett disagreed with parts of the presentation on Friday that indicated the senate's processes were too complicated, or that there was not representation of students and administrators in the decision-making process.

"Our processes are streamlined," Collett said in an interview after the meeting. "We have administrators and students on every senate committee. Faculty and students and administrators are voting members of the senate, which I think is important."

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Collett said she felt personally attacked by the presentation on Friday. Faculty who interact with students on a daily basis are the best people to make decisions about academics at UK, she said.

"I'm taken aback and dismayed at the level of aggressiveness and negativity that was presented in this report, and it honestly feels like a direct attack on academic integrity," Collett said.

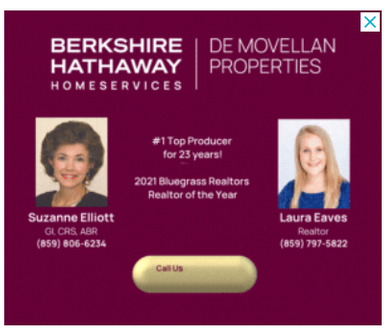
DeShana Collett, chair of the University Senate Council at the University of Kentucky, speaks following a university Board of Trustees meeting at the Gatton Student Center on the UK campus in Lexington, Ky., on Friday, Feb. 23, 2024. Ryan C. Hermens *rhermens@herald-leader.com*

Along with the university senate, both the Staff Senate and Student Government Association serve in advisory roles to President Eli Capilouto and the board.

“What is planned to be presented sets the stage for potential recommendations that will have significant implications for the fundamental principles of academic shared governance roles and threatens the integrity and effectiveness of the Senate’s function in ensuring academic standards and quality education for our students at the University,” Collett said in an email.

The change was suggested after looking at the governing structures of 26 institutions, including other SEC schools and public universities in Kentucky. UK is the only school where the faculty senate has more than advisory role and has the authority to pass policies, according to a review done by UK and Deloitte Consulting.

The senate’s rules were created internally, and do not have to be approved by the board. UK’s senate rules are 305 pages, while other university’s rules average 35 pages, according to the review.



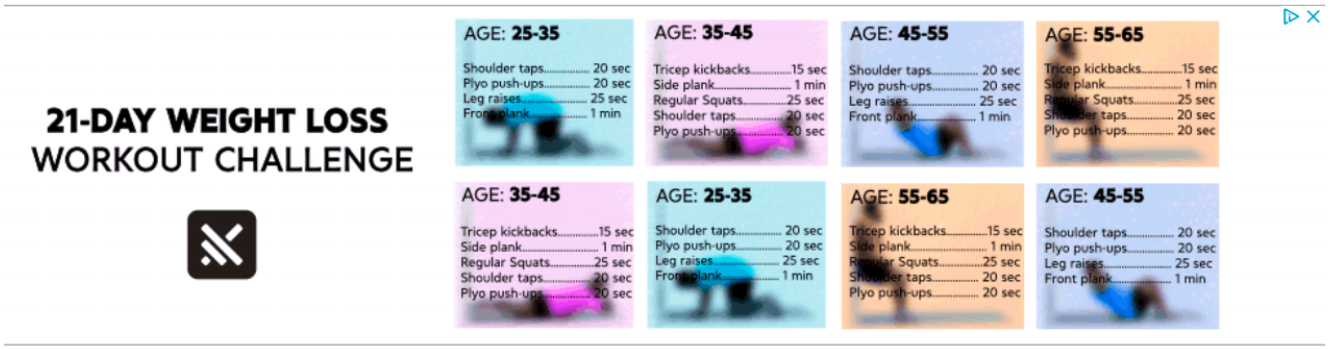
Chair of the board E. Britt Brockman said the presentation Friday morning “lays out a case for necessary change.”

“Aligning ourselves more closely with other peers — the majority of whom are accredited by the same body we are — should not be seen as a threat,” Brockman said. “It should be welcomed as an opportunity to be better.”

Molly Blasing, a member of the senate council and an associate professor of Russian studies, also said faculty are the best people to make decisions about academics. While there may be room for improvement in the senate, she hopes the work group will speak with members directly.

If UK’s senate is an outlier, Blasing said she hopes that can be a good thing because of its focus on students.

“I was disappointed that they characterized the culture of the senate as something negative,” Blasing said. “The people I work with are some of the most dedicated people.”



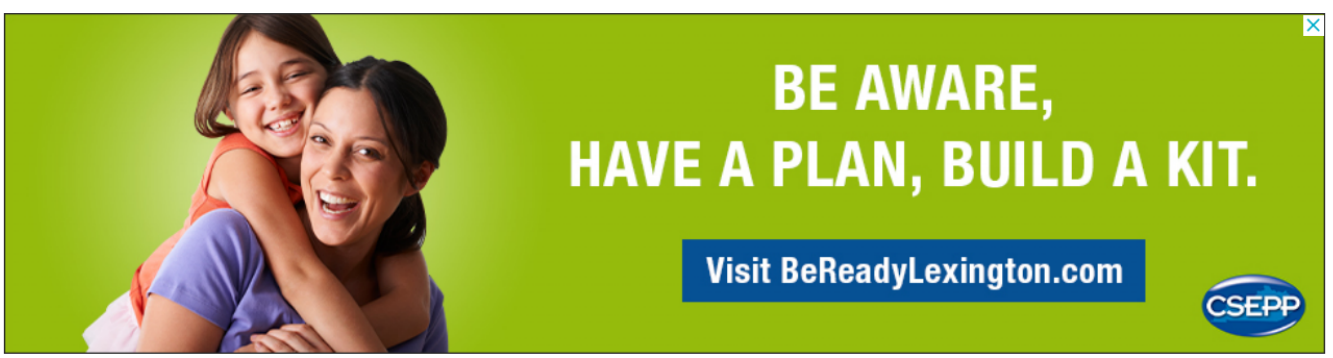
UK spokesperson Jay Blanton said this move is meant to “strengthen shared governance,” not take it away. Blanton also emphasized that no matter what decision is made, faculty would still have authority over curriculum.

“Faculty have the essential voice when it comes to curriculum: what gets taught, who teaches it, how they teach it within their expertise, that has to be a faculty decision, and that will always go back to the faculty,” Blanton said.

This move is about making sure governance is balanced between students, faculty, staff and administrators, Blanton said.

As part of President Eli Capilouto’s performance evaluation in December, the board listed strengthening relationships with faculty and shared governance as areas for improvement.

Hubie Ballard, one of the faculty trustees who joined the board earlier this month, said he does not view this report as a loss of shared governance, but a way to maintain it.



“A large body of faculty do not view this as a loss of our voice,” Ballard said during the meeting.

UK administrators have “a deep respect and support for shared governance deeply embedded in this campus,” Blanton said. A new process could allow decisions and changes at the university to happen faster, he said.

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Chairman Britt Brockman presented a resolution giving Capilouto the authority to review governance regulations. It passed with Faculty Trustee Hollie Swanson as the only "no" vote.

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The resolution:

CR 1

Chair of the Board of Trustees
February 23, 2024

Members, Board of Trustees:

RESOLUTION DIRECTING THE PRESIDENT
TO RECOMMEND CHANGES TO
THE UNIVERSITY'S GOVERNING REGULATIONS

Recommendation: that the University of Kentucky Board of Trustees directs President Capilouto to move quickly to formulate recommended changes to our Governing Regulations for this Board's consideration at the next meeting.

Specifically, those proposed changes should do the following:

1. Define a clear and appropriate distinction between the education policy-making function of the Board and the respective responsibilities of the President and faculty to administer and implement the Board's educational policy.

2. Reaffirm that faculty members assume responsibility for determining good educational practice and, therefore, should have a substantive role in the development and review of academic policies.

3. Ensure that the proposed changes are consistent with (A) the University's status as an independent body politic of the Executive Branch of the government of the Commonwealth; (B) the requirements and prohibitions imposed on the University by state and federal law; and (C) The Principles of Accreditation adopted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges ("SACSCOC").

4. Recommend changes to the University's Governing Regulations that define and clearly articulate a shared governance structure that is in greater alignment with institutional benchmarks and that clearly recognizes the Board's primacy as

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University of Kentucky Board of Trustees faculty trustee Hollie Swanson speaks to the board on Friday, February 23, 2024. Ryan C. Hermens *rhermens@herald-leader.com*

This story was originally published February 23, 2024, 9:13 AM.

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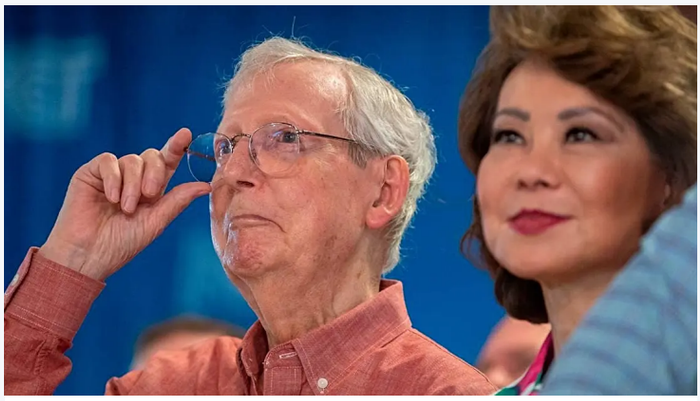

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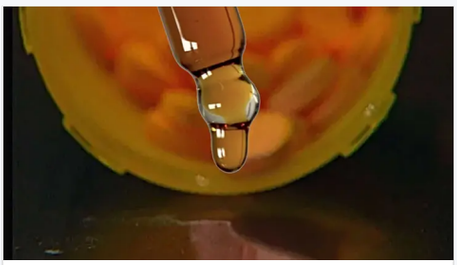

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