Senate Council
March 22, 2010

Improving the Senate

Order of Agendas

- Put the action items near the start of each meeting, and leave guest speakers and less important items for later. "The mind cannot absorb more than the seat can endure", and after a while during the meetings the mind becomes saturated. Putting the action items at the start will ensure that they are carefully considered and that questions will be asked and answered. Near the end of the meeting the voting tends to become perfunctory.

- Add a New Business component to the agenda of each meeting. At present, I have no idea when or how to bring issues to the floor.

Committees/Councils

- Revive the Senate's moribund committee system. (Two or three years ago I volunteered to be on some sort of undergrad curriculum committee, but never heard back after making the offer. With the development of GenEd in full swing you'd have thought this would be an active group. Maybe the group is indeed active, but I just wasn't put on the committee -- I have no way of knowing.)

- There was some discussion about the role of Councils, etc. in vetting curriculum proposals. I am currently a member of Undergraduate Council and previously served a three-year term on Graduate Council. In my experience, the Councils usually do a good and conscientious job of vetting curriculum proposals. That said, it would be beneficial and appropriate for the University Senate to provide more explicit guidance to the Councils regarding the objective of their vetting (to my knowledge, no such guidance exists). The guidance might take the form of a broad policy statement. For example, the faculty in the academic unit proposing the changes likely are in a better position than the Councils and Senate to know whether the proposed changes enhance (or at least do not compromise) academic rigor and whether they unduly harm current students. Senate thus might decide that the broad policy statement provide guidance about the extent to which Councils should give deference to the academic units proposing the curriculum changes versus exercising their oversight responsibilities.

- I do not think the committee structure of the Senate has been well used. Committees offer an opportunity for some issues to be brought forward and should be part of the solution for performing an advisory role. That said, committee meetings for the sake of meeting are not effective. I do not think that all the standing committees must always be active at a given time, but they should be available to serve their charge or to receive requests from senators posing agenda items to them. Some committees are probably too broad; for instance, facilities seems to cover everything from computing to classrooms to grounds. Perhaps it would be better to make more use of ad hoc or working groups on specific issues as needed (for example, IT support issues, distance learning initiatives, etc.). Committee agendas beyond the general charge could be generated by concerns brought forward by senate members or suggested by senate council based on their overview of priorities for the coming year. To stimulate member initiated agenda, the senate council call for

specific agenda items at the start of the year and focus on constituting the needed committees based on that input. I think committees should be available and active as needed based on institutional priorities and member concerns.

- Several people complained about the Senate's role as a rubber stamping organization. One approach would be to delegate authority for final decisions on certain issues to those committees that consider them carefully. In my experience a large group viewing complicated issues with little preparation rarely makes good decisions, and I question why final votes on certain issues take place in the full Senate. Perhaps committee decisions and supporting materials could be made available to Senators for review and challenges for a prescribed period before becoming final decisions.

Communication

- I don't see meaningful *communication* from Senators to the groups they represent. Providing a concise list of relevant announcements and Senate decisions that Senators could post on faculty listservs would be one way to standardize the information coming out of the Senate. In cases where several Senators represent one group such as a college, a single Senator could be selected to disseminate the information to that group.

- I appreciated the opportunity for the Senate to have a broad open discussion facilitated by Professor Swanson about our role in university governance.

- Budget issues - Clearly this is a huge concern for everyone these days. If we could possibly be facing program or benefit cuts or other draconian responses to a dire budget situation, will the senate have enough information to provide meaningful input? Will such input be sought? The suggestion was made that the Senate council chair could seek to participate in the meetings between the Provost and the Deans. This would seem to be an important way for the Senate to be kept apprised of issues that could have a large impact on the institution as a whole.

- There really should be some regular communication between the US and the SS on matters of money. Perhaps the Senate Council and the Staff Senate's Executive Committee could meet on the issue occasionally?

- Also, it might be nice if there was some more general communication between the two Senates. It might facilitate matters for each to know that the other exists, and that, for the most part, a lot of the internal struggles they're each facing are the same.

- How can the Senate have better ties to other university committees where appropriate or ensure seats reserved for a senate member are filled? One of the reasons I saw a need for a senate IT committee was because the UK academic computing committees had been vacant and inactive for years. Vince Kellen re-constituted these committees in 2009, one for instructional computing and one for research computing. Is there some channel of communication between the Senate and committees such as these? Related to this, how many university committees call for a Senate representative? For example, I serve on the university web advisory committee that has a slot for a senate member that has rarely been filled during the last 6 years. Is there a way for senate members to know who those representatives on outside committees are so they could provide input to them on relevant issues?

- Philosophically, I associate the idea of a "senate" with the dual roles of "advise and consent" and it is the lack of much of an advisory role that I see as the most problematic. I find almost all of what we do to be quite "top down." Generally, we are informed of decisions that have been made or are recommended to be made. I am able to go back to my unit and report on what has transpired, but what seems to be missing is much opportunity for two-way communication; that is, a way for me to bring other issues that concern my colleagues back to the Senate. I do think an active committee structure is part of the answer, but I think it also goes beyond that.
- I do have a few specific suggestions for your consideration.

- A theme in the discussion was antipathy toward "administrators" and glorification of faculty. On one hand, this was amusing because I consider the Senate to be part of administration. On the other hand, it was disturbing because we have an entire branch of our Gen Ed curriculum to teach students not to apply such generalizations to broad groups of people. If I had a third hand, I would also point out that any group that refuses to work constructively with others gets marginalized. My impression is that the majority of Senators are interested in constructive collaboration to solve problems, but they are easily drowned out by those who speak often and loudly. Promoting more electronic communication on important issues before and after meetings may be a way to increase productive participation. Yesterday's invitation to send "Improve Senate" emails is a good example of a way to encourage broader participation.

- I think communication could be improved within the senate. I had a interaction that may not be typical, but was nonetheless frustrating. In the spring of 2008, I sent a proposal to the council chair suggesting the senate council consider the need for a Senate IT related committee/work group. That request was never acknowledged. Since that was near the end of the spring term for the senate council, I assumed it was just being deferred. I resubmitted it the next year in the fall of 2008 to the new council chair. It was also not acknowledged. However, I did find out later from another source that it got on the agenda for spring of 2009, but I was on sabbatical then and not part of the working group that did finally explore this issue. My point is really just that, based on my limited experience, I concluded there may be communication lapses between senate council and senate members. There should be a defined process for how a senator can bring items forward for consideration.

Shared Governance

- Shared governance between faculty and the administration depends on the willingness of both to share. From the faculty's perspective, how we can best enhance the effectiveness of Senate's role in shared governance depends on the administration's willingness to share its governance authority. How and to what extent is the administration willing? For example, I was on the Senate committee that interacts with the administration on budgetary matters several years ago. The administration shared a lot of budget information with the committee, but I never got the sense that it would lead to actual changes in budget decisions. I recommend consultation with appropriate members of the administration to get a more accurate sense of its willingness to share governance.

- There is clearly a sense among some faculty that the administration needs to do a better job of sharing its governance authority with the faculty. If the faculty is truly committed to shared governance, we need to be open to the possibility that, on some dimensions, the faculty needs to do a better job of sharing its governance authority with the administration. Consultation with the administration on this issue is appropriate.

- I know there are some legitimate concerns about our role being that of a rubber stamping body, but sometimes this is simply the result of predefined roles and established processes. We are the final body to consider academic changes, and although Professor Chappell's concern that we do not invest much time as a body in these decisions has some merit, for the most part I trust that the many previous steps each proposal has gone through has adequately vetted each change. I am in favor of more "local" control when possible and while I do review these items, unless I see some egregious issue of concern I generally do not believe we as a body need to micromanage these approvals. Further, in the example of the College of Ag proposal he was opposed to, there was an opportunity for him to voice his concerns prior to the vote and perhaps sway other senators to reconsider their vote. Other discussion included some who advocated a smaller Senate, but I do not agree with that suggestion. I think the Senate is a unique body that can provide a voice representing the faculty as a whole, and as such it needs to have a large and diverse representation.

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Miscellany

- I have always found it odd that the President of the University is the presiding officer of the Senate. Is this a state law? If not, then ensuring the independence of the body should be a key short-term goal.

- While I understand that the Pres turns over the gavel at the first meeting of the year, I'd like to make sure that he can't call it back when push comes to shove and the campus faces an internal controversy. Don't wait for that to happen -- move to exclude the President now.

- Another theme was a desire for more involvement in university-wide policy decisions, earlier in the decision making process. Streamlining the Senate's pro forma duties would leave more time for a proactive policy focus.