Faculty Senate, Tuesday, September 1, 2020, 5:00 PM  
Via Zoom

Voting/unanimous consent results appear in red.

1. The meeting was called to order at 5:00 PM.

2. Announcements and Information:

   Noting that there is no provision in our by-laws for electronic/virtual meetings, Speaker Lewis asked for unanimous consent that senate continue to conduct business via Zoom this semester, with the understanding that our votes are provisional until such time as we can assemble and formally ratify all votes taken during virtual meetings. Meanwhile, the Committee on the By-Laws and the Faculty/Administration Manual will work on amending the by-laws to allow for electronic meetings.

   Parliamentarian George Pothering and Senator Bob Mignone (SSM) discussed the possibility of using the electronic faculty ballot system to conduct a vote validating the provisional votes cast via Zoom by the Senate.

   Unanimous consent was given to proceed as Speaker Lewis proposed.

3. The April 7-14, 2020, minutes were approved.

4. Reports

   a. Speaker of the Faculty Simon Lewis

      Speaker Lewis thanked faculty and staff for all their efforts over the summer and acknowledged the dilemma facing the administration regarding re-opening decisions. He stressed the importance of maintaining a sense of community among students in online classes, and the difficulty of maintaining a sense of community among faculty when we are unable to meet in person, for instance at the Faculty House. He recommended joining the Faculty Governance listserv and making use of the IRIE database (interdisciplinary research --- irie.cofc.edu).

   b. President Andrew Hsu

      President Hsu reported that he has received a great deal of feedback from the campus community regarding the decision to move forward with plans to bring students back and teach hybrid courses on campus starting September 14; the response has been about evenly split for and against coming back. Our goal, he said, is to try to capture as much of the semester as we can with students living on campus with some form of face-to-face
instruction. He reiterated that “nothing is written in stone” and that the College will pivot as science and data dictate. He thanked the faculty for their strength and hard work, and for continuing to move the institution forward.

President Hsu also affirmed that the College will move forward with our strategic plan, having identified student retention as the top priority for the coming year.

He introduced three members of the leadership team who are new to the College: Provost and EVP of Academic Affairs Suzanne Austin, EVP of Business Affairs and CFO John Loonon, and Vice President of University Marketing and Enrollment Management Amy Takayama-Perez.

Q&A:

Senator Todd Grantham (Philosophy) asked for an update on enrollment. President Hsu reported that we ended up with 2060 entering freshmen, 60 more than this time last year. Unfortunately, that figure falls short of our target of 2300, which, prior to COVID, we were on track to surpass by 100. EVP Takayama-Perez added that we exceeded targets for transfers, with about 500.

Responding to a question from Jon Hakkila (Associate Dean, Graduate School), President Hsu said that we lost about 160 continuing students plus another 150 or so non-degree students, but that the latter group does not represent much lost revenue.

Senator Irina Gigova (HSS) asked, in the event that the number of infections significantly increases and we revert to all-online classes, is the plan to close the campus and send students home or try to keep them here? President Hsu replied that the plan is to keep them here if possible, with infected students isolating or in quarantine. To some extent, he said, we’re already doing that with the cases we’ve seen so far. He added that, based on the experience of other colleges in the state that have re-opened, on-campus activities are relatively safe and easy to control, but off-campus activities, especially on weekends, are the problem.

Prof. Jacob Steere-Williams asked what the College intends to do to accommodate faculty who have young children at home during the pandemic. He stressed the difficulties facing faculty members in this situation. Pres. Hsu replied that senior leadership has discussed assembling a task force on supporting faculty and staff. He said that he recognizes the importance of the issue and invites faculty to send suggestions gleaned from the practices of other institutions.

Senator Bob Mignone (SSM) asked for an update on state appropriations. Pres. Hsu replied that the state legislature has not yet passed a budget and will likely just pass another continuing resolution. Based on conversations with other university presidents, he believes funding for higher ed in the state will probably stay the same as last year.
Senator Mignone asked if there were other schools in South Carolina that had resumed face-to-face instruction and were doing okay. Pres. Hsu responded that other than USC, schools in the state were doing reasonably well, particularly smaller colleges.

Senator Elaine Worzala (Finance) asked why there does not appear to be testing on campus. Pres. Hsu and EVP of Student Affairs Alicia Caudill replied that we currently have arrangements with MUSC and other local sites for students to be tested; that there will be testing on campus this Thursday and Friday (Sept. 3 and 4), and that they hope to have the necessary equipment to do more testing later in the semester.

Prof. Steere-Williams asked for more information about the College’s finances and how they factored into the decision to return to in-person instruction. Pres. Hsu and VP for Business Affairs John Loonan answered that because the state has not passed a budget, we don’t have one. Mr. Loonan added that before the pandemic, the College was facing an $8.7 million budget deficit. We did believe that, if we went online-only, we would lose a lot of revenue, possibly around $40 million in tuition, fees, and services. Just by delaying the fall semester, auxiliary services took a significant hit. Now that we know our fall enrollment, we are going into a second round of contingency planning. Meanwhile, he said, we are also thinking about how this affects the spring semester and potential enrollment loss.

c. Provost Suzanne Austin thanked everyone for their sympathy and support over the past few months, and for the extra work they’ve done since the COVID outbreak.

Regarding the promotion and tenure calendar: her office is extending the deadline for submission of packets by two weeks, and candidates have the option of adding a one-page statement addressing the impact the pandemic has had on their work. Provost Austin emphasized that the evaluation of teaching is holistic, not overly reliant on course-instructor evaluations.

She encouraged faculty to focus on what we can control right now, which is the classroom experience of students. She said we should continue to help students learn what we think is important in our discipline. As expected, she and others in Academic Affairs have heard concerns about the remote learning environment, some of which stem from misunderstandings regarding asynchronous instruction. We need to educate students and parents about the nature and the potential advantages of asynchronous instruction. Meanwhile, we must think about how best to engage students productively in the subject matter of all our courses.

Provost Austin expanded on Pres. Hsu’s announcement that student retention would be the primary focus coming out of the strategic plan for this year. We will look for more ways to support students and to help as many as possible graduate within four years.
She discussed preliminary plans for a Faculty Development Center. Despite the current financial challenges, Provost Austin would like to begin a program of support for innovative teaching and learning strategies. Such a program would not duplicate the work of TLT, as it would not be tied explicitly to technology. One possibility (as an example) would be a certificate program for faculty, something that could serve as an additional credential for performance reviews.

Finally, Provost Austin expressed how much she looks forward to working with everyone and being able one day to meet in person.

Senator Jessica Streit (Art and Architectural History) asked if it might be possible to postpone the deadline for sabbatical proposals. Provost Austin said that it seemed like a reasonable request and that she would look into it.

5. New Business

a. Speaker Lewis: Resolution thanking Dean Fran Welch [PDF]

Prof. Hakkila suggested one correction: adding “Education” to the reference to the “School of Health and Human Performance.” Speaker Lewis said that we would make that correction. The motion passed by acclamation.

b. Committee on Academic Standards, Admissions, and Financial Aid (Meta Van Sickle, Chair): Course Alternative Math Policy [PDF]

Prof. Van Sickle explained that the proposed change to the undergraduate catalog would enable academic departments to allow students with approved accommodations to count alternative gen-ed math courses toward the major or minor. It would be up to individual departments to make this determination.

Sen. Mignone asked for some clarification as to the extent of this proposed change: under what circumstances it allows students to substitute courses for math requirements in their majors, and whether it would allow departmental substitutions for these courses on a case-by-case basis. Registrar Mary Bergstrom and Associate Provost Mark Del Mastro explained that the proposal simply allows a department to change its curriculum so that students with approved accommodations for the gen-ed math courses could count the alternative courses toward the major as well. They stressed that this change is separate from the issue of approving substitutions on a case-by-case basis. To allow students to meet program requirements with alternative courses, departments would have to change their curricula, stipulating specifically which alternative course(s) could apply to their degree program.
The motion passed by a vote of 37-4, with one abstention.

6. Constituents’ General Concerns

Professor Kris De Welde (Director of Women’s and Gender Studies) brought the senate’s attention to a letter the executive committee of Women’s and Gender Studies program sent to Interim Provost Welch. The letter outlines the differential impact of COVID-related disruptions on women and people of color. WGST is seeking formal support for the letter; she will send it to Speaker Lewis and share it through other venues. PDF

She explained that the letter urges administrators to intentionally and explicitly prioritize equity when making decisions about policies related to the pandemic. Race and gender should be an important part of these conversations.

For example, she said, research suggests that the recent move to extend the tenure clock, while well-intentioned, may contribute to inequities. Research also suggests that telecommuting results in increased household labor and stress on working women more than on working men.

The executive committee is calling for task forces and faculty committees, working closely with the administration, to make changes and revisions to policies and processes. She added that just being attentive to these issues without structures of accountability may exacerbate these problems.

Provost Austin added that she looks forward to working with the senate and others on campus to address these issues.

Professor Lisa Covert (History) announced that a small group of faculty met yesterday to revive the AAUP chapter on campus. The next meeting will be held on September 21. Feel free to email her for more information.

7. The meeting adjourned at 6:32.