Purpose of Submittal:
Lysa Rivera, Faculty Senate President, will brief the Board on recent activities of the Faculty Senate.
Good morning. Thank you very much for the opportunity to speak today. Because I was unable to meet you this August, I thought it might help to introduce myself. My name is Lysa Rivera. I’m an associate professor of English and have been at Western since 2007. I teach courses in multiethnic American literature.

Last week I had the pleasure of leading not only our first Senate meeting of the new academic year, but the first in-person meeting in two years. Although this year is just getting started, we had in front of us a very time-sensitive agenda item carried over from the previous year. This relates to the distribution of course evaluations. As a reminder, during the pandemic period when all or most courses were taught remotely, the Faculty Senate recommended a simple online form to be distributed for all courses. With the help of the University Office of Research, these online course evaluations forms have been what we have used for the past two and a half years. Unfortunately, the return rate of these course evaluations is significantly lower than in person evaluations. Because research persistently shows that the validity of assessment correlates directly with a strong response rate, faculty have been eager to return to print evaluations. Then last Fall, we learned that the previous technology utilized to read the scantron portion of the print course evaluations no longer worked. Faculty are eager to return to print evaluation forms, in part because we always benefit from constructive feedback, but more importantly because these evaluations serve a large role faculty reviews, promotions, and salary increases.

As always, where there are problems there are opportunities and this glitch was no exception. It prompted Senate to think more intentionally about the content and delivery of course evaluations moving forward. Partly by necessity (i.e. the defunct software) and partly in response to what faculty generally agree to be a limited tool for evaluating learning in the classroom, Senate decided to put together an ad hoc committee charged with developing a working set of new course evaluation questions to be used in a pilot project for this entire academic year. I chaired this committee, and our work took place over the summer. A few takeaways from our work are as follows:

1) There is a use for course evaluations: they provide a space for students to provide constructive feedback anonymously and without fear of repercussions. This sort of feedback serves faculty who want to understand what works and doesn’t work in a course and as a way for faculty to understand where they might improve, change or expand on content and assignments.

2) Research overwhelmingly shows that course evaluations are also spaces in which students express personal grievances and/or disagreements with faculty members. Rather than reflecting candidly on learning, their feedback evaluates the instructor.
3) Multiple studies have shown severe bias against faculty from marginalized identities including faculty of color, queer faculty, and women.

The new sets of questions we crafted were informed by these points and various ‘best practice’ models available to us online. We also revisited the old, pre-Covid questions, some elements of which were incorporated into the new question bank.

During last week’s Senate meeting we passed a motion to solicit feedback from our constituents across campus on how faculty would like to proceed. Given the robust and productive discussion we had in Senate yesterday, I am confident that whatever step we do take, it will reflect the general will of the faculty and will be in the best interests of both them and their students.

Outside of course evaluations, Senate also discussed a proposal to revise the membership by-laws the University Planning and Resource Council (UPRC). This proposal builds upon the work undertaken by UPRC last year (to strengthen its place in conversations about resource allocation) by redirecting the shift in focus of its membership in a way that centers faculty and promotes advocacy, transparency, and communication.

Thank you for your time today. Can I answer any questions?