

Report from Faculty Senate Brandon Dupont

December 8, 2023

Dear Trustees,

I have organized this report into two major parts. The first part summarizes a variety of structural issues related to the Senate and how we conduct our work, specifically focused on our standing committees. In the second part of the report, I summarize other actions of the Senate, focused primarily on our important role in providing a forum for updates and discussions of issues that are important to the faculty.

As I have mentioned in previous reports, one of my highest priorities as Senate president has been to reinvigorate the dormant Faculty Senate standing committees. This has been motivated by my view that the Faculty Senate cannot effectively engage in the shared governance processes that we value here at Western without the important work of its standing committees. Moreover, when the standing committees are not functioning, much of what they should be doing gets shifted to the full Senate, which can then impede our work.

I am pleased to report that we have reinvigorated the standing committees this fall. The Senate's Outreach and Continuing Education Committee (OCEC) is now staffed and meeting under the leadership of Jennifer Seltz. The OCEC provides advice and recommendations to the Vice Provost of Outreach and Continuing Education and the Senate and serves as a liaison between the faculty and the OCE. Given the initiatives now under the purview of OCE, I am glad that the Senate has a formal process for providing faculty perspectives to that office.

The Senate Library Committee (SLC) has also started meeting, now under the leadership of Chair Blanca Aranda. The SLC is charged with providing advice/recommendations to the Dean of Libraries and serving as a liaison between the faculty and the libraries. The committee has met twice this quarter, the first of which was an organizing meeting that I called where we discussed priorities for the committee, a 2022 CHSS-Libraries report, and ways to alleviate old tensions over library collections that had emerged between some faculty and the Library administration.

At its first fall quarter meeting, the Faculty Senate created a new ad hoc committee that is charged with conducting a comprehensive review of the Faculty Handbook. We have met twice thus far and are well on our way to crafting what I think are important updates to the handbook itself before turning our attention to the appendices, which include the bylaws of the Senate and its committees, the code of faculty ethics, and other important elements. These revisions will be reviewed by the Senate as they are completed, and the fully revised handbook will be brought to the Board of Trustees for your approval as soon as our work is completed.

At our most recent meeting on November 27, the Senate voted to restructure the University Planning and Resources Council (UPRC). We have had several conversations about this proposal at both the full Senate and Senate Exec throughout the fall quarter, and UPRC had these discussions through much of last year. The UPRC has therefore been disbanded and restructured into a Budget Representative and a Deputy Budget Representative who will sit on the Senate Exec and periodically lead budget-related discussions in the full Senate. These two representatives will also be voting members of the new University Budget Committee. We hope that this new structure will provide faculty with a more effective way to participate in budget conversations and to influence budget decisions, something the UPRC has struggled to do for several years.

Let me close this section of the report with some very positive news about the Faculty Senate office. First, I am excited to report that Dr. Michael Slouber, Professor in the Global Humanities and Religions Department and a specialist in the early medieval religions of India, has been elected as Senate Vice President and President-Elect. Michael is a thoughtful contributor to the Faculty Senate, and I have every confidence that the Senate will be in good hands under his leadership next year. I am also pleased to report that we successfully concluded a search for a new staff role in the Senate office with our hiring of Becky Johnston as Faculty Senate Specialist. Becky brings a wealth of experience to the office, including previous work in the education field, as executive director of the American Indian Health Commission of Washington, as Legislative Affairs Specialist for the National Congress of American Indians, and as a Legislative Assistant to Senator Byron Dorgan. I am very much looking forward to working with Becky over the remainder of my term.

One of the important roles of the Faculty Senate is to provide a forum for discussions about important university issues and initiatives. As such, the Senate has had conversations about a couple of important matters.

- (1) Enrollment Updates – At our October 16 meeting, we got an update on enrollment trends from AVP of Enrollment Management Shelli Soto. While there are clearly challenges remaining, my colleagues and I were pleased to see some positive trends in this update, including the second-largest first year cohort ever and a strong recovery in first generation students (24.2 percent of enrollment in Fall 2023 compared to 17.2 percent just a year ago). Furthermore, it is encouraging to see that nearly all the classes (96.4 percent) at our main Bellingham campus were face-to-face.
- (2) The Budget Situation - The Faculty Senate has provided a forum this quarter for important conversations about the university budget, which has been a hot topic on campus since the announcement of the 3 percent budget cuts last year. We got a budget update from Provost Johnson and VP for Business and Financial Affairs Joyce Lopes at our October 30 and November 13 meetings. As we implement the new Budget

Representative framework, we look forward to similar updates and discussions later in the academic year.

Looking ahead to the winter and spring quarters, I will mention a couple of discussions that are planned.

The first is focused on the challenging and complex issue of artificial intelligence (AI) in higher education and here at WWU. I have asked the Senators to gather input from their colleagues around campus to address two basic questions that will inform how we proceed: (1) Are faculty using AI in their work? If so, how? (2) What concerns do they have about AI on campus, particularly as it pertains to classroom assignments, research papers, etc?

I asked for this information to be submitted by the end of the fall quarter, but I have already received some valuable feedback from this fact-finding mission. I will be using this information to structure a conversation about best practices and the opportunities/challenges presented by AI to our work as faculty.

I plan to organize a Senate discussion about AI with guests from the Senate Academic Technology Committee (ATC), Academic Technology and User Service (ATUS), and the Center for Instructional Innovation and Assessment (CIIA). While these conversations will likely be ongoing, I hope that we can provide a forum in which we can discuss some best practices and provide faculty with other information/guidance.

Another issue that arose this fall is that of academic freedom and freedom of speech/expression in the wake of the horrific attacks in Israel and the subsequent conflict in Gaza. While it is important to me that we do not drift into the complex politics of conflict in the Middle East, the Faculty Senate does have an interest in the broader issue of free speech and academic freedom on campus. While we are still working out the details, the Senate will host a conversation about these issues, again with guests from around campus. My hope is that in addition to allowing faculty an opportunity to weigh on these issues, the conversation will help our ad hoc committee do its work on the Faculty Handbook revisions since Appendix 4 of the handbook is a statement on academic freedom. I think the ad hoc committee will benefit from hearing this full conversation at the Senate. Hopefully, these kinds of conversations can be ongoing in different venues as we seek to create a culture of open and respectful debate on campus.

Let me close this report by thanking you for the work you do on behalf of Western Washington University and for your attention to the issues that come before the Faculty Senate. I look forward to continuing to work with you for the remainder of the academic year.