**Faculty Senate Minutes**

Wednesday, September 28, 2022

JCK 880 and Zoom Meeting, 4:00-6:00 pm

**Attending Senators:** Taylor Acee, Stacey Bender, Dale Blasingame, Rachel Davenport, Peter Dedek, Farzan Irani, Jennifer Jensen, Ben Martin, Roque Mendez, Rebecca Bell-Metereau, Adetty Pérez de Miles, Andrew Ojede, Michael Supancic, Alex White

**Guests:** Lisa Ancelet, Angela Ausbrooks, Jesse Backstrom, Cynthia Hernandez, Laramie McWilliams, Vincent Morton, Aimee Roundtree, Karen Sigler, Gavin Steiger

The meeting began at 4:00 pm

**Student Absence Notification Process and Office of Disability Services** (Gavin Steiger, Director of Disability Services; Bobby Mason, Assistant Vice President for Institutional Compliance and Chief Compliance Officer; Cynthia Hernandez, Vice President for Student Affairs; Vincent Morton, Dean of Students).

This year there was a change to the student absence notification system on the Dean of Students website. Previously, a student would submit documentation to the Dean of Students and the documentation would be assessed for validity by staff. Now the system sends the information directly to the instructors. The senate was concerned by reports that students don’t seem to understand that their instructors will see all of the information that they are sending. Additionally, faculty relied on this system as a way to protect the privacy of their students by allowing a neutral advocate to review private details and relay a simple message to faculty.

Dean Morton explained that the system was never designed to ‘excuse’ absences. Rather, the role of the office was to verify the submitted information and relay this to faculty. Absence policies are strictly under the purview of instructors in accordance with their syllabi. Over time, students and faculty have come to rely on the system as a means to verify excused absences. COVID created an overwhelming volume of requests, prompting the change to the system. The Dean of Students office can still review documents when faculty have concerns about validity, but they are unable to continue to review every document.

A senator noted that faculty found the previous system to be valuable because it separates the process of judging the validity of an excuse from the process of teaching. Some faculty may become jaded and suspicious by being forced to repeatedly evaluate explanations. Dean Morton replied that their office is understaffed to process the number of requests that they receive, and that their staff also lack the expertise to fully vet submissions.

Vice President Hernandez commented that the system was being misapplied in syllabi. She proposed other ways for faculty to handle absences. One option is to not require documentation, or to reduce this requirement. In addition to challenges related to verification, documentation is problematic in other ways. For example, this requirement may place strain on the student health center due to students seeking documentation. One potential way to protect privacy while allowing for documentation is to prepare a simple template for medical practitioners that would omit private medical details.

A comprehensive student absence policy is being considered that would consolidate four different policies. The goal of this policy would be to clarify what types of absences would be excused, and what type of verification would be required in each case. Alternately, faculty may develop a policy in their syllabi that allows for a small number of absences that do not require an excuse. A senator noted that many faculty already do this, but this arrangement may be too inflexible in the midst of an ongoing health crisis. The senate is interested in working to develop a process that will help both faculty and students to share the necessary information to fairly evaluate student absences.

This fall, faculty have noticed a large increase in the number of accommodations requested from individual students, sometimes upwards of ten accommodations. However, when faculty meet with these students to discuss their needs, they often do not request all of their allowed accommodations. The office of disability services explained that there has been a large increase in the number of students requesting accommodations, up 33% over the past three years. This may in part be due to metal health issues associated with COVID. Online coursework also complicated accommodations, since some accommodations were inapplicable for some online/hybrid courses. Therefore, the system was changed to allow students to pick and choose their approved accommodations for each of their classes. This appears to have resulted in some students selecting many accommodations that are not ultimately needed.

Two accommodations were singled out as especially challenging for faculty to manage. Note takers have traditionally been difficult for both faculty and ODS to manage, so faculty were given some suggestions about how notes or course resources can be shared. For example, it was suggested that faculty assign random note takers to upload their notes to Canvas after each class. This has many potential side effects and problems, and a senator expressed concern about the potential damage caused by potentially inaccurate notes being shared between students. ‘Flexible attendance’ is another requested accommodation that has raised many questions. This accommodation is impossible in some courses, especially clinical and laboratory courses. Gavin Steiger clarified that this accommodation requires faculty consultation, and it is understood that not all accommodations are appropriate for all classes.

Senators asked for clarification, especially regarding which accommodations are expected and which are at the discretion of the instructor. A senator suggested that this could be presented in a ‘two tier’ system, clearly distinguishing accommodations that are course dependent (requiring faculty consultation), and those that should be granted to all students who qualify.

A senator expressed concern about the capacity of the testing center, given the rapid increase in the number of students requesting accommodations. The volume of students taking tests at the testing center is actually lower than it was pre-COVID, but it is expected to increase. The center is relocating to provide additional testing space.

**Personnel Committee Guidelines**.

A subcommittee condensed the recommendations of the Council of Chairs and the Faculty Senate drafts to create current guidelines draft. In general, the new document is less prescriptive, allowing individual departments and units to define their own criteria. Senators generally approved of the changes that were made and agreed that the guidelines achieve the two primary missions of the revision: to allow departments to include nontenure line faculty on their personnel committees, and to clearly define the role of an elected personnel committee chair. The senate voted to approve the guidelines with a noted revision.

**Questions for the President’s Academic Advisory Group (PAAG)**.

Senators identified several topics of importance for the upcoming meeting with President Damphouse.

1. Relatively few faculty (and no non-tenure line faculty) are serving on the two commissions and two task forces that are currently being organized. The senate is interested in learning about the process that was used to select membership.
2. President Damphouse recently met with the Texas Legislature to request additional funding for Texas State University to pursue its mission. The senate is interested in an update.
3. The senate would like to understand the long-term plan to fully integrate the Round Rock Campus into the Texas State community. Round Rock currently lacks many quality-of-life amenities such as food service, and the population of faculty and students on campus is very low.
4. The faculty senate is advocating that per-course faculty be eligible for the one-time bonus scheduled in November.

The senate approved of Dale Blasingame to serve on the Mariel M. Muir Excellence in Mentoring Award Selection Committee.

**Update on Faculty Title Series**

Starting next summer, new non-tenure line instructional positions will be advertised using proper titles (Assistant Professor of Instruction, etc.). In early spring of 2024, faculty will choose to opt in to the Faculty Title Series. A review period will follow prior to the fall semester for those who apply to enter at a rank higher than Assistant Professor. As the series is implemented, promotions would be official at the start of the fall 2024 semester. A salary increase will be associated with an increase in rank, but the faculty title series will not result in other types of raises. However, equity adjustments are being broadly considered prior to the implementation of this series.

**Minutes:** The senate voted to approve the September 21 minutes.

The meeting adjourned at 6:00 pm

Minutes submitted by Ben Martin