April Address to Trustees, “The Role of the Senate in the Purdue Family”

Patricia Hart

TRANSCRIPT

Today I would like to say a few words about how the University Senate works and how we can collaborate for the best outcomes for our beloved Purdue. This year I have thought a lot about what shared governance means. After a lot of meditation I have concluded that it is when every part of the Purdue family works together, sharing our particular types of expertise. The amount of participation is not the same on every issue. The important thing is to get the right balance at the right time. The University Senate can be an invaluable resource in this noble endeavor.

The voting members are 99 faculty people from around the West Lafayette campus and the other campuses, including the provost. There is one undergrad and one grad student, and the president and the treasurer also vote and have floor privileges.

Senators are apportioned between all of the ten traditional colleges based on faculty headcount, with the greatest number coming from Engineering, followed by Science, and then Ag. Together, those senators make up more than half of the body, and more than 80% of the senators represent the STEAM disciplines. So, you can see that the Senate looks like the priorities that you and the president have set for the university. Engineering is going to be apportioned more and more senators as their numbers continue to rise.

The senate has five standing committees that meet publicly and take minutes: Educational Policy, Faculty Affairs, Student Affairs, University Resources Policy, and Equity and Diversity. There are also important sub-committees, including Academic Organization and Budget Interpretation, Evaluation, and Review. Only one body, the Advisory Council to the President, does not take minutes. Everything said there is considered confidential. The Chairman of the Board of Trustees has the power to convene that committee at any time if he wants confidential input on any subject from 21 faculty people around campus and from every college. We would welcome him, or any other Trustee, to get us together or come in and ask anything you would like to know.

All of these committees work hard and soberly with dedicated members who take valuable time from well-respected and well-funded research projects and other responsibilities to help keep Purdue great. For one example, I always see in the front row Professor Wayne Campbell of Nutrition Science, who is one of the top grant-getting people in Health and Human Sciences. I am pretty impressed with who is willing to serve.

We in the Senate believe that there is much to be gained from harnessing these longstanding structures when the University makes major budgetary or academic decisions that affect us all. If ad-hoc committees are convened to tackle specific tasks, we think they should operate openly, take minutes, and post them online. This is a public university. This way the senators can do their job of vetting policies and seeking input from around campus. That is not a very smooth and easy way of doing things, but we think it is a pretty good one. Many eyes on the matter bring
different perspectives so that shortcomings are caught and corrected, and creative contributions can be made.

Right now we have before us the prospect of revolutionizing the way that academic space is used in the university. Large issues are at stake here, from the utilization of the active learning spaces to increased centralization of scheduling. These decisions should not be made unilaterally at the top. We think it is vital in this process that the Senate has active participation through the University Resources Policy Committee and other groups, so that there is a chance for the stakeholders to participate and give valuable insight. I think you will find that it is useful to hear what the Senate can say. This is the transparent path and, without a doubt, it is not the shortest or the easiest, but it is the way to get the best results.

Overall, the Senate is a thoughtful and hard-working body, and we are anxious to share and help the governance of the university whenever it is appropriate. There is a lot of talent there, so please know that we are always ready to work for the good of Purdue.

Do you have any questions for me?