University Senate Chair Remarks

October 21, 2019

Late last week I was at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor for the Big Ten Academic Alliance meetings. In attendance were the Senate Chairs and other Senate leadership from each of the Big Ten institutions. There were a number of important topics discussed including admissions and enrollment, sexual harassment, online education, and faculty life. When delivering our institutional reports outlining key dimensions of University Senate on our respective campuses, a common theme emerged on the challenges faced regarding shared governance. Many universities reported shared governance was confined primarily to topics related to curriculum and instruction, and thus faculty voice was limited in this regard. Some noted that shared governance is dependent in a large part on having a healthy relationship between the administration and the Senate, and thus the efficacy of shared governance fluctuates as a result. Other institutions reported there was little to no shared governance at their university. A bit of an outlier among the group, Michigan State University reported a notable improvement in shared governance over the past few years, and said they were pleased with
increased inclusion of faculty voice. The MSU Senate leadership attributed this improvement directly to the fallout of the Nassar scandal\(^1\).

Earlier last week, I was debriefed on the 2018 COACHE\(^2\) survey results. While COACHE has been discussed in other venues, during this meeting I was reminded of the extent to which faculty at Purdue are dissatisfied with governance. Indeed, according to the analysis, the five benchmarks on governance were the lowest ranked benchmarks at Purdue. Moreover, we were in the bottom 30% of the cohort (109 institutions), and were well below our 5 peer institutions in terms of faculty satisfaction with governance. For example, sample survey items on governance asked the following: “institutional decisions are not made until consensus between faculty and senior administration is reached,” as well as “faculty have equal say in

\(^1\) Dr. Larry Nassar is currently serving life in prison for sexual abusing more than 200 girls and young women while serving as an osteopathic physician and team doctor at Michigan State. Evidence suggests MSU administration were aware of complaints of abuse as early as 2016, if not sooner, and had not adequately responded to remove Nassar from his position.

\(^2\) COACHE: Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, a job satisfaction survey coordinated by Harvard University. Purdue has participated in COACHE since 2012. Survey theme on governance: "Shared governance" means something different to each group on a college campus. Whatever the definition, we know that governance is working when faculty, administrators, and other stakeholders listen respectfully to different perspectives and then work together to make decisions aligned with their shared understanding of their institution's best interests. Our instrument draws specific attention to the faculty's own communication and decision-making structures, on the culture among faculty, and on the working interactions between faculty leaders and senior administrators.
governance matters.” These two items specifically had only 12% and 10% respectively of faculty rating these items a 4 or 5 – in other words, indicating over 90% of faculty expressed some level of dissatisfaction on these items.

A few weeks ago, I received the following question from a Senator. Since President Daniels is not able to attend the meeting due to schedule conflict, I have been asked to respond. Here is the question:

Being new to the Senate, I would like to better understand the process through which Senate resolutions are handled after they have been voted on by this body. It appeared to me that the administration communicated their response to the voter ID resolution with the press, rather than to the Senate. Is this the normal process through which I should expect to learn of how resolutions are handled by the administration? Or would it be of value for us to work together to formalize a process in which the administration communicates with the Senate prior to discussing Senate resolutions with reporters?

In response to this Senator’s question, I direct us to our bylaws (Article 1, 1.00) which state:
The University Senate is the governing body of the faculty and it exercises the legislative and policy-making powers assigned to the faculty, subject only to review and check by the faculty by established procedures (Article VI). Therefore, subject to the authority of the Board of Trustees and in consultation with the President, it has the power and responsibility to propose or to adopt policies, regulations, and procedures intended to achieve the educational objectives of Purdue University and the general welfare of those involved in these educational processes.

One of the roles of the University Chair is to expedite and implement University Senate actions (Article 3.21). I have found in many instances the University Senate has been quite successful in collaborating and communicating with the administration. As a result, there have been productive conversations and positive outcomes. While some may not always agree and while the outcomes may not be what we hoped, the important dimension of shared governance is that we are able to develop and foster healthy relationships and that we are present at the table when the opportunity presents itself.

Yet, in light of these recent events I have outlined with you today, I am reminded of my Vice-Chair election speech I delivered in spring of 2018. Since many of you
were not on the Senate at the time, and since most of you probably don’t remember my speech, I thought it appropriate to share excerpts as it relates to my remarks to you today:

From my vantage point, it seems that the Senate has had varying levels of success influencing and impacting the decisions of the University. This can be discouraging for those who have differing perspectives or viewpoints regarding the process by which decisions are ideally made. Yet, as a 2009 Chronicle of Higher Education article noted, shared governance is “not a matter of committee consensus.” True shared governance, “attempts to balance maximum participation in decision making with clear accountability. That is a difficult balance to maintain… Genuine shared governance gives voice (but not necessarily ultimate authority) to concerns common to all constituencies as well as to issues unique to specific groups.”

I went on to say,

The Chair of the Senate plays an important role in communicating the collective faculty voice to the administration and wider campus and academic community. At the same time, I have heard from faculty who are disheartened or discouraged, and who question the extent to which our voice “matters.” I too find myself asking what impact the University Senate has on
the decision-making processes of the Administration (...). Yet, I believe the University Senate has an important role to play, and so despite reservations we may or may not have regarding the impact of our voice, we must also continue to work pragmatically and strategically on those areas where we can affect positive progress. If given a voice, if offered a seat at the table, I believe we should take advantage of those opportunities and have our voice heard. If and when the outcome is not as we had hoped, we must keep moving forward, and keep sitting at the table.

Now fast forward to today October 21 2019. As University Chair, I feel the same sentiments I expressed nearly two years ago in my Vice Chair election speech. Yet, I have witnessed success when we have a seat at the table, when we are able to work collaboratively with the administration on issues and concerns both “common to all constituencies as well as issues unique to specific groups.” Some may have found the immediate response to the media regarding the Voter ID resolution passed in September less than ideal. However, through conversation we were able to work with the administration to determine a feasible and reasonable approach to fulfilling the intent of the resolution. I’m pleased to report the “grace period” for students to return their old student ID and get a replacement is this
week, October 21-25. Moreover, the sports wagering policy\(^3\) was a collaborative effort by which faculty, Senate committees, Senate leadership, Administration and the Board of Trustees were able to work together to arrive at a policy that upholds our values and sends a powerful message across campus that demonstrates our respect and support of our student-athletes. It is these moments where my faith in shared governance is strengthened.

It is my hope that the administration can continue to work collaboratively and in good faith with the University Senate and vice-versa. At the end of the day, we all want what is best for the university. The challenge before us is arriving at a common consensus as to what that means.

Thank you.

\(^3\) [https://www.purdue.edu/policies/ethics/iii5.html](https://www.purdue.edu/policies/ethics/iii5.html)