Officers’ Musings for August, 11, 2014

Hope you have a relaxing and/or productive summer!  Now that we are drawing near to the beginning of the Fall semester, we wanted to update you on some of the issues the Faculty Senate and Exec will be dealing with shortly.  It has been a busy summer, and the Departmental Success Taskforce, in particular, has forwarded several items to Exec already, with more to come after their August 12 meeting.  The Taskforce has been co-chaired by the Provost and Virgil Sheets, and its members include: John Conant, Concetta DePaolo, Lindsey Eberman, Lea Hall, Kandi Hill-Clarke, Chris MacDonald, David Malooley, Paul Schikora, and Keri Yousif.

We have had the assurance of the administration that all recommendations from the Taskforce will go through the governance process before being put into action.  Some of the changes may be controversial, so it is important that this process be followed, and that we give each of them a complete hearing.  The Senate leadership will also insist that effective faculty development be provided where needed, particularly with regard to the recommendations that require the use of technology.

Rather than dramatically revamping what a department is or what the role of the chair should be, the focus has been on addressing specific issues identified by faculty; departmental chairs and staff; and students.  In addition it has been important to both the Taskforce, and the Senate leadership, to strengthen department chairs while maintaining them as primarily faculty, rather than as administrators.  To that end, the Taskforce has created recommendations for new Handbook and Biennial Review Process language that will serve to tighten up loopholes and put into writing what many good faculty are already doing.

Included in these Taskforce recommendations will be the need for faculty to:

1. Post assignment grades on Blackboard in a timely manner (two weeks unless a good rationale is provided in the syllabus)
2. Maintain and appropriately post office hours
3. Respond to email and phone communication in a timely way

Additionally, a new course evaluation system is currently being sought to replace SIRs and e-SIRs.  The new system will allow for a standard block of questions to be asked for every course, with sections that will also be customizable by colleges, departments, and individual faculty.  It should also be possible to use the same system to have students evaluate their advisors as well.  With this in mind, the Taskforce will also be recommending that all faculty:

1. Have students evaluate every course using a standard course evaluation form (the results of which should be included in pretenure, promotion, and biennial reviews)
2. Have their advisees evaluate their advising in a similar way (although whether this belongs in service or teaching is left up to departments)

Also, the Taskforce has clarified the section of the Handbook on student absences, and included in the Handbook a statement that **not** all “courses” need to be treated the same and that some common sense should apply to these requirements.  Thus, dissertation hours would not require a syllabus, textbooks, final examinations, or course evaluations; while independent studies courses may or may not, depending on their nature.

In addition, in terms of the biennial review, it is recommended that no faculty shall be eligible for “Meets Expectations” or “Exceeds Expectations” who demonstrates a chronic and willful neglect of minimum requirements of professional standards and behavior as outlined in the University Handbook provisions under teaching responsibilities.

The Taskforce is still discussing a number of items, included in which are:

1. Handbook language which will allow chairs to deny across-the-board raises to underperforming faculty in non-biennial-review years, so that chairs will not have to wait two years to react to or recognize underperforming faculty.
2. Clarification of the process of evaluating faculty, so that when an apparent deficiency in performance occurs,  the departmental personnel committee will be consulted (and the faculty can no longer choose whether to involve the committee or not).  This will both aid the committee, in that they will have more information when performing faculty reviews, but also the faculty member in question, as the committee may be able to provide additional context for that faculty member’s behavior.
3. Clarification of the role of departmental chair
4. Additional recommendations regarding mentorship of faculty and interdisciplinary work
5. A definition of departmental success

Again, the administration agrees that all of the recommendations coming from the Taskforce will go through appropriate governance processes.

 As a reminder, all approved minutes from Faculty Senate and Executive Committee meetings are posted on the Senate website: The Senate web address is <http://www.indstate.edu/facsenate/> and minutes can be found at <http://www.indstate.edu/facsenate/minutes1.htm> .