Officer Musings

January 15, 2014

It has been a while since we have delivered to you a Musings, so here is a somewhat long start-of-semester and catch-up version. There are many issues on which we will comment here. From Faculty voting rights (specifically instructor voting rights); to Biennial Reviews; to issues relating to reported violations of handbook policies on Study Week, Final’s Week, and class meetings; to Wellness; to Commencement; to Budgets; to the struggles some programs are going through to get under 71 hours; to the struggle some faculty have experienced with getting adequate orders and information on textbooks; these issues have piled up since Thanksgiving. We will take them one at a time.

At the November meeting of the Faculty Senate, the FAC proposal to extend voting rights to Instructors on the selection and removal of chairpersons was rejected. Instructors have the right to vote in departments but, like votes on promotion and tenure, there are areas where voting rights are limited to particular classes of faculty. The FAC proposal, which Exec endorsed unanimously, would have allowed Instructors to vote on the selection and removal of chairpersons. The, in retrospect, convincing argument was made by some Senators that chair removal decisions, in particular, are always contentious and leave vulnerable faculty, particularly those in the Instructor ranks, in very bad positions. When the vote went against the proposal, the President decided that he would take the issue to the Board of Trustees. His argument is that the significantly improved status of Instructors (multi-year contracts, the right to vote in departments on general issues, the right to serve on committees and have their vote count, as well as the economic benefits associated with their higher salary and availability of benefits) should not only give them increased rights and benefits, but also require from them responsibilities commensurate with their improved status. The Board will decide the issue in March. The Executive Committee will assemble the views of faculty (Instructors as well as Tenured and Tenure-track faculty) on this subject and Chairperson Lamb will report those to the Board at that time.

Moving on to Biennial Reviews, we congratulate those faculty who were recognized, as well as pledge a thorough review of what went well and what did not during the process. The Provost and Deans have organized their thoughts regarding the process. We want faculty to weigh-in as well. Please direct those comments directly to the Chairperson of FAC (Darlene Hantzis) or to the Executive Committee Liaison to FAC (Tim Hawkins).

The Thanksgiving break, positioned where it was such that there was only Study Week between the Friday before Thanksgiving and Final’s week, resulted in Handbook violations almost too numerous to count. Faculty canceled classes during study week. Faculty canceled classes prior to Thanksgiving. Some gave no final or required no final project in lieu of a final. Some faculty, apparently behind their desired course pace, included tests and other major assignments (which had not appeared in their syllabi) during study week violating the 4% standard. (No assignment can be due or test given in an undergraduate class when it counts more than 4% of the course grade. A paper can be due during that week if it is in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester.) Some faculty gave their final during their last class period rather than during final’s week. There were many reported combinations of these violations. This, of course, is on top of the students whose attendance also waned badly during this time. The Provost is concerned that these Handbook violations went unaddressed. We, the Executive Committee, firmly and resolutely back the Provost on these issues. We do so for several reasons, but two are sufficient to make the point. First, we are professionals who ought to behave professionally, and second, the Handbook affords us extraordinary protections and influence over our workplace and we cannot demand that the administration live by the provisions of it, if we take a blind eye to our colleagues’ violations of it.

Now (on the Road to Wellness) we take up the issue of unpacking the pounds some of us put on during the holiday season. Many of us participated in the Wellness Initiative screenings. Those of us who had measurements indicative of health concerns are going to be (if they have not already) contacted by one of two health contractors to offer their services as health coaches. There are three points we have been asked to convey and emphasize. First, IT IS VOLUNTARY. Second, ISU has and will have no record of who the affected employees are. Third, IT IS VOLUNTARY…if you think that you could be helped by having a professional work with you on health issues, you are encouraged to make use of the offered assistance.

We recognize it is only January, but something new will happen at graduation that you, your students, and their families should start preparing for now. If you teach a course that caters to graduating seniors, you are encouraged to tell your students that starting in May, graduating seniors will be granted a limited number (probably 5) tickets for loved ones to attend graduation. This is a direct result of having an increasing number of freshmen starting four years ago. Because we have continued that success, this will probably be the new normal. Nancy Rogers is coordinating this effort and will be sending out a formal announcement. Please tell your seniors to tell their families of this new process.

In December, the Governor announced a budget rescission because revenue was falling behind projections. The President outlined the impact to ISU in his last UPDATE in December. There will be cuts. Academic Affairs preliminary portion is $500,000. The Provost has asked the AVPs and Deans to consider what they would recommend were that portion to be the final decision on cuts and to enumerate the consequences of those cuts. Some (not all, some) of the departments authorized by the Provost in November to search for faculty, were asked to communicate the budgetarily contingent nature of their searches to applicants.

The policy passed last year regarding long programs also deserves comment. We understand that the policy requires directed Foundational Studies courses (for instance the requirement that Social Work students complete Psychology 101) be counted to the major and not within the hours of Foundational Studies. We supported that rule because students who transfer to ISU or change majors within ISU should not have to redo portions of their Foundational Studies that they have previously completed, and if they do, it should count as a course in the major. However, the officers believe that once a student is a junior or senior, taking courses designed for juniors and seniors, they have locked in on the major. The UDIE courses and the upper division composition requirement are courses designed for juniors and seniors and directing those student to take specific courses to meet those requirements seems perfectly legitimate and it is reasonable that they should double count for the major and Foundational Studies. As an illustration with which we are familiar, it should not be imagined that a student would have taken English 305 and then have transferred into the College of Business. That just doesn’t happen frequently enough to require that the College of Business cut another 3 hours from their curriculum for all students. As officers, we are and will continue to work with the administration to make this reasonable modification of the interpretations regarding the long-programs rule.

Finally, something where we can all become righteously indignant against the administration… (understand, that is necessary for good mental health)… textbooks and the apparently endemic problems faculty and students are having relative to the bookstore. We have heard of some serious problems associated with book unavailability (resulting from significant under-ordering by the bookstore) and of a serious lack of communication between the bookstore and departments/faculty. After having been constantly reminded by the administration for failure of faculty to order books in a timely fashion, we are ready to become unhinged by the reports we are hearing. If you are similarly experiencing bookstore frustrations, you are asked to route them through your Chair, who will assemble them and pass them to the Dean and Provost.

We are very pleased that the Provost has expressed the President’s willingness to address these issues with the urgency they require.