Officer’s Musings

September 24, 2013

Though there were no action items on the September Faculty Senate agenda, it was nevertheless a productive meeting in that a significant discussion took place on three issues about which you are likely to have an opinion. Those three issues were: the new policy regarding non-full-time adjunct faculty prohibiting them from teaching more than 9 credit hours in a semester; the need for the entire faculty and departments to take a stake in the retention and graduation efforts of the University; and the need (perceived by the administration) to create a system of evaluation for departments above that which was created last year that provided for a process of dealing with departments that were no longer “viable.” Taking these in order…

 The President and Provost were asked, quite pointedly and appropriately by the temporary faculty advocate regarding the 9-hour limit policy. The policy is motivated by the Affordable Care Act provision requiring large employers (defined as those having more than 50 employees) to provide health insurance for their full-time employees (defined as working more than 30 hours in a week). The 2-hours-out-of-class-for-every-hour-in-class rule-of-thumb for students became the basis for estimating how much time a faculty member spends per week either delivering, preparing, or grading materials for a class. So 9 was chosen because (2+1)x9=27  and is less than 30.

 Concerns were expressed by faculty regarding the morality of the policy (which has the effect of both reducing the earning potential of our part-time faculty while also denying them health insurance) and the consequence of the policy on students (placing more of them in the hands of less experienced adjuncts when fully capable adjuncts were available).  The President addressed these concerns by both saying that we cannot have employees “accidentally” become benefits eligible, and  that deans and department chairpersons would work quickly to move as many part-time adjuncts to full-time benefits eligible positions and multi-year contract positions as instructors as enrollment projections and budgets would allow. Because we have a sizable difference between our Fall and Spring enrollments, that will still mean that we will have need for part-time adjuncts in the fall and those will be limited, quite strictly, to 9 credit hours.

 The President finished this conversation by expressing a concern that some of our regular faculty and more of our part-time faculty are teaching a combined number of credit hours across several institutions that is excessive and that doing so is depriving our students of the time and diligence of these faculty. He has been urging FAC and the Executive Committee to redo section 503 of the Handbook on outside employment. That brought a retort from the temporary faculty advocate that teaching multiple courses on multiple campuses is required to maintain minimum economic viability for her family. To say the least, we have not heard the last of this topic.

 Board members were, in their June meeting, particularly interested in ensuring that departments were working on the issues of retention and graduation and faculty were not treating the creation of the University College and new freshman advising system as reasons to believe that departments were not responsible for the success of their students. About this they were adamant. As a result, the administration believes that we have a need for retention and student success plans (those that AVP Josh Powers is pushing departments to create.) We know of no department that is averse to helping students succeed but we also know of no department that is enjoying the task of developing another report that necessitates future annual reports. The discussion at Senate on Thursday regarding retention and success was multi-faceted.

 Some Senators were concerned that our focus on increasing the success rates of poorer students could take time away from better students who have a genuine likelihood of graduation and who may transfer if they are not sufficiently challenged here. Other Senators were concerned that the quality of the students, overall, had diminished in recent years and were concerned that no action on our part could rectify a student failing to go to class or do the work. The President acknowledged the legitimacy of both concerns yet indicated that we needed to do better by all of our students. In particular, he indicated a need for departments to take particular action to improve the experiences of first year students. He is aware that we dislike spending so much time justifying ourselves but he seems convinced that the worst of that wave is yet to come. He views these efforts as necessary to insulate us from a University of Phoenix model of higher education.

 Regarding departments, the Executive Committee and the administration have been working on a revision to section 351 of the Handbook regarding departments and it appears likely that we are headed for a taskforce on the topic. The administration, on behalf of the Board, appears set on creating an evaluation system for departments that is analogous to the biennial review process for faculty. This is because the Board of Trustees wants to hold departments accountable for progress regarding their contribution to University goals. We, the officers and Exec, see this as potentially overbearing and onerous and we are working to reduce that potential. We do not imagine we will be capable of reducing the burden to zero, but our goal will be to make the process as simple and as efficient as possible.  What we are hoping will be the outcome is a requirement that department develop (if it does not already have one) a mission statement, a list of goals, benchmarks, and measures that will be used to determine whether the department is successful, unsuccessful, or potentially subject to merger/abolition. We hope that the bulk of the data collection will be performed by the administration and that any reports will be minimal. We also hope to ensure the process is developmental in nature, especially for those departments noted by the process to have fallen short of their goals.