Officer Musings

October 10, 2013

This was another light week of action items at Exec and another interesting week of discussions. After providing more context to last week’s discussion of student faculty ratios, we’ll use this week’s musing to give you a look in to the issues we are tracking. Those issues are: the composition of peer review committees for Instructors and Lecturers; health insurance premiums, how the system for determining them has changed, and how that new system will impact people differently; and how ISU’s Study Abroad students were impacted by Financial Aid issues this summer. Before moving on, though, as part of the Strategic Plan’s Goal 6 (Enhancing the Quality of Life of Faculty and Staff), the university is conducting climate surveys starting next week. We ask that all faculty look out for that survey invitation in an email.

Regarding last week’s discussion of student-faculty ratios, the officers and provost agreed to work on a rational measure that would consider course releases that are officially recognized (chairperson, director, etc.), as well as other complicating factors (like unpaid leaves, grant buyouts, etc). To be clear, we agreed to continue talking about these issues. We haven’t agreed to any details. However, there appears to be reasonable consensus about the importance of officially recognized course release assignments. We do think that the goal of the Provost is in line with ours: to come up with a measure against which departments can be judged both in terms of performance and in terms of faculty line requests.

What is also clear is that the blunt measure (a snapshot headcount of students relative to a snapshot headcount of faculty) will continue to be the measure against which the university tracks its progress for the state. If this is the approach used by all of the institutions reporting to the state, then it is less of an issue.

On the topic of peer review committees, we encourage every department with an Instructor\* or with a full-time Lecturer\*\* to read Handbook section 305.11. It is new as of February. It requires that a department with at least two Instructors to include one of them on a peer review committee that evaluates Instructors and similarly requires a department with at least two Lecturers to include one of them on a peer review committee that evaluates Lecturers. As part of the discussion of this new policy, President Bradley questioned the wisdom of extending to Lecturers the same level of participatory rights and expectations granted Instructors. The officers will re-visit the issue with the Provost and seek the counsel of FAC should a change be thought wise. On that topic, the President continued to reiterate a desire to move Lecturers that were performing well into Instructor roles.
\*Instructors are non-tenure track faculty member on a multi-year contract.
\*\*Lecturers are full or part-time faculty on a one-semester or one-year contract.

On Health Insurance premiums there was a joint request by R. Guell and S. Lamb that the premiums announced last week be re-evaluated in light of their observations (verified by C. Rogers in Business Affairs) that the new premium rules would transfer a significant portion of the health insurance premium burden off of relatively well paid faculty and administrators and to relatively less well paid staff. Specifically, there have been two important changes: the elimination of the tier-based system (replaced by a poverty-line based subsidy system) and the replacement of ISU salary with family income as the measure against which the subsidy standard would be applied. These have combined to cause individuals in families with current salaries/wages below $28,500 but with combined family incomes above $39,000 to see a projected premium increase of more than $100 per month. At the same time, those earning more than $81,000 could well see $25 or more premium decreases. The President responded by reminding us that the recommendations on the system changes were reviewed and endorsed by the University Health Benefits Review Committee (a combined committee of faculty and staff). We were pleased that the President did feel that the concerns expressed by S. Lamb and R. Guell were substantive and should be passed on to the Committee for their reevaluation.

Finally, there was a concern raised at Exec by T. Hawkins that policies of the University’s Financial Aid Office were having the effect of creating a disincentive to study abroad experiences for our students. He specifically referenced a requirement that our Financial Aid Office imposed on students that they produce transcripts for their study abroad classes before financial aid for the subsequent term would be released. Moreover, he was concerned that this was communicated to students in an unnecessarily terse fashion. After a thorough discussion, it was agreed that there was a very short window between the end of most study abroad experiences and the beginning of a new term for documentation to be produced. It was agreed that the President would ask J. Beacon and C. Baker to see if there wasn’t a process by which appropriate and intermediate forms of documentation might enable subsequent term financial aid to flow. It was also agreed that the Financial Aid Office could not allow loose procedures in this area because of the Federal government’s penchant for exacting incredibly tight and invasive audits with potentially extraordinarily significant consequences associated with failure to comply with Financial Aid regulations.

The meeting was productive