Faculty Affairs Committee//Annual Report AY 2019/20

FAC met seven times during the year. Several of the meetings were joint meetings with other Academic Senate committees, including Curriculum and Instruction Committee and Student Affairs Committee.

In the Fall, FAC and CIC jointly met with guests Boris Baltes (Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs, David Strauss (Dean of Students), and Nikolina Camaj (Conduct Officer, Dean of Students Office) to discuss grade appeals and academic dishonesty/misconduct procedures. The main concerns of the two committees were the lack of clarity as to the role of faculty, as distinct from departmental and college/school administrators, or even the Provost Office, in the appeal process. A Chair can investigate matters as they see fit and there is no formal process to guarantee that a faculty member will be heard, nor is there the possibility for a faculty member to appeal. The committees agreed that a policy needs to be developed that protects faculty members in the grade appeal and misconduct processes. Schools and colleges, and perhaps even departments, should be encouraged to draft policies that give faculty members, rather than Chairs and Deans, a substantial say in the processing of grade appeals and potential sanctioning of academic misconduct, while students should continue to have the right to due process.

A second important set of concerns discussed in the Fall pertain to LGBTQ+ student life and academic programming. Guest Stuart Baum (President of the Student Senate) presented the latter’s recently adopted Resolution that asks for administrative investment of resources in LGBTQ+ diversity and inclusion by adding a full-time position to oversee student life, as well a full-time Faculty (director) position to coordinate and expand the currently severely underfunded and understaffed Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies program. FAC fully supports the Student Senate resolution, which was forwarded to the Policy Committee, which equally expressed its support. Follow-up on this issue is required in light of the current tightening of the budget under COVID19, a situation in which it will be likely that even a relatively small investment in marginalized groups such as LGBTQ+ people and under-resourced programs, such as GSW, may easily fall by the wayside.

AnnMarie Caño informed the committee of the various initiatives and activities her office had developed and undertaken in the previous academic year. A new two-day faculty orientation has been implemented and a range of additional professional development programs were offered. FAC was pleased to hear about these activities and furthermore applauded Dr. Caño’s efforts to increase possibilities for academic recognition and for initiating award processes that limit the operations of gender and racial bias in faculty recognition.

FAC additionally focused on issues around the new Title IX guidelines and on approaches to Consensual Relations among faculty, staff, and students. Guests Brandy Banks (Title IX Director), Nicky Wright (Office of Equal Opportunity and Assistant Vice President), and Linda Galante (Associate General Counsel—since retired) discussed and consulted the committee on a draft policy concerning expectations of consensual relations at WSU. Most universities have such policies in place; WSU does not. The draft includes definitions of Unequal Power Relationships and Sexual and Gender-Based Harassment that should assist in addressing other forms of workplace violence as well, such as bullying. While the committee continues to have concerns about the the possible consequences of violations and the enforcement of the policy, members generally agreed that its development is a step in the right direction. Still, the committee also stipulated that, in addition to implementing policies such as these, an effort should be made to spread awareness of the seriousness of certain forms of illegal and/or inappropriate sexual and gendered behavior, and that a concerted educational outreach plan should be developed in order to promote an overall cultural shift around sexual violence, harassment, and bullying.

Early in 2020, FAC discussed the Report produced by the Ad Hoc committee on academic transparency. The committee was formed because of serious concerns around the use of the Academic Analytics and Academic Performance databases, recently purchased by the upper administration; software “suites” that offer comparative data analysis for strategic planning through discipline-specific online analytic tools. The FAC fully supported the recommendations of the Ad Hoc committee, but further recommends that a) the Provost’s Office provides an annual report on the use and usefulness of data generated by these software “suites” (the report should provide insight into what purpose these data will serve; b) that the Provost’s Office provides a report—prior to negotiations of the new contract—which reviews the use(fulness) of the systems, including processes such a data validation and communication (90 days before the Unions and the university enter these negotiations).

FAC discussed the Final Report of the 3N Committee on Online Learning (June 18, 2019) and remains concerned that the report does not address fundamental questions around the types of online coursework that adequately serve certain segments of the student population. The report offers recommendations to the Provost concerning compensation, student service support, and faculty training, but does not address questions around best practices, and policy conflicts between Deans’ offices and the university administration. The FAC will need to gather more information and have additional conversations with the Provost and OTL in order to make additional recommendations.

FAC and CIC met jointly to discuss the Provost’s Interdisciplinary Hiring Initiative with guests Keith Whitfield (Provost) and Boris Baltes (Associate Provost for Faculty Affairs). Whereas the Provost and Associate Provost provided ample information about the process and procedures around the initiative, FAC (&CIC) remain skeptical about the fact that the faculty are largely eclipsed from the determination of hiring initiatives and that decisions about “topics” or “themes” are made outside the purview of faculty perception of hiring needs within schools, colleges, and individual departments.

The final meeting of the academic year was a joint meeting with Student Affairs Committee and centered on the Inclusive Access Billing system, which was narrowly prevented from being simply announced by Tim Michaels (Associate Vice President for Student Auxiliary Services and Chief Housing Officer) and Jodi Young (CEO of the B&N university bookstore) after an intervention by the Policy Committee in the midst of the COVUD19 outbreak and the lockdown of the campus. The Committees’ major concerns revolve around the lack of faculty consultation, the fact that the system is opt-out, rather than opt-in, the list of publishers involved is limited to the large corporate, for-profit publishers, and thus narrows down the range of potential course materials, and last but by no means least, that it is the CEO of the bookstore rather than qualified librarians and expert faculty who is making decisions about teaching/learning materials and access to these materials. The proposed (but not yet disseminated) announcement of the system appears to co-opt OER terminology, which is misleading to both students and faculty. It is furthermore unclear if this billing system (or change in course fee & billing practices) requires a change in the current BOG policy. Additionally, it is absolutely not clear that the system will, in effect, lead to lower costs for students. Faculty are concerned that a department or program Chair can unilaterally decide that individual faculty have to use the system—rather than opt-out. The committees ultimately agreed that a pilot project is necessary to see what benefits or lack thereof these changes in the course fee and billing system would entail. This recommendation was accepted by the Policy Committee and presented to the Provost, who agreed to comply with it.

Respectfully submitted,

renée c. hoogland, Chair