WAYNE STATE UNIVERSITY

Department of Economics
College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
2145 Faculty/Administration Building
Detroit, Michigan 48202
(313) 577-3235/ Fax (313) 577-9564
E-mail: allen.goodman@wayne.edu
web: http://www.econ.wayne.edu/agoodman/

December 9, 2019

Dr. Linda Beale
President Academic Senate
Wayne State University

Re Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Transparency

Dear Dr. Beale,

Please find enclosed a report prepared by the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Transparency. In this report, we detail our proceedings, interviews, and data-finding activities, and we present four recommendations for further action. I am submitting this report to you in my role as Committee Chair.

I am grateful to the Committee members for their enthusiasm, cooperation, and input into the process.

Sincerely yours,

Allen C. Goodman
Professor of Economics and Committee Chair

Inception

In June 2019, the Academic Senate Policy Committee convened an ad hoc committee to look at the use of proprietary databases and algorithms by WSU administrators, as part of their decision-making processes. There were general concerns raised about:

1. The quality of the databases.
2. The nature of the proprietary algorithms used.
3. The process by which those with access to the system used the databases.
4. The cost to the University of acquiring these database systems.

Appointed Committee Members were:

Allen C. Goodman, Professor, Economics – Committee Chair
Loren J. Schwiebert, Associate Professor and Department Chair, Computer Science
John A. Rothchild, Professor, Law
Michael J. Krall, Associate Professor, Social Work
Elizabeth L. Stoycheff, Associate Professor, Communication, Fine, Performing and Communication Arts
Richard T. Lerman, Director of Computing Services and Part-time Faculty in Information Systems Management, Mike Ilitch School of Business
Paul J. Beavers, Coordinator for Assessment, University Libraries

Meetings and Activities

The Committee met by phone during the summer term, and scheduled meetings with the following representatives of the University Administration:

> Darin Ellis, Associate Provost for Academic Programs and Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness
> Daren Hubbard, Chief Information Officer and Associate Vice President for Computing and Information Technology
> Meihua Zhai, Assistant Vice President, Office of Institutional Research and Analysis

All of the meetings took place on Monday, August 19 on the fourth floor of the Faculty Administration Building.

Chair's notes for the three meetings are available on request.

Subsequent to these meetings, the Committee met a second time with Darin Ellis, who demonstrated the Benchmarking Suite database. This meeting occurred on October 4, 2019.

In a separate communication to Allen Goodman, Daren Hubbard provided cost information regarding expenditures on the databases.

Findings

In initial meetings, the Committee sought to determine the breadth of their inquiry. Dr. Goodman had received inquiries from faculty members on issues related more broadly to transparency, including administrator use of undocumented text messages as a means to circumvent easily documented email messages. Committee members determined that such topics, while fundamentally important, were outside the scope of the inquiry, and that the Academic Senate may choose to implement a more permanent committee to address those other inquiries.

The Committee chose to concentrate on two databases with accompanying software: Academic Analytics and its student accompaniment, Academic Performance Solutions. The descriptions came from our interview with Dr. Darin Ellis on August 19.

Dr. Ellis explained that the University has a license from Academic Analytics (corporation) for two products:

> *Discovery Suite* – This software/database maps out collaborative and interest ties. Faculty members can access the *Faculty Insight* section of the University's Academia platform and look at their own profiles, as well as the profile of any other Wayne State faculty members. Faculty members are both able and authorized to edit their own entries.

Dr. Ellis invited individual Committee members to review their own profiles and asked that we report deficiencies to him.

> *Benchmarking Suite* – This software/database can build up a Department profile. It can be used to compare WSU Departments to similar departments at other universities. It can provide metrics of overall strengths and weaknesses. In statistical terms, it can provide a weighted index of z-scores (relating individual Universities to means of relevant groups).

According to Dr. Ellis, Academic Analytics has a License Covenant that limits access to Deans, Chairs, Administrators, and excludes access to individual faculty members. While individual faculty members can view and edit their own information on the platform, they do not have access to analytic tools through which comparisons are possible.

In a separate meeting, on October 4, 2019, Dr. Ellis provided a demonstration to Committee members (all committee members except Loren Schwiebert were present).

Costs

In a separate communication with Dr. Goodman on October 18, 2019, regarding costs, Daren Hubbard provided the following information, in question and answer format.

1. How much does the University pay for Academic Analytics, and for how long have we been paying it?

> Contract started in FY 2018. Per year costs are $180,300 in FY 2018; $185,700 in FY 2019; $191,300 in FY 2020; and $197,000 in FY 2021. Total costs of $754,300.

2. How much does the University pay for Academic Performance Solutions, and for how long have we been paying it?

> Contract started in FY 2017. Per year cost is $161,500 for 5 years with contract ending 12/8/2021, total cost is $807,500.

3. Are the current contracts year-to-year contracts, or are they longer term in nature?

> No year-to-year contracts as stated in 1 and 2.

Committee notes also indicate that Dr. Meihua Zhai, during her interview on August 19, mentioned her plans to develop a system in-house to replace Academic Performance Solutions. The Committee received no further information regarding this statement or future plans.

General Findings

1. Regarding the Discovery Suite, several Committee members inspected their own (and other) academic records (once logged on, one can see just about any person in the University). Coverage was uneven across all disciplines. In particular, it appears that the database does not include publications in law journals.

2. Regarding the Benchmarking Suite, Dr. Ellis demonstrated two particular functionalities of the suite.

> a. Comparing academic departments with comparable departments at other universities. This tool provides a z-score normalized from -1.0 to +1.0. The demonstration, including departments of certain committee members, seemed to provide useful information. Dr. Ellis could not provide the algorithm that is used, which is presumably proprietary to the vendor.

> b. Benchmarking particular faculty members against certain recognized indicators of scholarly quality. Dr. Ellis noted this could be used to identify faculty members for national awards. In particular, a School of Business faculty member was identified as a potential candidate for the John Bates Clark Award (in Economics for that American economist under age 40 "who is adjudged to have made a significant contribution to economic thought and knowledge").

> c. One Committee member notes, however, that the benchmarking can be either positive or negative. If administrators have sole access to the full suites, faculty members may never know when the data have negatively affected their positions at Wayne.

3. In a vigorous discussion with Dr. Ellis, Committee members addressed the concern that such databases could be used to "punish" some departments and/or colleges. Dr. Ellis insisted that the information was but one of many sources that might be used for University decision-making.

Recommendations

1. That a faculty oversight committee be appointed (by the Academic Senate) and granted access to the Academic Analytics and Academic Performance Solutions platforms, on par with that granted to deans, chairs, and administrators, to monitor the databases/algorithms for errors and completeness. This committee (with staggered terms of two years) would report to the Academic Senate at least once per year regarding issues that may relate to the databases/algorithms.

2. That a policy be established requiring that administrators share benchmarking reports with faculty members whenever those reports are used in tenure, promotion, and selective salary decision-making. Affected faculty members and departments must be made aware of the use of benchmarking algorithms if they are used in the tenure/promotion/salary processes.

3. That when the benchmarking tools are used to implement budget reduction or enhancement decisions, reports from the benchmarking suite be shared with the contractually mandated Budget Committees, at the Department, College, or University levels.

4. That appropriate training/information materials be provided to faculty members (either by the University Administration, or by the Faculty Oversight Committee) so that those faculty members will be able to understand the nature of the information systems, and/or be able to monitor their own records.