



STEPHEN F. AUSTIN STATE UNIVERSITY

Faculty Senate

1936 North St. ▪ Nacogdoches, Texas 75962-3015

▪ Phone (936) 468 - 1751

<https://www.sfasu.edu/facsenate/>

Date: December 1, 2021

To: Karen Gantt, Chair, Stephen F. Austin State University Board of Regents, Austin Building,
Nacogdoches, TX 75961

From: Faculty Senate, Stephen F. Austin State University

Re: Faculty Senate Resolution Assessing the Performance of the SFASU Board of Regents

Introduction

1. Whereas the events in and around September, 2021 involving the governance bodies at Stephen F. Austin State University as well as the community more generally highlighted profound gulfs between the perceptions of the Board of Regents in comparison with those of many members of the university community (including but not limited to the Deans of the six colleges, the Faculty Senate, the Chairs Forum, the Staff Council, and student groups) with respect to three “crisis” areas—i.e., crises relative to Campus Culture, concerning the unclear state of the university’s Budget and Finances, and involving performance evaluations of the university’s Executive Leadership, and
2. Whereas the Board Chair characterized during a Board of Regents session on September 12th that these crises together represented “an untenable situation on campus,” and

Executive Leadership

3. Whereas, relative to the issue of Executive Leadership, official calls for the removal of President Scott Gordon have gone unheeded by the Board several times since that date, and

Campus Culture

4. Whereas, relative to the issue of Campus Culture, the Board Chair first noted her surprise in several September meetings at longstanding complaints from campus members about the forced inaccessibility of Regents to any individual at the institution other than senior administrators, and
5. Whereas the Board Chair likewise expressed dismay at reports of a campus culture that has long been characterized by a fear of speaking out to administrators (up to and including Board members) due to fears of anticipated retribution, and
6. Whereas the Board Chair noted in a meeting with the University Budget Council (UBC) membership on September 7th that the development of such a “distant” relationship between the Board and the members of the campus community was unhealthy and needed to change, and furthermore, for the campus to succeed, then the Board needed to be positioned to listen regularly to what she referred to as “the pulse of the campus,” and



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7. Whereas the Board Chair noted in a summary presented during a Board meeting on September 12th that during her recent week on campus, she could summarize the issues raised in her “listening tour” into three “themes,” one of which specifically pertained to the perceived decades of both official and casual caution levied against campus members attempting to access Board members in order to discuss concerns on campus, and
8. Whereas in the same session, the Board Chair expressed a hope that these discussions on campus could represent a “springboard to better relations” between the Board and the campus community, and
9. Whereas in the same session, the Board Chair acknowledged an extraordinarily low level of morale on campus, and
10. Whereas in a meeting with Senate leaders on September 28th, the Board Chair expressed a wish that the Senate and other campus governance groups would, in the wake of the “whirlwind” set of revelations generated during those lengthy set of September listening sessions, see fit to provide the Board with “the gift of time” to address the current set of campus crises and, more particularly, to permit the Board to establish a new relationship with the campus, and
11. Whereas in a communique to the campus community on September 27th, the Board reaffirmed its commitment “to greater accessibility in its own relationship with all sectors of the university community” and its own “accountability for promoting a campus culture of excellence and integrity,” and yet
12. Whereas multiple offers by campus leaders since that time to increase the frequency of communications between the campus and the Board—through, for instance, offers for Board members to appear at monthly Faculty Senate meetings and/or through meetings with various governance groups, have either largely been rebuffed, or the terms of the single meeting held between the Board Chair and campus leaders since then, have been set by the Board, a clear rejection of both verbal and written requests delivered to the Board Chair by the Senate Chair, and
13. Whereas in that single leadership meeting, the Board Chair, despite having spent the better part of a week listening to dialogue concerning these three crises, brought forth not a single discrete suggestion for how to improve the Board’s relations with the campus, a disconnect which remains a core contributor to the campus’ cultural malaise, and
14. Whereas this failure to proffer any suggestions to improve campus culture thereby suggest that the Board’s claims to not take these cultural issues “lightly” (voiced in a joint Board and Senate



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Leadership meeting on September 28th, 2021) appear, at best, to have led to no discrete or measurable actions, and

Budget and Financial Status

15. Whereas, relative to the university's Budget and Financial status, the Board Chair noted in her Board address on September 12th that another theme dominating the discussions during her listening tour involved a perceived lack of accountability among senior administrators as well as the Board for their failures to understand and control the budget in fiscally responsible ways, and
16. Whereas in that same address, the Board Chair noted the anger and resentment and mistrust generated across campus by clear indications (and first-hand testimony) that several senior administrators did not know the university's budget particularly well, and even more troubling, they seemed to have no firm grasp on the institution's apparent structural operating deficit, and that given those conditions, the Board was viewed as complicit in potential financial mismanagement, even if the Board claimed ignorance of the actual state of budgetary affairs, and
17. Whereas the former Vice President of Finance and Administration had been speaking openly of the likelihood of eight-figure projected shortfalls in the 2022 budget during presentations to the Senate and other campus groups at least as early as February 2021, and
18. Whereas presentations to campus leaders across campus and to the Board throughout the Spring and early summer of 2021 projected such shortfalls, and yet
19. Whereas in the listening-tour session between the Board Chair and the UBC, all of the following individuals and groups—President Gordon, members of the Budget Office, and the Board Chair herself—all testified that at that time, they could not provide a firm estimate of that projected shortfall (if there even was a shortfall), and
20. Whereas in her address to the Board on September 12th, the Board Chair acknowledged the widespread criticism of a Board as well as an administration that appeared not to have a clear handle on fundamental budget questions and noted that the Board is ultimately accountable as the final authority on the university budget, and
21. Whereas the Board announced that in response to these uncertainties, the Board would initiate an audit of the university's budget, its budgeting processes, its structural deficit, and the balance of the general fund, and



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22. Whereas members of the Faculty Senate and other governance groups formally requested (as in the Senate letter to the Board dated September 22nd) that the audit be “performed with no past or current connection to the Board, to SFA administrators, faculty, or staff,” and yet
23. Whereas the Board proceeded to approve the appointment in a contract signed October 5, 2021 with an external audit firm whose senior partner is an SFA graduate, and
24. Whereas instead of appointing an audit firm with no previous exposure to the systems and processes that SFA intended to validate through this audit, the audit firm in question had, in fact, engaged in multiple audits on campus previously, contrary to “best practices” in business audits in cases where an institution’s underlying systems or processes are in question, and thus are to be the most rigorously and objectively assessed, and
25. Whereas the Board showed poor judgment in contracting with an audit firm whose previous audit experiences in FY 2019 and 2020 automatically generate *a priori* questions and doubts regarding the level of objectivity and third-party distancing involved in this external audit—questions and doubts that were fully predictable, given the nature of the contract awardee, and
26. Whereas, at least nine months after the specter of massive structural deficits were raised internally within the administration, no word has yet been delivered to the campus regarding the expected sizes of the deficit (if indeed there is one), nor of the balance in the general fund, and
27. Whereas the University Financial Council (UFC) was instantiated by the Board in part to address these issues, and to act as a conduit to the broader campus community regarding budget and budget-related data; nonetheless, the UFC has met only once this semester, and all of the work the committee is performing relative to budget/audit data has thus far been the province of a single Board member and members of the administration’s budget and audit groups, rather than any Dean, Chair, Staff Council, Senate, or Provost representatives—despite their presence on the Committee, and

Summary

28. Whereas it appears that the Board of Regents has failed to produce any concrete or meaningful responses to the campus crises identified in September, save for the audit (which, as noted, has not been conducted as requested by the Senate and others), and
29. Whereas the single most significant step the Board could have taken to indicate that it is indeed taking campus issues seriously would have been to follow up on its commitment to



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communicate more frequently and openly with its campus constituencies, despite multiple invitations from several groups and in several venues to do so, and

30. Whereas the Board's commitment to following up on these crises appears to be, at best, inconsistent and, at worst, potentially insincere, therefore

BE IT RESOLVED on this day, December 1, 2021, that the Faculty Senate has voted to issue a statement of "Low Confidence" in the Board.

1. As part of that statement, the Senate reaffirms its:
 - a. Recommendation that the Board meet more frequently with a jointly determined set of campus leaders from across all major governance groups in order to discuss the Board's agenda and its vision for improving the conditions underlying the three current campus crises, and
 - b. Recommendation that the Board reinforce its commitment going forward to openness and transparency in terms of shared governance with campus governance agents in meetings whose agendas and attendee lists are the joint production of those groups.
2. Moreover, the Senate will:
 - a. Share its current assessment of the Board's performance with the Chairs Forum, the Provost's office, the faculty, the Deans of the six colleges and the graduate school, and the Staff Council, and
 - b. Reserve the right to communicate this resolution (and the rationale behind it) to local, regional, and national media outlets, as well as through national academic organizations including but not limited to the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, and others as deemed necessary, and
 - c. Commit itself to monitoring the actions and behaviors of the Board relative to these three crises and it will revise—as needed, and in whatever direction appropriate—its current Board confidence rating based upon the impact of those actions and behaviors on those same campus crises.



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Brian Uriegas, Chair Faculty Senate

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Brian Uriegas', written over a horizontal line.

Christopher J. McKenna, Chair-Elect, Faculty Senate

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'CJ McKenna', written over a horizontal line.