

Faculty Senate Chair's Report
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Address to Board of Regents
October 23, 2017

Good Afternoon Mr. Chairman, Board of Regents, Dr. Pattillo, Dr. Bullard, Colleagues, and Guests:

Thank you for allowing me to speak on behalf of the faculty. Today, I want to recognize faculty accomplishments that have occurred in the last three months, provide an update on some of the Senate activities, and address some faculty related concerns.

Let's begin with faculty accomplishments. I have provided you with a 9-page list of faculty activities including 48 publications, over 50 presentations, 2 awards, 4 grants, and 8 elections to state and national leadership positions. As you can see, the last 3 months have been very busy and productive for our faculty. I am certain there are additional activities that were not reported. Productivity looks different in various professions and it does not always fit into the categories listed. For instance, I see announcements of faculty music recitals and art shows on a regular basis in SFA Today and those are not included in the list. The list I have presented today is evidence of faculty members who are dedicated to advancing their professions and bring notoriety to SFA.

In July, I provided information on several of the goals the Senate is working toward. One of those goals was to research titles and a career ladder system for our non-tenure track faculty members. Our current system provides no opportunity for advancement within this faculty classification. The goal has been very well received by our non-tenure track faculty. The Professional Welfare Committee has been researching systems at other universities and is working to prepare information and proposal that we will move forward to the Provost and Human Resources. We believe this proposal is in support of attracting and retaining high quality faculty and staff, which as you know, is Pillar I of the Strategic Plan. The Academic Affairs committee is engaged in gathering information related to modifying our current course evaluation system. This is also something that is included in the plans for Pillar II of the Strategic Plan. There are other groups on campus also looking at this issue and our hope is to collaborate with those groups. We were very pleased with the statement of support President Pattillo released in support of our students who are impacted by administrative mandates related to DACA. The Ethic Committee developed a statement supporting the President's statement and indicating our commitment to supporting and advocating for those students.

The Faculty Senate is aware of the focus this year on recruiting and understands the critical nature of that goal. The Faculty Government and Involvement Committee is organizing a faculty forum to gather information on current recruiting activities in which faculty are engaged and gather ideas on how faculty can contribute to these efforts, while still remaining focused on our primary responsibilities related to teaching, student retention, scholarship, and service. The forum is scheduled for December.

As Senate Chair, I receive a number of questions and recommendations from the faculty at large. A common theme in those communications is related to comparing us to other universities, especially in the area of faculty salaries and comparing our budget allocations to other state schools. I have appointed a task force to engage in a comparison study of salary allocations, other budgetary allocations, faculty retention rates, and enrollment. The task force also set a goal of studying our own budget over a period of 10 years to determine allocations trends. The overall task has been challenging because the publicly available budgets are not always detailed enough to determine how funds are being spent. In our strategic planning process, there was a clear call for increased transparency and communication related to university decision making. To that end, the Senate will host the second Financial Forum in January. The forum will give faculty and staff the opportunity to ask questions about the budgetary decision-making process. As an aspect of shared governance, we would like to see more integration of faculty input into the financial decision making.

And my final topic I would like to discuss is faculty morale. I will be honest with you, I have agonized over what I should say to you on this topic. Although my name is frequently mispronounced as Solomon, I am only a Solmonson and can only pray for that level of wisdom. And I have been doing a lot of that lately. I take my responsibility of being the voice of the faculty very seriously. To that end, I have asked faculty for input on what they would want me to say to you. I asked Senators to talk to their faculty and gather thoughts and concerns. And I received feedback from all across the spectrum. I don't believe it is my job to select a side and only present that information. For the purpose of equity, I believe we need to ensure that all voices are heard.

I have had Senators report things like "We love our job and we love SFA. We are very happy and feel we have the resources and support necessary to do our jobs well." On the opposite side of the spectrum, I am hearing faculty who are very unhappy and do not feel as if they have autonomy, adequate resources, or administrative support to do their jobs well. And as always, there are people in the middle. From an anecdotal perspective, it appears the level of satisfaction is correlated to specific academic units, but I believe there is a need for hard data to verify that assumption. It is my understanding the Deans are considering readministering a survey that was done in the spring. The survey was launched near the end of the semester and they did not receive the desired level of responses. I would encourage the Deans to move forward with that survey so that we can disaggregate the data to determine where things are going well and see if those efforts would be appropriately duplicated in the areas where there are higher levels of dissatisfaction.

I have also heard individuals who expressed some fear related to airing any concerns. In light of the current financial status, I have heard a few individuals indicate that we need to sit back and be quiet and be grateful that we still have a job. While there may be some reality to that, I don't believe that approach benefits the university or our students. We realize funds are limited and enrollment needs to grow and that is why we are hosting a forum to discuss how faculty can assist in meeting that goal. While we feel we need to continue to keep the topic of increasing faculty and staff salaries in the forefront, we also believe there are cultural issues that can be addressed at little to no cost and will contribute to a more positive campus culture.

I believe that most faculty would agree that at this point our most precious commodity is time. On a daily basis, we face a challenge to balance our commitment to high quality teaching, engaging in scholarly work, and service to the university and our professions with assessment, accreditation, and audit requirements. A significant amount of our time is spent on tasks that contribute to a culture of compliance. We understand that some of this is related to mandates placed on the university. Given that we are living in a world that requires increasing compliance to legislative and accreditation mandates, we can counter that by being mindful of local decisions that contribute to additional administrative tasks. If I heard correctly on Friday, the university has some new statutory requirements related to ethics. However, I believe I also heard that mandatory ethics training for all employees was not included in those requirements. And yet, we are moving forward with a plan that will require every faculty and staff member to participate in an annual ethics training. Do we have evidence that we have broad scale issues with unethical behavior? If this is not mandated, why are we increasing compliance issues for all employees?

There is not any one requirement that is problematic. But, when you looked at the overall picture of all the administrative tasks that are now required, one more thing on the list becomes the tipping point. We see funds being directed toward additional administrative positions to manage outside requirements of the university. But, we also see that those positions do not prevent those tasks from being pushed down to faculty, staff, and administrators. These tasks take time away from being able to focus on providing high quality learning experiences for our students.

In addition to time, we have policies that are not congruent with our strategic goals. The overarching goal of providing transformational learning experiences for our students is something most of us would agree should be our highest priority. However, our workload policy does not support that goal. Practicum and internship experiences are encouraged as high impact practices and transformational learning opportunities. They are also highly time consuming for faculty. And yet, faculty teaching those courses receive a reduction in their teaching load credits. We support the Pillar II work group that is suggesting looking at the faculty workload policy and other policies that are often barriers to transformational learning experiences. Our policies need to support promoting a culture of teaching excellence.

Our travel reimbursement policy is another example of not honoring faculty time or professional needs. I have received a barrage of emails on this topic in the last week. For several years, we have accepted a reimbursement rate of .40 a mile, which is below the state rate and the rate of most other universities. However, the newest addition to that policy requires faculty and staff to calculate whether it is more cost efficient to rent a vehicle rather than travel by personal vehicle. If travel includes air transportation, the faculty member is expected to rent a vehicle, travel to the airport and return the vehicle. Upon returning from travel, the faculty member will once again repeat the process of renting a vehicle to drive home, purchasing gas upon arriving home, and prior to returning the vehicle. If a faculty member is required to engage in supervision of students in internship placements, he or she may have to rent a vehicle each time site visits are scheduled. While this may provide some cost saving measures for the university, it is a total lack of consideration for faculty time and inconvenience. I had to rent a vehicle this morning due to a car being repaired. The process took over an hour. As stated before, time is a precious commodity and a culture of compliance places a significant drain on that resource.

Time is one of the reasons we are told that we have trouble engaging faculty in service to the university. In discussing this in the Senate at our October meeting, one Senator reported her faculty telling her they are tired and don't engage because they expect their voices not to be heard. Dr. Bullard has done an excellent job of assisting Faculty Senate in increasing faculty representation on committees. However, there is limited evidence of that representation resulting in including faculty perspective in decision making. This symbolic engagement adds to the morale concerns. As we have moved through our strategic planning process to strategic doing, there have been significant activities related to Pillar II. Despite a tremendous amount of time being dedicated to meetings to discuss Pillar I and III, very little has been done to achieve those goals. These goals are intertwined and we are missing out on a significant synergistic approach when we are not moving forward in improving the culture and attracting and supporting a high-quality faculty and staff who will then implement academic and co-curricular innovation.

Faculty identified the need to update and renovate classroom spaces so that they are more conducive to high quality instructional practices. The information was received and budgetary allocations were made to begin the process of updating a limited number of rooms each year. As the Provost stated this morning, we have done 12 rooms, with 5 more scheduled for this year. We have approximately 50 rooms identified as in needs of renovations. We were told it will take about 10 years to renovate all of the teaching spaces and once complete, the first spaces will once again be obsolete. While faculty are appreciative of the efforts, they are painfully aware of the amount of money that has been allocated for renovation of non-academic areas. One of our Senators said, "Don't tell me what you value. Show me your budget and I will tell you what you value." Does our budget indicate that our highest priority is providing transformative academic experiences for our students? When we are seeking donations to the University, are we utilizing our strategic initiatives to educate and engage donors in supporting our priority of providing high quality academic experiences for our students?

I have attempted to communicate examples of issues that faculty have identified as concerns. I do not want to present the image of a faculty versus administration mentality. I don't believe that benefits anyone. As I said at the Senate meeting, I truly believe that a house divided will never stand. We want to be on the same team working collaboratively to achieve the goals of SFA Envisioned. It is my hope that through meaningful engagement, we can all work together to ensure that all faculty and staff are saying "We love our job and we love SFA. We are very happy and feel we have the resources and support necessary to do our jobs well."