

# Stony Brook University Senate Bulletin

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April went out with a fit of coughing and sneezing as the spring pollen exploded on the scene. I encountered it on April 23 in Annapolis, where the spring arrives well ahead of its Long Island apparition. The few days before I returned sufficed for it to advance to our shores, so we could all share in the misery.

In Annapolis I was grappling with national issues (What is the proper scope of the US National Observatory? Why is Solar Physics dying as a discipline? How can we increase Congressional support for basic research? Why does the National Science Board insist on fragmentation and recompetition when there are clear efficiencies of scale to be gained from consolidation of observatories?). None of these questions are new. It is far more important to pose these tough questions than it is to expect immediate answers. Momentum of large institutions changes only slowly, but repeated applications of a small force may eventually have an effect.

Last week the politics became much more local. The SUNY Faculty Senate met in Plenary Session at Empire State College; I attended as Campus Governance Leader. (The price for breathing freely on Thursday, following Wednesday's rains, came due immediately. The Hutch and the Bronx River parkways were both closed due to flooding; I spent over half an hour appreciating the scenery and urban art on the Cross-Bronx, while approaching the Major Deegan at a slow walking pace.)

The SUNY Faculty Senate mirrors much that is good and bad about New York State. There is much potential, and many good ideas. Chancellor Zimpher is a champion of shared governance, and shares her ideas freely. The interactions of the Senate with the Chancellor are akin to a British Parliamentary exchange. Each of the Senate Sectors (e.g., the CGLs, or the University Centers, or the Health Science Centers) prepares a list of questions for her, which she then addresses. The give-and-take is extraordinary. On the other hand, there are clear tensions between the needs of the University Centers and the needs of the Comprehensive Colleges, as well as between the upstate and downstate schools. SUNY, like the state, is large, diverse, and almost ungovernable. The questions, the answers, and the tensions, don't change much between Senate meetings. But the nuances do.

And back on campus, the scope of the politics shrinks even further. The smaller the scope, the easier it should be to close issues. But this is not the case: the same old questions and issues continue to persist. Momentum eludes us. While a foolish consistency may indeed be the hobgoblin of little minds (R.W. Emerson), an appreciation of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle tells one that if your position is everywhere, your momentum is zero. If this University is to move ahead, it must make decisions and stick to them, so long as the facts warrant. The Senate Exec is mindful of its role in shared governance; we believe we provide an important level of checks and balances on the administration. With this obscure context, the Senate Exec has been asked by the Provost to reconsider an issue we had considered closed: the Stony Brook Curriculum (SBC).

That issue aside, we are in week 14 of the semester. The end is in sight. I'd been planning short celebratory Senate meeting. We will hold our first annual University Senate Service

Awards ceremony, to acknowledge and honor the extraordinary service to the Senate and to our Standing Committees put in by some of our colleagues.

But circumstances overtake us, and these there is business to attend to.

### **The Stony Brook Curriculum**

On February 4 2013, following many months of consideration, the University Senate voted by 32-3 (with 5 abstentions) to accept the recommendation of the Undergraduate Council and require a minimum grade of C (or S) for all courses satisfying the Stony Brook Curriculum (GenEd).

The Stony Brook Curriculum, with this grading scheme, takes effect with the Fall 2014 semester.

The Provost has asked us to reopen this issue, based on a reanalysis of student grades in DEC courses. The fact is that a significant number of our undergraduates currently pass DEC courses with grades below C. The Provost fears that should all these students need to retake courses there will be an unsatisfiable demand for sections. There are also concerns that students on TAP, and that students with Athletic eligibility, may be adversely affected. Finally, this could negatively impact the President's plan to increase the 4 year graduation rate from 49% to >60%.

The Undergraduate Council has discussed this issue thoroughly. The Senate Exec has discussed the issue, and has a much more sanguine view of the situation.

- If students know that they must get a minimum grade of C, most will put in more effort, if needed to do so. This will greatly reduce the number of potential retakes. We note that most majors require a minimum grade of C for major credit.
- We note that one goal of the SBC is to require fewer courses than does the current DEC. A student who does not get SBC credit for a course, for example by passing with a D or a C+ grade, still gets academic credit for the course, and makes progress towards graduation. The main consequence to a student who gets C- grades is to restrict the number of electives that they can take; most will never to exceed 120 credits.
- SUNY requires a C minimum grade to satisfy its General Education Requirements (GER) and ensure transferability. If Stony Brook lowers its standards below this, our students may have difficulty transferring within the SUNY system.
- We recognize that there are at-risk students at Stony Brook. If the university is serious about their success, it must be willing to invest more resources in advising and tutoring services. The answer is not to lower standards.

The Senate Exec is adamant that the way to increase student success, including increasing the 4 year graduation rates, is to invest the resources necessary to ensure adequate advising and tutoring services, and to ensure section availability. Lowering standards is not an option.

I have offered a compromise, that a student in their first year in residence at Stony Brook be allowed to use one C- grade for SBC credit. The rationale is that there are students who simply adjust slowly to the demands of college, and that time will ease their transition.

The Provost will present his case to the Senate on Monday. There will be no vote on this matter until and unless the Undergraduate Council decides to revisit the matter.

### **2014 Senate Elections**

The Senate Elections are done. The bad news is that only 195 potential voters bothered to vote; the good news is that this is nearly double last year's turnout. This is despite the fact that polls were open fewer than 2 weeks, and that we did not make a strong effort to publicize the voting.

Winners and losers (yes, there were some contested seats) are being notified; results will be reported at the May 5 Senate Meeting. As usual, there are a number of write-ins that need to be confirmed. There are still open seats; the Senate Exec will be looking to fill these on a temporary basis.

### **2014 Senate Administrative Review Committee Survey**

The ARC mini-survey is now open. Please register your opinions on the Senate, Club Red, on-line learning, cluster hires, diversity among the faculty and administration, and the supervisory process.

### **Transitions**

People continue to come and go.

- Irene Stern, a stalwart member of the Senate's Executive Committee for at least the past 4 years (representing the PEG board) has retired. We will miss her.
- Jerry Stein is retiring after 38 years at Stony Brook, most recently as Dean of Students. His contributions to improving the undergraduate experience are legion. Stony Brook would be a very different place were it not for his efforts.
- The Provost has announced that Deputy Provost Brent Lindquist will be leaving at the end of June to become Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences. Brent was President of the University Senate prior to his first stint in the Provost's office. We wish him the best.

We too are looking for a Dean of CAS. By Tuesday the 6 finalists will have circulated through, seen campus, met with administrators, and talked with faculty. Meg Schedel, incoming President of the Arts & Sciences Senate, and I have met with the candidates, representing governance, and asking probing questions. The Provost aims to have a candidate in the job at the start of the semester. Our role as governance will be to ensure that the new dean respects the tradition of faculty/staff governance, and works clearly and openly with the appropriate governance organizations and structures.

Some time this summer I shall hand over the figurative gavel of the University Senate to President-Elect Ed Feldman. Our By-Laws are silent on when this handover occurs, so I'll be looking for a suitable Summer afternoon when we can schedule a Senate Barbecue and do the transfer of power in style.

It has been a challenge, and a privilege, to run this Senate the past 4 years. As in any organization of amateurs, a lot of the cohesion comes from the one Senate professional, Laurie Cullen, who keeps us moving forward. Much of the reason we sometime seem to be lurching forward is due to the work that is put in by the members of the Senate Exec, and the members of our Standing Committees.

*All opinions expressed above are mine, and are not those of the Senate or its Executive Committee, though they should be.*

Fred

### **Contacts**

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