

Faculty Senate President's Meeting

March 9, 2020

Members Present:

Douglas Airhart, Jeremy Blair, Troy Brachey, Chris Brown, Debra Bryant, Andrew Callender, Wei-Tsun Chang, Kris Craven, Yun Ding, Mary Lou Fornehed, Steven Frye, Stuart Gaetjens, Mark Groundland, David Hajdik, Barbara Jared, Brian Jones, Christy Killman, Matt Langford, Susan Laningham, David Larimore, Mark Melichar, Christie Miller, Holly Mills, Lachelle Norris, Linda Null, Brian O'Connor, Joseph Ojo, Sally Pardue, Richard Rand, Jeff Roberts, Mike Rogers, Lee Ann Shipley, Troy Smith, Sandra Smith-Andrews, Barry Stein, Holly Stretz, Lenly Weathers, Zac Wilcox, Kim Winkle

Members Absent:

Michael Best, Sheikh Ghafoor, Shelia Hurley, Nancy Kolodziej, Mary Matthews, Lori Maxwell, Allan Mills, Anthony Paradis, Jeannette Wolak

Guests Present:

Lee Wray

Call to Order

Senate President Smith-Andrews called the meeting to order at 3:35 p.m.

Senate President Smith-Andrews' Comments

There is much going on with regard to continued tornado assistance and the possible threat of coronavirus/COVID-19 impacting the university. Regarding the latter, all study abroad travel for Spring Break has been cancelled, as well as all international travel. With regard to domestic travel, it is suggested faculty submit travel requests as usual knowing it will be conditional, and then check within two weeks of the travel to see if it is allowed. Both Senate President Smith-Andrews and Senator Rand are able to help train or refer anyone for help who wishes to consider moving courses all online to iLearn.

President Oldham's Opening Remarks

The President wishes to address and receive feedback on tornado response, coronavirus planning, and the advising center concerns.

University Response to the March 3 EF-4 Tornado

The President was in Washington, D.C. when the tornado hit. He shared appreciation for Lee Wray, Karen Lykins, and members of the cabinet and administration for their efforts and acknowledged there were an overwhelming number of details to work through. Approximately a dozen households of Tennessee Tech affiliation were affected, though the campus was not in danger. Tennessee Tech will continue to coordinate with property owners, mayors, and the community to provide service and assistance as needed; there will be more opportunities for service as the recovery will be long. Also, Tech is providing space to FEMA at Hyder-Burks Pavilion for up to 30 days. The president felt this was a great lesson to students to see the value of community, and while there was a great outpouring of support for the closure and the volunteer response, he is aware of some lessons to be learned regarding how to

respond to this level of crisis. The Emergency Operations Plan is being followed but is under constant review and updating to remain effective during these kinds of events. The President stated that keeping everyone safe is always his priority.

Senators shared the following comments and suggestions:

- Overall, senators felt pride in the response by University employees and students, and felt students received as much or more education in assisting with tornado response than they would have if classes had not been cancelled. Some felt catharsis in volunteering.
- Senator Frye shared appreciate for staff and administrators who allowed a successful program review to continue despite the closed campus.
- Most expressed concern that the warnings went out too late, and the President said they would be evaluating that system and looking to tweak it for better response times.
- Many felt the campus meeting to observe a moment of silence and acknowledge the tragedy was a good idea and a meaningful event.
- It was suggested that the language used in the closure email should be clarified or defined. What does “closure” mean vs. “shutdown,” whom does it affect, who are considered “essential personnel?”
- One senator expressed the desire that closure notices come with more notice to allow for adjustments in planning. President Oldham said it was clear that waiting to shut down would not have been received as well.
- It was suggested that anyone helping in any capacity with the cleanup and recovery log their time with the city so as to minimize the amount the city will have to pay.
- The Spring Preview Day attendance was not significantly impacted by the tornado; the President said that around 70% of those who had RSVP'd attended.

The President again praised the campus's response and involvement and reiterated that procedures in the Emergency Operations Plan will be reviewed and updated as needed.

Coronavirus/COVID-19

President Oldham stated that Tech had a jump on planning for this outbreak thanks to the earlier case in January, but that this is an evolving issue with an unknown trajectory. There is a task force in place meeting as needed to plan and monitor the situation. While other universities are closing and/or transitioning to all-online teaching, no decisions have been made regarding closing campus at this time. A campus email was distributed during the meeting outlining Tech's current plan to monitor the situation. At this time, all international travel and study abroad plans are suspended indefinitely. “Unofficial” travel is not affected at this time, however those traveling for personal reasons to international areas will still need to adhere to self-isolation requests set forth in the email. That said, the President would encourage all faculty, staff, and students to proceed with caution regarding travel.

Senators asked the following questions:

Q: Does the university have a policy on pandemics?

A: There is a section in the Emergency Operations Plan on how to plan and proceed in such cases, that it cannot cover every scenario because each epidemic/pandemic is different. The university also follows the guidelines and recommendations of the Centers for Disease Control (CDC).

Q: How will we facilitate classes all moving online? Will anyone still be on campus?

A: Provost Bruce is working with Deans and Chairs to develop an online plan and get faculty trained in iLearn as needed. There is no determination yet regarding who or how many people will be needed on-campus.

Q: To whom should faculty direct questions regarding travel funds, especially those happening months from now?

A: There is no estimation yet as to how long international travel will be suspended. Proceed with caution regarding travel plans, and try to make plans and pay for things that can be changed/refunded just in case. Senate President Smith-Andrews reiterated that requests for travel funds should still be made, but be advised that all requests are conditional and subject to change.

Q: Who is responsible for non-refundable fees already paid?

A: For university business, Tech absorbs that cost.

Q: When would cancelling classes or closing the university happen?

A: There is no clear answer at this time. Looking at absenteeism is an incomplete picture, but that combined with cases in or near Cookeville and this campus would all be factors.

Q: Do we have enough people in the clinic?

A: Normally, yes, though it may be best to plan for backup personnel.

Until more information is known, it was suggested but not required that faculty stop requiring attendance; classes and attendance are important, but focusing on health and avoiding the spread of the virus is also important.

Advising Center Concerns

Senators continue to share concerns regarding the justification and timeline for the changing in the advising structure. Senators largely support the idea of slowing down or scaling back the scope of the center to focus on only low-retention areas and at-risk students until more data can be found to show that advising is the cause of Tech's retention rate. Senators were not convinced that advising is either the cause or the solution to the retention rate issue and would support looking into any and all other variables that could be negatively impacting retention. In addition, there are concerns that there will be no way to know if an increase or a decline in retention after implementation will be due to the advising center or other factors, and senators would support finding other ways to address retention such as first-year experience classes. Some also questioned if the drop in retention aligned with the loss of international student enrollment or the President's reorganization efforts instead of advising.

President Oldham believes he and the senators are all interested in the same goal of retaining students and assured senators that the plan is not only one thing; details, structure, and implementation can be tweaked to find what will work best for this university. Regarding the lack of institutional or outside studies to show that centralized advising is the solution to the retention problem, the President stressed that his plan is based largely on personal experience and best practices. He said that this structure has proven successful in organizations with a similar academic profile to Tech, and that this may be the best way to have accountability and gather retention data. While there is no proof that the advising structure is solely or even partially responsible for the drop in retention, he feels the centralized advising option a worthwhile endeavor. Because it is nearly impossible to determine every factor that goes into retention, the center will be focused on holistic advising to try to address all issues that affect a student's decision to

return. The President acknowledges that there will be stories of success and stories of failure, but believe that the university cannot stay the course and expect a different outcome. He welcomes faculty input and involvement with the new center and the advisors. Senator Roberts commented on the status of the implementation team, prompting the President to decide he may need to visit with the team directly to answer questions and guide their progress somewhat.

When asked if the 15 Credit-Hour tuition model would affect retention, the President said that it should help retention (and therefore graduation rates). Overall, support for this model seems apparent and is being recommended to the Board of Trustees. In response to a concern that this model may negatively impact student GPA, President Oldham said data show GPAs rise slightly under the new model.

Other Matters

Senator Rand shared that Doc and Susan Wells are voluntarily helping tornado victims recover data from damaged computers. The work is supervised and data will not be compromised.

Senator Airhart shared that the Lion's Club is providing \$10,000 to replace prescription eyewear lost in the tornado.

Adjournment

The meeting adjourned at 5:39 p.m.

Approved: 03/23/2020