

**Faculty Senate President's Meeting Notes**  
September 20, 2021

**Submitted by K. Craven**

**Members Present:**

Dan Allcott, Michael Allen, Sean Alley, Chris Brown, Debra Bryant, Steve Canfield, Melissa Comer, April Crocket, Kris Craven, Dennis Duncan, Mary Lou Fornehed, Steven Garner, Scott Hagarty, David Hajdik, Syed Rafay Hasan, Katherine Hermann-Turner, Tammy Howard, Samantha Hutson, Janet Isbell, Christy Killman, Matt Langford, David Larimore, Jane Liu, Mark Loftis, Chad Luke, Jeanette Luna, Ann Manginelli, Jennifer Meadows, Holly Mills, Linda Null, Brian O'Connor, Kristin Pickering, Elizabeth Ramsey, Richard Rand, Christopher Reames, Lee Ann Shipley, Drew Sisk, Scott Smith, Troy Smith, Sandi Smith-Andrews, Dan Swartling, Lenly Weathers, Robert Wilbanks, Kimberly Winkle, Laith Zuraikat

**Members Absent:**

Stephanie Adams, Douglas Airhart, Troy Brachey, Yun Ding, Emily Lee, Lori Maxwell, Joseph Ojo, Holly Stretz, Russ Witcher

**Guests Present:**

Lee Wray

**Call to Order**

Call to order 3:35 p.m.

President Oldham welcomed all of the new Senators to the Senate and thanked all for their service to the university.

**Capital Projects**

President Oldham is pleased with all of the work happening on campus and would like to talk about the major projects taking place. He would remind everyone that he is talking about current plans, which are subject to change. The work on the replacing the cupola on Derryberry Hall has begun and is expected to continue on and off for several more weeks. This is expected to be completed at the end of October. On Friday September 10, the university held the ground-breaking ceremony for the new engineering building which will be located in Sherlock Park. We should begin seeing contractors in that area soon. The plans for the new residence hall, which will also be located in the park area, are in the design phase and he anticipates a ground breaking for that project this fall. Work on the pedestrian mall along Peachtree Avenue will take approximately 18 months and will begin as soon as the final design is complete.

There is an effort to update the campus master plan with an architectural firm out of Nashville. The plan is to schedule sessions for the firm to meet with representatives from campus during this semester to provide input. The plan will be submitted to the Board of Trustees for approval

in December and then to the state of Tennessee. He encourages all Senators and TTU faculty members to participate in the process.

Question: There are a number of individuals who use alternate forms of transportation, such as skateboards and bicycles, to get around campus. Will these be considered in the planning of these projects?

Answer: I would hope so. We want to accommodate all of the campus community and transportation options.

President Oldham also talked about the process for deciding what projects will occur next. The state of Tennessee solicits proposals for capital projects every year. Each time they determine what to focus on that year and release the rules that will be used to judge the proposals. For this year they were originally planning to focus on major renovation projects and not new construction. Tech submitted a proposal to renovate Johnson Hall which will include the removal of Foster Hall. So far there has been no feedback on this proposal from the state. However, four weeks ago, the state added an additional request to include new projects with an emphasis on either workforce needs in Tennessee and/or aspects of community engagement. In response, Tech decided to submit a proposal for another new engineering building.

Question: Have you ever considered starting a School of Public Health? That would fit this emphasis very nicely.

Answer: There has been a small amount of talk in this direction, but not a lot. President Oldham believes that Tech is not likely to score well and get funded to build a new building for a new school, but would have more luck supporting the existing schools already on campus.

The reason for a new engineering building is that Tech needs to replace the existing foundry and Lewis Hall which houses the Manufacturing and Engineering Technology department. This is what the new proposal will be responsible for doing and is a good fit to the new rules set by the state.

### **HEERF Funding**

This is money received from the federal government. Some of which is pass through money, meaning that it is to be given directly to students for financial relief due to COVID-19. Tech has already received and given two rounds in the last academic year. The third round has been received and is a little looser on the qualifications and is partially based on financial need. According to the rules, approximately 95% of the students got at least some money. For full-time students, the minimum amount was approximately \$525 and the maximum was approximately \$1,830. This round also included graduate students. The money was distributed and the students should see it in their account today.

## **COVID Concerns**

President Oldham assured the Senators that he is working closely with the city, county, community, and school districts. They meet once a week and have a lot of conversations. Many have expressed that they are encouraged by the campus response and they feel the campus is doing well. The numbers are declining and we are currently at about half of where we were just 2 weeks ago.

## **Enrollment Numbers**

President Oldham asked the Senate to consider the broader context when looking at the current student enrollment statistics. In total, enrollment was down 3.4% on the census date as compared to last year. Across the state, community colleges are down on average 6% and all of the major universities other than UTK and TSU are down. The increases at those two schools are mostly due to out-of-state students. Since the census date, there have been 60 or 80 new students admitted. Another factor is that the number of high school graduates is flat, but the percentage of those graduates who are enrolling at the college level has decreased substantially. This is a multi-year trend that is continuing, but could rebound. The number of returning students also dropped from about 78% down to 73%. The first-year retention rate is on par with normal and is mostly in the population of students who have not yet declared a major. This is also similar across the state. There has been a slight increase in the number of transfer students. The number of new freshman students didn't meet the expectations.

The administration is going to become more aggressive to combat this. The strategy is to work on increasing the number of scholarships by decreasing the ACT score and GPA requirements for receiving a scholarship. They have checked the financials and Tech has the funds for this plan. Currently, messaging is being developed and will be released soon. There is a lot more to it, but this is a very high-altitude flavor of the situation.

Another positive step is the Roane to Tech Program. President Oldham credits Brandon Johnson, Vice President of Enrollment Management, for his hard work in making this program happen. The agreement has been signed. When a student starts at Roane State as a freshman and signs to transfer to Tech they are guaranteed admission as long as they meet the established benchmarks at Roane State. We will immediately begin working with the student before they even arrive on TTU campus. This will provide support to the student and lower the barriers to a successful transition to Tech.

On a very positive note, Tech has been working on achieving a 60% 6-year graduation rate and this was accomplished last year. This represents an 8 or 10% increase. President Oldham credits everyone on campus for this accomplishment.

## **Calendar**

The calendar committee will now be a Standing Committee of the university. This committee will report to the Academic Affairs office and does have faculty representation. President Oldham understands that there are concerns and dissatisfaction with the new changes. However, the calendar is not changed on a whim so next year is already set and any further discussion will be in regard to the 2023-2024 academic year. He did say that there is one correction for this spring. The online academic calendar did not show Good Friday as a holiday. However, it is shown that way on the HR calendar. The academic calendar on the web site will be updated to reflect this day as a holiday. He also addressed the issues with the Joint degree programs with ETSU and assured the Senate that these have been worked out.

Question: Since the 9-month faculty contract starts only 2 days before classes begin, when are the faculty supposed to plan and attend pre-semester workshops, meetings, etc.?

Answer: Things are not lining up the same way as before. Now there is 1.5 weeks at the end of the spring semester when faculty are still on contract but the semester is over. There may need to be some adjustment to the period of the contracts to compensate for this issue. There are only 30 weeks of classes over the 9 month contract period, there is some extra time in there.

Other concerns were expressed including the student's needing a mental break between semesters and that has been drastically reduced. There is not as much time between fall and spring semester for students to earn money at a holiday job or for faculty to do research and grant writing. Also, the impression is that some of the adjustments were to make up for shorter class periods requiring more class meetings and whether this is really required. The problems with too many classes starting and stopping at different times could have been solved administratively and not with such a dramatic change in the academic calendar.

President understands that there are continuing concerns and believes that the standing committee for the academic calendar is in the best position to resolve these issues moving forward. President Luna pointed out that a standing committee was originally supposed to be created following the Faculty Senate meeting with the President on February 8, 2021; however, the administration has not yet created it. Other things that were addressed by the changes in the calendar include a need to streamline the scheduling of campus facilities for other purposes and optimizing the use of all spaces on campus.

### **SACF Funds**

President Oldham explained that the changes were to simplify the fees that students pay and make it easier for them to know how to plan financially. The decision was to eliminate all special course fees while holding the departments and colleges harmless. This means that they will receive an amount through the other areas of the budget that is commensurate with an average of their expenditures over a number of years, but increased slightly to compensate for other factors. The tuition rate was also increased by an appropriate amount. As a result, it will not be as easy to transfer the money to other areas, but there will be less restriction on how the

money can be spent. This method will be much easier for the students to understand the fees. However, due to the nature of the programs in Nursing, Engineering, Business, and Education students in those majors will pay a program fee which will vary depending on their specific major.

Question: The amount of compensation for those without the program fee is based on average of past 3 years expenditures before Covid-19. This average may be falsely deflated because some spending requests were denied and the budget during those years was tight. Will there be opportunity for it to grow with time?

Answer: That is how the amount was determined. This had to be approved by the Board of Trustees and it is hard to justify a need for an additional fee when the accounts show money that is not being spent. If departments are holding onto money for an insurance, it is hard to justify an additional student fee to the BOT. That is why the average was based on actual expenses with an added cushion. If the department needs to encumber funds for special projects, then this can be explained and justified. However, we need to use what we collect. With time the budget model should accommodate.

Question: Some departments may need to accumulate money for large expenses, like replacing expensive equipment. Will this be acceptable?

Answer: Yes. The department needs to follow the rules, but it can be done.

Question: How does this new fee rank among other peer institutions?

Answer: Substantially lower than UTK, but higher than some others. Overall, President Oldham believes that it is competitive. You want flexibility and not to raise it too quickly. We are not the cheapest but that is not where we want to be either. That would indicate a devaluing of the educational experience. This ties into the work on scholarships discussed earlier. He thinks this puts us in a decent place.

## **Covid-19**

Senator Fornehed again updated the Senate on her experiences working in the hospital over the last week. There were 8 deaths over the weekend and talking to the families was very difficult. She discussed the need to constantly make critical care decisions about each patient. Her belief is that all of the current patients were unvaccinated when they contracted Covid. The current situation is much worse than it was earlier this year. Everyone in the health care profession is weary. Everyone getting vaccinated is a very good place to start.

Question: How can we support?

Answer: President Oldham has not received any specific needs or wants from Nursing. He spends time with Leigh Ray and sees that they are working very hard and doing an incredible job. It is different this year from last year. It is challenging to convince some people to get vaccinated. We are trying to get statistics for campus on the vaccine rate. One area is athletes. There has been some success there. Maybe half of that population was easily convinced and the other half is requiring more convincing. The reasons for the hesitation are all different. There needs to be more communication and time for this to succeed. The most compelling influence for students is other students. The community leaders are having similar issues. Unfortunately, many times it takes someone they know getting sick to convince them to get the vaccine. We are making some progress.

Question: Regarding the messaging about masking. Do you have any suggestions about how to make it more consistent? Things will only get worse over the winter.

Answer: President Oldham didn't know of anything. These are hard conversations. The President believes there is no compelling data that shows a need to mask outside. However, it is reasonable and appropriate for indoors. But there are issues when eating and exercising. The data is inconsistent. Experience would indicate that there is no spread through sports, spread is mainly through living arrangements. If you have ideas, please let him know. The conditions on campus are being tracked closely. Currently there are 63 cases out of approximately 11,000 people.

Lee Wray said there has been one Tech student in the hospital who was very sick for a time. Senator Fornehed said she has been checking on him and he was released last night and is doing ok.

President Oldham thanked her for doing that. This fall has been fairly good on campus, but that could always change. He is willing to take steps if that is needed. We have the vaccine to vaccinate everyone on campus, that was not the case last year. The delta variant presents quicker, so a shorter quarantine might be possible. This is something that could be looked at with caution.

Question: It is not a good idea to shorten the quarantine period. Students need to understand the risks. What options do faculty have for enforcing the making in class?

Answer: There are a lot of options. You can dismiss them from class. You can fail them.

Question: Last year we were told to refer students to the Dean of Students if they refuse to wear a mask in class. Has that changed?

Answer: No change, that is still an option. You can apply a grade penalty. If the student is particularly disruptive, you can call campus security.

Adjourned 5:24 p.m.

Approved: September 27, 2021