

Faculty Senate Meeting February 4, 2005

Chair's Report

Welcome, everyone, to the first Faculty Senate meeting of Spring 2005. As most of you are aware, a number of significant changes have taken place at the College since we last met. First and foremost, we welcome a colleague, Patrick O'Sullivan, as our new Academic Vice President and Provost. The Executive Committee has met with him, and you will also have the opportunity to hear his perceptions, expectations, and visions in a few minutes.

You will see that the agenda for today's meeting is rather sparse—as though for the first time we might go home in an hour or so. I am going to suggest that we allow its expansion, probably until the designated time of 2:30. I am sure that Dr. O'Sullivan will be able to use extra time for his presentation, and I will set the precedent by taking somewhat more for my own, too. In addition, there are several items of business, new and old, that have come up since the agenda went out.

In the last week or two, I have heard several faculty express the sense that the present moment represents perhaps the last, best hope for Old Westbury's future. At the helm of Academic Affairs we have a leader who knows and cares about the College, and whom we know to be decisive and reliable; articulate and responsive. Old Westbury has a tradition of AVPs representing the faculty's best interests, and we look forward to working Dr. O'Sullivan in this way.

In addition to arranging to meet with me as Chair and with the Executive Committee as soon as possible, he has already helped with the Senate's urgent agenda of finding a secretary. The position has been posted again as of January 26, and Human Resources has committed to beginning the interview process by February 21 at the latest. Hiring processes can be frustrating, but I am sure our patience will be rewarded soon.

Between the last Senate meeting and this one, we have also lost a dedicated colleague, Nancy Sacks, who directed the First-Year Experience program for the last 3-1/2 years. I understand that Matt Foglino, our SGA representative, is going to announce a reception that the students have organized to honor Dr. Sacks, February 15, 8:30 p.m., in the Student Union Coffee Shop. At the very least, I hope that as many faculty as possible will be able to attend this event, to show our appreciation for Dr. Sacks and her accomplishment in establishing a ringingly successful First-Year Program on which to build. Dr. O'Sullivan has expressed his commitment to the continuation of the program, and I expect that we will hear more about these plans at this meeting.

With the First-Year Program, the Honors Program, the newly established School of Education, and many other areas of curriculum, we have now an almost unprecedented opportunity to forge ahead and build. What is the Senate's role?

It cannot do everything—this we have to acknowledge with a mixture of relief and regret. Just as the College's "Town Hall" structure of governance had to be replaced, some fifteen years ago, by the more formal structure of representative governance guided by Bylaws, so now the increasing complexity of the College's organization means that some major decisions must be outside the Senate's hands. We must place judicious trust in those who lead us—in those who truly lead, by demonstrated commitment to responsive and consultative process involving faculty, and who acknowledge the limits of

their authority. All of us in this room today are leaders, and we should let these principles guide us.

This is perhaps the first purpose to consider for the Faculty Senate: the fostering of leadership, along with the promotion of awareness of the scope of academic responsibilities and concerns beyond our campus—at the state level, nationally, and even internationally. Certainly there is much work to be done on all these levels, and the more we can secure a stable footing in our work on campus, the more we can engage with them. In my own field, Middle Eastern Studies, furious debates are raging regarding the rights of professors to teach controversial views—including anti-American, anti-Israel, and plausibly anti-Jewish perspectives, all with profound implications for the moral integrity of our profession. Related debates are taking place between the SUNY Board of Trustees and the University Senate. I am not sure we not yet ready to lift our eyes from our chores at Old Westbury to join in these timely debates with full vigor, but I hope we will be soon.

Why are we not yet ready? With half—I hope the harder half—of my chairpersonship behind me, I will ask you to bear with me as I outline my perceptions on this question, along with a “road map” for the Senate’s role in moving us along to a better place. We are not ready for the highest functions of our calling because our eyes are too often cast down, and our footsteps are weary and sometimes straying. Last September, in our report for President Butts’ Five-Year Review, the Executive Committee observed that “faculty are in a state of discouragement, if not yet complete despair.” This is what we saw.

In so far as faculty are discouraged or demoralized, there are a number of reasons, some of which are beyond the Senate’s capacity to contend with. We cannot fix the state budget, or the state government, or any number of individuals we conceive of as affecting our destiny adversely. But we can take charge of what is within our control.

There are several areas where I believe the Senate’s work can make a real difference in our work and for the campus. First, as noted above, we can make the Senate what it should be: an agency for fostering both leadership and democratic participation. In today’s society, anything approaching democracy and free—or at least relatively unconstrained—exchange of opinion and ideas must be cause for encouragement!

Second, facilities. I plan this semester to keep dialogue about facilities going at every Senate meeting. It is a difficult issue: at the University Senate Plenary a week ago Dr. Dolan and I approached Chancellor King about the Academic Village again, and he said he simply did not know what to do. But we have to keep trying. Most of us have heard many times the useful tripartite formula for the College’s mission:

- Improve image of quality—which I believe can only follow from quality’s substance.
- Improve retention.
- Achieve financial equilibrium.

Improvement of the facilities of the College at least to the level of decency is integral to the first two aspects of the mission. Campus buildings, and especially the Academic Village, where the great majority of classes are held, and where most students and faculty spend most of their time, are the physical embodiment of the College’s commitment to quality. Students will not stay if what we offer them falls so far below what they would

accept in their own homes, and if we send them from pillar to post to find classrooms after the designated ones have, say, sprung gushing leaks. Those of us who work here tend to resign ourselves to the surroundings, but I think that the resignation is a factor in halls that are lifeless even at peak hours of the day. Vital campus life is not just the responsibility of Student Affairs; it is our presence that will bring it about.

The third goal, financial self-sufficiency, is the check on our dreams and the incentive to responsible planning. Resources are constrained at every level. We cannot throw good money after haphazard plans. We cannot install computers or a server in the math lab—for example—until the leaks are fixed. The campus must find a way to systematize both critical and routine maintenance under the supervision of qualified and accountable personnel.

This systematizing of resources brings me to my third charge for the Senate: judicious use and cultivation of the resource of faculty energies. For the first, and possibly last, time in my career, I feel moved to paraphrase George W. Bush, in his observation on taxes last Wednesday. Applying it to the matter of college service: “Faculty energies should be spent wisely, or not at all.” There is a further connection to taxes, I suppose, in that all should contribute in proportion of their means. Faculty become demoralized when their energies in college service are overtaxed. Some combination of positive and negative incentives needs to be brought into play to spread the work more broadly.

But the work also has to be allocated efficiently, and it must be rewarded in ways both tangible and intangible. I was dismayed last semester at the demands that the Mission Review II process put on faculty efforts, though I was heartened at how readily and effectively they took on the tasks with which the Senate charged them. The resulting document, brimming with that effort if not always with clarity, is ours to work with. It is my earnest hope that further planning—for curriculum, academic reorganization, and budget and resource allocation-- will take place with this document and previous guiding documents firmly in view; in the full view of faculty governance and under the supervision of the Academic Vice President. All the evidence points to such transparency as a crucial factor in faculty morale.

The Senate should not constrain its vision for faculty initiative to college service. I urge everyone here, along with colleagues who are not present, to look at the document recently prepared by the Chancellor’s office on best practices for Faculty Development. The Executive Committee has begun to discuss these issues with the AVP. Dr. O’Sullivan has expressed his commitment to establishing a regular sabbatical policy, and we have urged him to consider ways that application for external funding can be made more dependable and responsive to faculty initiative.

There is doubtless more we can do, and I would urge the Senate to be diligent in pursuit of means to support and recognize faculty achievement in all areas. The College needs ambitious people. In order to keep them, it must provide them with both resources and recognition. If this does not happen, ambition will either stagnate or go elsewhere. In the words of a colleague, “It must be possible to rise at Old Westbury.” When Old Westbury’s people can rise, the College itself will rise to take the laurels of distinction it has long deserved.

--Caroline Sawyer