

**Report to the Faculty**  
**Sara Freeman, Chair of Faculty Senate**  
**February 25, 2020**

Colleagues, the agenda for March 4 is full. We will move briskly through the items of business concerning a first reading of a bylaws change and a degree change. Yvonne Swinth has provided a thorough overview of the proposed addition of an entry-level OTD degree in the OT program. This proposal has been reviewed and approved by CC and comes to the full faculty since the faculty as a whole is responsible for the courses of study, including graduate degrees.

We will also welcome our colleagues on the Experiential Learning Faculty Advisory Board who have been wanting to present about pedagogy and programs for quite a while. I suspect their presentation will make a natural transition to our return to curriculum work. The conversation we will have on Wednesday will share some of CTF's recommendations and conduct a conversation about workload.

For the rest of this report, I am going to talk about things that are pivotal to our campus ethos and mode of work for the rest of this year and beyond. I am going to be quite frank right now, because I am almost at the end of my term as Senate Chair and I feel some extra directness is a value. I am going to give my updates on the February Board of Trustees meeting and current business of faculty Senate and our work on curriculum revision. Overall, I am emphasizing that we owe it to each other — and to our staff colleagues and students — to be willing to make decisions and act in uncertain times in order to increase our solidarity and persistence for the next five to ten years.

**Board of Trustees**

The February Board of Trustees meeting came a week after the open forum President Crawford held for community response to the Budget Task Force recommendations the reduction in exempt retirement contributions. This topic was on the mind of the Board, as was the insight from the Board workshop on financial stress testing, which was for me paradoxically comforting even as it confirmed what a tight eye-of-the-needle we are threading from our position in the sector of higher education.

In Friday's general Board meeting, I spoke about the faculty's range of reactions to the strategy and equity of the BTF recommendation (as represented by our listserv conversations). I highlighted that, despite other divergent insights, across the campus faculty share extreme concern about the timeline for discussion of budget recommendations, the limitation the BTF works within, and the long-term status of faculty and staff compensation. I know Nila Wiese was a strong contributor in the Finance and Facility committee meeting as well, giving voice to the impossible situations faculty and staff are being put in regarding workload, retention, cost of living, and more. I believe we are all capable of reading the subtext in the use of words like "lively" to describe the discussion in the F&F committee.

As you know, the Board adopted the BTF recommendation as is and did not take up the idea of making an additional one-time withdrawal from the endowment to balance next year's budget. It is fair to say that faculty have shared with each other several arguments about why a one-time endowment withdrawal makes sense to them and seems prudent at this moment. I perceive the Board's decision to reflect the sense that an additional spend from the endowment does not at this time make sense according to their metrics. It may be worth it for the faculty to ask the Chief Financial Officer to explain the difference in the points of view about the best way to close a short term gap and what it means to tap the endowment in that way, especially for future decision making. It is this point of difference that has not been fully articulated. I also mentioned during the Board Workshop that I think it would be extremely useful for faculty to see and understand the type of information the stress tests collate, since it is that type of analysis that leads the Board and our Cabinet to take the position that our challenges are short term ones, which is not, I think something all faculty feel fully convinced about at this point.

The notion of short-term challenges is what Board President Bob Pohlad emphasized at the meeting, and that is where I will pivot toward our always ongoing shared governance work and the current execution of the strategic plan. Again, being as plainspoken as possible, I will summarize by saying that faculty expresses consistent anxiety that the issues higher education faces in general and how we experience them in particular are not short term and that we are not well positioned to address them. The Board, on the other hand, rests its analysis on the precepts that problems of enrollment, retention, and market position are ones we are well positioned to address and that if we do, we will not be facing long term financial issues.

This difference in scale of fear and frame for action is in some ways irreconcilable because we all have to make projections about how much we think will go right and how much we think will go wrong, at both the graduate and undergraduate level. Elements of high level future planning sometimes seem to project that everything will go right, especially regarding how additional graduate programs will positively impact our overall budget. Aspects of faculty conversation can default to the idea that everything will go wrong, especially regarding fears that start up for additional graduate programs will not be net positive for much longer than anticipated and therefore will burden the already stressed situation. This argument also often asserts that undergraduate curricular change will "make no difference." It is hard to navigate these analyses as we watch program eliminations and university closures near and far. On both a micro and macro level, it is an emotionally charged climate as well as being a wicked economic, political, and sociological problem to solve.

On balance, it is likely that some things will go right, and some things will go wrong as we navigate the next ten years on campus. I would like the faculty to consider what we are well served by in terms of how we participate in addressing our challenges. The Board understands the Strategic plan as the way to address our current concerns, and they are eager to support initiatives the faculty bring forward related to the strategic plan. They expressed this to me over and over again during last week's meeting. We have the authority and option as the faculty to pursue initiatives. That is the energy and engagement I received from the Board, even as they

understood how gravely faculty are impacted by next year's budget decision and our fears about the landscape for higher education. I hope that we as a faculty can honor each other's fears, but not let them stop us from acting with a sense of purpose.

### **Curriculum Revision**

That turns me to revision of the undergraduate curriculum framework, since the CTF moves into the last phase of work on its charge now. I will recap by saying: There are many indications that we need to change some things for our students in order ensure their success and the success of this institution. We don't have to change everything, but we will likely benefit from changing some things: the trend in our retention rate (both its overall decline and the welcome uptick from fall to this spring) tells us that. Everyone has been on high alert since last year....retention ticks up a bit. But we need to make sustainable changes that keep it there.

As regards enrollment, the curriculum may not be the central reason students choose a place to attend, but I think any refreshments we make allow for strengthened narratives and renewed energy, which accrues to the benefit of admissions work. That's enough for that area. More important, I've concluded that where we can make a huge difference through what we do in our curriculum is retention in the first and second year. Likewise, curriculum changes support an increased sense of a shared purpose on this campus, which also helps students see a stronger trajectory for a life after college so we can make a big difference there as well. I'm here to encourage us that for those reasons it is worth it to persist with curriculum reform.

The CTF has taken the faculty's direction from the November vote that as we move to a renewed curriculum we want to keep the basic categories of the current core rather than restructure them. That is a fair decision regarding direction. That does not mean we should make no changes to our curriculum. Together, we need to improve things for our students. So, the CTF will be bringing recommendations, and hosting the conversation about workload. For the rest of March, April, and May we will be deciding, as a faculty, what actions we want to take. Often when we approach decisions about curriculum, we hear two types of arguments that make it hard to continue with the process of applied action. Those are arguments about proof and arguments about purview. I address aspects of those arguments in the next section.

### **Taking Action in Uncertain Times**

As we approach our continuing curriculum work this spring, I ask the faculty to keep two things in mind:

1. We will never have the type of proof some of us ask for that any changes we make will **assuredly** solve our challenges. That type of guarantee does not exist in life or human institutions, even as we commit to research, provide data, and ground our judgements in evidence from other campuses. No other campus has done exactly what we might do. No other campus is exactly like us. If they had done exactly our thing, we wouldn't want to do it then because they already had. We always have to extrapolate some. We always have to take a bit of a leap of faith. As each of us knows from our personal lives: we often must make life-shaping decisions with incomplete information and without assurances. I caution that refusing to change because there is no guarantee means we

will continue to experience the detriments we currently experience. That's how we get a longer and longer term problem.

2. As for purview, the faculty control the curriculum. But we are part of a whole symbiotic system on this campus and in governance. Our on-campus colleagues have made clear that they cannot solve the problems we face without us. We have made clear to Cabinet and Board of Trustees that we have concerns about some of what is under consideration. But, as regards mid and low level staff in particular, they are looking to us as the people with the purview and power to make quite a large impact through curriculum choices. We need to be mindful of how our collaborators in the staff and on the Board of Trustees view our curriculum work in light of the university's challenges, the challenges in the world, and the invitations of the Strategic Plan. They have met us in good faith and are eager to serve our visions. Are we prepared for how it will feel if we don't come through for each other and for them over the next few years to do what we can do regarding curriculum?

### **The Future and Further Directions in Faculty Governance**

I really have struggled this month with how disheartening it is to read the news (in general, but notably about higher education). I think it is important that faculty continue to create chances to talk with the President and among ourselves about how we steer through the next ten years. Interestingly, I have spoken to colleagues at multiple universities in the last few months, many of whom are researching governance structures and considering the creation or reform of their way of doing governance. Across those conversations, I've come to understand that Puget Sound has a quite open, ground up structure (truly): one that is horizontal and responsive in ways that have caused gasps from some people I talk to, especially including the detail that an elected faculty member leads the full faculty meeting. I say this because it feels pivotal this spring for us to keep at it, now, and for the future. I worry that we will all become so disheartened that we lose track of what we've got and what good may come. Let's have a drink, let's dance it out, let's keep going.

To that end, Senate is in the midst of a very active docket of business regarding the VPDI Search, ASC policies, changes to compositions of committees, and follow through on SET work and policy about contingent faculty roles. We are discussing the student proposal to turn Warner Gym into a Student Support Center and will also discuss more effective ways of scheduling meeting times for standing committees and the use of the common hour. We are soon to be making the call for nominations for next year's new Senators and the next Faculty Senate Chair.

As Denise Despres would say at the start of pretty much every session of her 400 level medieval lit seminar in 1995 as we opened our texts and focused for the day: We have a lot of work to do, and not very much time to do it.

Sincerely,

Sara