 COMMITTEE ON ACADEMIC FREEDOM  
Annual Report, 2009 - 10

To the Academic Senate, Santa Cruz Division:

The Committee on Academic Freedom (CAF) met during fall and winter quarters to complete its main business of the year. CAF reviewed and discussed the Report of the Humanities Division Advisory Task Force on Reconstitution and the Policy Review of Establishment, Disestablishment and Change of Academic Programs and Units.

Report of the Humanities Division Advisory Task Force on Reconstitution
The committee expressed its appreciation for the fact that then-Humanities Dean Van Den Abbeele convened the task force and thereby created a forum for participation and commentary by rank and file divisional faculty. CAF focused on the potential academic freedom implications of merging certain humanities departments. We were guided by our understanding that a central focus of the task force’s report was the advisability and/or possibility of such a merger taking place. While such dilemmas are not inevitable, CAF recommended that careful attention be paid to establishing clear evaluation practices in the newly merged units to avoid confusion about the norms and/or expectations in the once discrete departments. This is especially important because all three of the departments proposed as possible merger candidates are themselves interdisciplinary departments.

CAF members were unanimous on the more general matter that any and all institutional reorganization(s) should have a clear and demonstrable curricular rationale and be driven by curriculum. Curriculum, in turn, must be driven by faculty research and pedagogies associated with it. By this logic, CAF believes that the planning and implementation of department mergers must be guided by faculty in the relevant departments. Finally, CAF members were unanimous in their concern about the vital need to retain the History of Consciousness program because of its central role in the intellectual vitality, to say nothing of the intellectual reputation, of UCSC.

Policy Review of Establishment, Disestablishment and Change of Academic Programs and Units.
The starting point in CAF’s analysis is the central role of trust within the system of shared governance that so admirably has served the University of California system and, since its founding, the Santa Cruz campus, within the Master Plan for Higher Education. This trust has three key aspects. First is the trust invested in faculty to develop, maintain, and continually improve the university’s curricular offerings. Second is the trust invested in faculty to establish and maintain clear standards of professional competency and excellence and to hold each other to rigorous standards in a thorough yet fair system of periodic peer review. Third is the trust of faculty in campus and systemwide administrators to provide and manage resources in a consultative process to support the university’s core missions in the production and dissemination of knowledge and the provision of public service to the people of California. Academic freedom depends crucially on all three pillars of trust.

The proposed policy document is unequivocal in retaining for senate faculty the primary role in creating undergraduate and graduate curricula (of any sort according to the array of definitions contained in the document).
Section IV of the document raised the most concern and questions within CAF because the proposed policies threaten and, in some instances, violate shared governance principles of trust in faculty to manage curriculum and program excellence and of faculty that campus administration would manage resources in a consultative manner to support core missions. Our concerns included the creation of a new authority for divisional deans to initiate transfer, consolidation, and disestablishment (TCD) of academic programs and units (i.e., departments and interdisciplinary units) which replaces the existing policy.

CAF is concerned that the policy document is entirely silent (in this section and in every other section) on the subject of resource enhancements. We believe resource enhancements can be a very important component of academic program and unit change. The policy enumerates reasons why an academic program may lose resources, but does not state how and under what conditions academic programs may be augmented, either with new-to-campus resources or through intra-campus resource transfers. This lends the document’s discussion of program maintenance and change a curious asymmetry. To the extent that the stated aim of the policy document is to guide program change, CAF recommends that the subject of procedures for resource enhancements be incorporated into the final policy.

CAF’s grave reservations about the proposed policy document arise from the fact that deans’ traditional short-term budget authority over annual resource allocations and routine change concatenate with new powers over program TCD. As the policy document indicates, “routine” changes are the exclusive domain of divisional deans and are exempt from higher level administrative review and academic senate consultation. Such changes can be “absorbed without undermining program viability,” can enhance operating efficiency and, in the best case scenarios, can create new intellectual synergies. But such changes also can have consequences and impacts that undermine program viability. This means divisional deans can unilaterally implement program changes of a routine nature that have a cumulative, negative impact on program viability, and use the new powers created in the policy document to unilaterally initiate TCD procedures for program weaknesses resulting from ostensible routine changes. CAF believes TCD procedures must be established that do not concentrate such wide-ranging unilateral authority in any single administrative officer.

The slippery slope from routine change to permanent change of the campus academic landscape prompts a second, related conclusion having to do with shared governance at UCSC. As construed on page one of the policy document, shared governance consists of the fact that the University has “assigned responsibility for courses, curricula, and degrees to the faculty, and responsibility for academic units and budgets to the administration.”

It is CAF’s sober assessment that the severity and sustained nature of the budget crisis in California has completely undercut the viability of this longstanding model of shared governance. Political and economic changes have advanced well beyond the point where anyone believes our current situation is that of a cyclical trough out of which, in due time, we will emerge to regain lost ground and gain new public resources. Instead, we are experiencing a (we demur from saying “the”) result of a secular decline in public sector support for the public sector of higher education.
At the level of campus academic planning, this ongoing secular decline, compounded by a deep and stubborn cyclical recession, means there are few, if any, programmatic resource allocation decisions that do not have a curricular impact, i.e., routine budget decisions are de facto curricular decisions. Current academic planning is preoccupied with planned shrinkage around reduced circumstances. In such an environment, which we believe represents the new status quo, the curricular prerogatives and responsibilities of faculty are clearly on a collision course with the budgetary prerogatives and responsibilities of the administration.

CAF asserts that it no longer realistic to make policy, as this document does, premised on the established division of labor of shared governance and calls for a new model to take its place. In a very real sense, the circumstances calling for clarification of TCD processes have already overtaken the policy document, so bleak are the state and campus budget forecasts.

The urgent task before the campus is defining a new model of shared governance, premised on emergent realities, that expands the role of faculty in determining the campus future. Given the collective brain power and management acumen of campus faculty, administrators, and staff, this project could be realized with alacrity—which is important, because time is of the essence. Despite our grave concerns, CAF remains hopeful that campus faculty and administrators will be able to move forward with developing a new model of shared governance.

Finally, members of the Committee on Academic Freedom believe CAF must participate in crafting a new model of shared governance that would include any and all TCD procedures covered by the policy document under review. Currently CAF is not represented in the procedures described in this document. The committee is the guardian of a core institutional value. As such, it must be included within all policy discussions affecting shared governance and in whatever TCD procedures are eventually adopted.

Respectfully submitted,

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