

Senate Chair Remarks
Board of Trustees Meeting
9 April 2021
Prepared by Deborah L. Nichols, Current Chair

Good morning.

Today I say goodbye to all of you as University Senate chair. It's been a long, strange year for sure. I think we have accomplished a great deal under a number of extraordinary circumstances. We have passed resolutions to support greater diversity and inclusivity on campus, we have worked through many challenges directly related to the pandemic, and we have attempted to do the regular business of the senate. We also collected a great deal of data, gathering nearly 27,000 (26,987) responses over four waves, to share with you how the campus community was feeling, what their concerns were, and ideas they had regarding what would be most helpful during these challenging times. These efforts were met with some initial skepticism and perhaps a fair amount of apprehensiveness about what the surveys might reveal. It is my belief, however, that knowing what the challenges are and facing these truths head on is best served by asking the questions, gathering the data, and listening to everyone's voices—even when the truth is just an acknowledgement that you don't always know the way forward. What we documented across these surveys led us to make strides in addressing child and elder care issues; caregiving responsibilities; distribution of faculty responsibilities; student, staff, and faculty mental health resources; and teaching challenges.

One consequence of the pandemic was an opportunity to engage in a different kind of shared governance. In June 2020, with leaders of CSSAC, MaPSAC, PSG, PGSG, and the Provost's office, we formed the Protect Purdue Leadership group. We met together weekly through February 2021 and currently meet about every other week to discuss questions and share concerns raised by each of our constituencies. I found this group to be an integral part of our pandemic response and invaluable to better understanding everyone's concerns across the campus community.

Consequently, while I could pass into my twilight days and simply assume the role of past chair on June 1st, as Dylan Thomas wrote, "do not go gentle into that good night." During the April Board of Trustees meeting, I shared a proposal developed by a number of faculty, staff, and student colleagues that we have been working on this spring. Given the effectiveness of our Protect Purdue leadership team and the collaborative relationships we have formed through these shared governance efforts, this group is proposing to restructure our university senate into one that is based on mutual trust, shared sense of purpose, clear understanding of the issues at hand, adaptability, and productivity; all evidence-based indicators of effective shared governance¹. While there are multiple goals linked to this proposed restructuring, I will highlight two of the most important ones briefly.

First, similar to the Board of Trustees equity task force's charge to "ensure all members of the university community have the opportunity to experience all Purdue has to offer equitably..." and as evidenced through the multiple surveys we conducted during the last year, it is critically important that all voices on campus are represented, able, and encouraged to participate in discussions about procedures, policies, and practices that affect them. And, equally important, for other constituents to understand and respect the challenges that our fellow colleagues face in the various roles and responsibilities they assume as Boilermakers. A university senate heavily dominated by faculty neglects the unique needs facing other groups on campus. The proposed restructuring would distribute representation through our shared governance structures more equitably across staff, students, and faculty.

Second, as the pandemic highlighted for everyone, effective and timely governance and an ability to respond in the moment to various challenges are both crucial aspects of shared governance. Current structures are not effective and do not support timely decision-making. In fact, the proposal outlines several arguments to illustrate how current structures promote a culture of dysfunction and intransigence. Robert Birnbaum, a scholar of higher education studying academic

¹ Ott, M. W. & Mathews, K. R. (2015). *Effective academic governance: Five ingredients for CAOs and faculty*. Cambridge, MA: The Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education.

senates, wrote in 1989², that these governance structures were “weak, ineffective, an empty forum, vestigial, unrepresentative, and inept...slowly collapsing and becoming dormant and purely ceremonial.” Little has changed in academic or university senates since that time. The proposed restructuring would retain individual groups like CSSAC, MaPSAC, and the graduate and undergraduate student groups, create a faculty council, and potentially create other councils that focus on the key needs of each set of constituents (e.g., non-tenure-track faculty and lecturers, alumni). A university or executive council comprised of leaders of these groups, and others (e.g., members of administration, alumni, a Board of Trustees representative), would also be created. This group would resemble the Protect Purdue leadership team and would be able to meet as frequently as needed to address circumstances as they arise. Finally, reporting to the councils would be standing and ad hoc committees, with equal representation of faculty, staff, and students on each of these committees. Regional campus representatives would also continue their roles in these respective councils and committees.

In the upcoming weeks, the shared governance task force will distribute its proposal outlining the rationale and justification for a restructuring, hold a listening session, and engage in other activities to solicit feedback and answer questions from all campus constituencies. A draft and detailed proposal will be distributed by early fall 2021. During fall semester, we will hold a campus-wide vote on the proposal with a simple majority needed to pass, and bring the results of that vote and the proposal to the Board of Trustees to ratify tentatively scheduled for the October 2021 meetings. The above process follows the precedent set in 1964 when the original university senate was formed.

² Birnbaum, R. (1989). The latent organizational functions of the academic senate. *The Journal of Higher Education*, 60, 423-443. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00221546.1989.11775050>