

ISU REPORT UNDERMINES FACULTY GOVERNANCE

By Nick Gier

The principle of faculty self-determination goes all the way back to the medieval university. Europe's academic colleges—along with craft guilds and Protestant congregations—were our first democratic institutions. The virtue of collegiality comes out of this tradition, and master craftsmen and those with master's degrees were tops in their disciplines but never masters of their colleagues.

In 1889 the founders of our great state gave the “immediate government of the University of Idaho” to the faculty. Faculty self-governance became a reality on American campuses in the 1960s with the establishment of faculty senates across the country. In 1968 the newly constituted UI Faculty Senate was formed to fulfill this essential duty.

When I started handling grievances for the faculty union in the 1970s, I discovered that some departments were holding secret files on some employees. I researched union contracts and drafted an open files policy, which, after being vetted by several committees, was sent to the Faculty Senate where it passed with no objections. I then negotiated the final wording with assistant vice-president Galen Rowe, and President Richard Gibb approved the policy.

In 1977 the UI general faculty met and passed—by a vote of 99-51—a policy that would give due process to professors who were denied tenure. The UI administration did not agree with this idea, but President Gibb respected the faculty vote and sent the measure on to the State Board of Education (SBOE). Two board members admitted that it was immoral not to give reasons for denial of tenure, but they took the advice of their attorneys and rejected the proposal.

This constructive process of shared governance has flourished in an atmosphere of mutual respect on campuses all across the nation. University administrators have trusted their faculty to initiate policy on a wide range of academic and personnel matters and they used their veto power rarely and responsibly.

A position paper of the American Federation of Teachers states that “in higher education there is a high turnover rate among top administrators; this means that faculty

and staff are often more knowledgeable about the institutional history that is so valuable to institutional planning. Without that history, colleges and universities are apt to repeat past failures.”

In stark contrast to the principle of faculty self-determination, Idaho State University is heading in the opposite direction. A report of the Institutional Governance Advisory Committee begins by asserting the absolute authority of the president first and foremost. This turns traditional institutional governance on its head.

Desiring to shed ISU of the “constraints of timeworn structures” and “reduce faculty service burden while increasing the breadth of faculty input,” the authors propose four new faculty committees, which would report directly to the ISU president.

We assume that the president will appoint the faculty on these committees, and the role of democratically elected senators would be reduced substantially. Particularly troublesome is the fact that the Faculty Senate will not have direct authority on curriculum matters, which has always been a faculty prerogative.

In a clear indication of a diminished Faculty Senate in the future, ISU Provost Gary Olson wrote a memo to the new senate officers in June. He informed them that the summer stipend for the chair and the course reductions for both the chair and the vice-chair had been rescinded. In a meeting with President Arthur Vailas the officers convinced him to restore the benefits, but the Provost’s preemptive emasculation of the senate was a stunning act of administrative arrogance.

The authors of the report are in error when they charge that the ISU Faculty Senate believes “it has the authority to approve or veto decisions made by the President.” Only the upper administration and the SBOE has veto power, and on the two issues cited in the report, the senators were responding to new administrative and faculty workload proposals with which they disagreed. This was their duty and right, not a claim to new power. Their responses were not vetoes; rather, they were the responsible actions one would expect for elected leaders serving their constituents.

The authors state that “careful, reasoned faculty advice is valued;” that “faculty time is limited” for governance; and that the “Faculty Senate and its advisory structure are expensive.” The clear implication seems to be that recent faculty actions were not responsible, and that they somehow spent too much time and money practicing the

democratic principle of self-determination. Does this mean that senate officers will no longer be able to travel to SBOE meetings to present faculty viewpoints?

In the fall of 2009 President Vailas believed that the senators were interfering in personnel matters when they voted to uphold—by a vote of 19-5—a faculty appeal board decision supporting engineering professor Habib Sadid. The appeal procedures—just like those pertaining to tenure and promotion—are under the senate’s direct authority, so there was nothing irregular about senators voting to affirm the appeal board’s 4-1 decision. Following very lengthy fact-finding and deliberation, duly selected faculty representatives found that the dismissal was without merit. Nevertheless, Professor Sadid was fired on October 30, 2009.

In the spring of 2010, following time-honored democratic procedures, the ISU faculty gathered petitions for a campus wide vote that overwhelmingly rejected Provost Olson’s plan to reorganize the university. When the faculty vote was ignored, a second petition drive led to a vote of no confidence in Olson. Out of a possible 656 faculty votes, 295 voted against Olson, 95 voted for, and 41 chose to abstain. Without any attempt to work out differences with the faculty on these essential matters, Vailas sent the reorganization plan to the SBOE and insisted that Olson stay on as his right-hand man.

The authors of the report state that the reason for the proposed changes is that the current system is not “responsive, effective, efficient, or flexible as it could be in providing advice and timely recommendations.”

There are certainly problems that need to be addressed (there are obviously too many committees), but I suspect that the real reason is that President Vailas has actually found ISU professors far too responsive and effective and voicing their opinions. In my experience UI presidents have respected the faculty voice and the traditional procedures in which it has been expressed, but it is clear that Vailas has not.

The report notes that the ISU Faculty Senate does not have a constitution as do its counterparts at BSU and the UI. It therefore recommends that such a constitution now be drafted. I believe that ISU faculty should take this opportunity to reassert the traditional principle of faculty self-governance.

I also urge that faculty across the state call or write their senators to make sure that their leaders speak out against these threats to faculty governance. The ISU report

will be discussed at the next SBOE meeting in Lewiston on October 13-14. If board members accept the recommendations of the ISU report, they could very well become new board policy for governance on all Idaho campuses. This should never be allowed to happen.

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