Report on Improving the Effectiveness of MSU Faculty Senate

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A strong Faculty Senate is a crucial element in academic governance because it provides feedback on most aspects of the complex fabric of the university and allows for the checks and balances needed in any healthy organization. The Faculty Senate meets roughly once a month during the academic year, and it is through these senate meetings that actions are identified and decisions are made. There is wide agreement that Faculty Senate meetings and processes could be restructured to be more efficient and effective.

Description of the process

At the last Faculty Senate meeting of the 2018/2019 academic year, all faculty senators expressed dissatisfaction with the effectiveness of the senate meetings and a desire to consider alternatives for improving our processes and infrastructure to better utilize faculty voice and expertise. As a consequence of that discussion, and given the desire for improvement, a subgroup formed to look into the issues and propose solutions.

This group of volunteers initially met on May 10th. During that meeting we made a list of the issues and brainstormed solutions. A follow-up meeting on May 16th was used to wrap up the brainstorming session and develop a plan of action. During the month of June, the group worked on collecting the necessary materials and developing the written documents here presented. In this report, we will briefly describe our findings and assessments of the situation, followed by our recommendations.

Challenges

The effectiveness of senate meetings is of upmost importance for genuine faculty participation in academic governance. Challenges faced in current Faculty Senate meetings include:

- Incoming senators are not oriented to their roles.
- The process of adding items to the agenda is cumbersome and not transparent.
- Agendas often include information items that could be shared in other forms, and do not cover critical issues for faculty that could benefit from faculty input.
- At senate meetings, only a small fraction of the faculty stand up to speak and the format doesn't lend itself well to dialogue.

- Outside senate faculty meetings, communication between senators is inhibited by channeling all information through the Steering Committee.
- Administrative support is insufficient to enable senators to deliberate and provide input on complex issues.
- Some faculty refuse to serve because it does not seem like a good use of time or serve with the assumption that they can use the time to catch up with email.
- Senators are removed for lack of attendance.

This group has identified four areas that could be improved and six specific recommendations for improving the effectiveness and efficiency of Faculty Senate meetings.

Areas for improvement

a) Orientation for new senators

Unfortunately, new senators appear at their first senate meeting without guidelines and therefore have limited effectiveness in fulfilling their important role as a liaison to their constituencies. This problem can be easily avoided by providing a *quick guide* to the senators on how the senate works and what is expected of them. We have developed a document to guide the transition of new senators. We also propose that a meeting of the steering committee at-large members with new senators be held at the beginning of each academic year so that people get to know each other and questions can be asked and clarified. Attached to this document we provide a draft of the *quick guide* as well as a possible **agenda** for this orientation meeting.

> *We recommend that all new senators receive orientation to the senate.*
> At-large members of the steering committee should meet with all new faculty senators in August, prior to the start of the academic year. During that meeting new faculty senators will receive a *quick guide* that clarifies their role and sets expectations. A version of this *quick guide* is provided in attachment. We also include the agenda for that orientation meeting.

b) Space and meeting format

It is well known that the venue and the arrangement of a room enhance (or inhibit) communication at a meeting. There are many examples of groups of similar size that have effective meeting spaces. We here discuss both the choice of the space as well as the sound system used.

The current space being used for senate meetings is a large lecture room (International Center 115) with unmovable chairs and tables. This space is appropriate for one-way communication, from lecturer to students. The president, provost and chair of the steering committee preside, sitting at the front and facing the audience of about 50-70 faculty senators in any given meeting. In addition, a faculty member that wishes to participate must walk to the microphone at the front of the room, and when signaled to talk has to state their name and college followed by their statement. This procedure has two problems. First, it sets

a high threshold for participation (most do not feel confident enough to go on stage or many feel their comment is not worth the effort). Second, it slows the process to a point where every intervention becomes isolated and there is no possibility of a real dialogue.

MSU has flex rooms that can hold this number of people and tables can be arranged in a circular format such that all members would equally feel part of the conversation. This group felt that it was important that the location of the meeting be kept central on campus to maximize participation. Flex rooms of the appropriate size are available in Erickson hall (e.g. room 344 in Erickson Hall or M010 and M242 in the new extension of the Business School).

We recommend that all senate meetings be held in Erickson Hall, in a flex room with tables arranged in a circular format and microphones distributed on the tables. To enhance participation and enable genuine discussions of topics, it is important that the tables be arranged in a circular format and that microphones be placed on the tables. This reduces the threshold for participation of all faculty senators and permits a natural flow for the conversation.

c) *Faculty Senate agenda*

The agenda of the Faculty Senate is a critical aspect of its effectiveness. For a strong Faculty Senate, it is of utmost importance that the faculty can efficiently control the senate agenda. Currently, agenda items are requested three weeks in advance and need to be submitted two weeks prior to the senate meeting. They are then discussed by the steering committee and may (or may not) end up being included in the senate agenda that is sent out just a few days prior to the senate meeting. Often, when a relevant topic is included in the agenda, it is after the fact, as an informational item. Over the course of the year, there is no guarantee that all relevant topics are discussed at Faculty Senate and certainly no guarantee that they are discussed at a time when input is possible.

We carefully prepared a list of topics, covering all aspects relevant to our faculty, which should be discussed by the Faculty Senate. We then met twice with Associate Provost Terry Curry to align the timing of discussion on these topics with the various university calendars to enable timely faculty input. This led to the attached calendar for the Faculty Senate. The agenda for each Faculty Senate meeting would then contain these items, as well as other additions drawn from requests by the membership. This will provide transparency and structure to the annual cycle of Faculty Senate meetings.

We recommend that the steering committee follow a senate calendar for covering a broad range of important topics. In order to ensure that the most relevant topics get addressed in Faculty Senate and that this discussion feeds into decisions in the upper administration, we propose that a senate calendar of topics, aligned with other university calendars, be followed in preparing the agenda for senate meetings.

All senate agendas contain, as a last topic, "Comments from the floor". In most meetings, the meeting runs over time and this serves as a deterrent to anyone that wishes to bring up any emerging issue from the floor. While the faculty calendar will ensure a broad coverage of the important topics, it cannot ensure that the Faculty Senate addresses emerging issues in a timely fashion. To enable this, we would like to introduce a new practice for submitting items for the agenda. In this day and age, with email communication available 24/7, it should suffice to email the steering committee chair's administrator a couple of days in advance, after the preliminary agenda has been shared. At that point, the steering committee chair should be given the authority to add the items to the agenda if indeed the topic warrants a prompt discussion. Amendments to the agenda can be done quickly at the beginning of the senate meeting. It would then be the responsibility of the chair to manage the meeting to try to ensure that these amendments can be discussed.

We recommend that the steering committee chair accept suggestions for additions to the senate agenda by direct email up to 2 days prior to the senate meeting and add to the agenda those items that merit prompt discussion. In situations where there are emerging topics, it is important that the senate gets a chance to discuss them and has the flexibility to act in a timely manner. A direct email to the chair of the steering committee should be sufficient to get an urgent topic on the agenda (see recommendation (6) below for a discussion of related administrative support).

In-person interaction is the richest form of communication and should be used mostly for discussion. To ensure that there is time for discussion at the senate meetings, we propose that items to be discussed by the senate be included at the top of the agenda, so they can be covered in the first half of the meeting. Informational items should be left for the second half. When time does not permit, informational items can be shared after the meeting through email.

We recommend that the agenda be reorganized such that all the topics that merit discussion and input from the faculty are covered before those topics that are informational. To optimize the time spent during the senate meeting, it is critical that items involving discussion be addressed first, since other items can be shared by email following the meeting.

d) Support for senate activities

Currently, the faculty-senate activities are supported by a faculty member acting as secretary. Gary Hoppenstand has kindly been serving as secretary for a long time. He prepares the minutes of every meeting and ensures that business is conducted according to the bylaws. In addition, there is a part-time administrative assistant that takes attendance and prepares the room for the meeting. If we want a stronger, more engaged senate, the current level of support is insufficient. Ideally, the senate would benefit from hiring a high-level staff person that would work closely with the Faculty Senate to carry out other tasks such as online votes, surveys, meeting agenda preparation and modification, coordination between university committee activities, collection of information from various offices in the

university, etc. In our opinion, the most serious issue is that no teaching relief is currently provided to the chair of the steering committee, on who many responsibilities fall.

We urge the steering committee to work with President Stanley to provide modest funding to enable an increase of support to senate activities. This may include providing one semester teaching relief for the chair of the steering committee as well as hiring a fulltime staff person to help manage the various activities. This is the motivation for our last recommendation (6).

We recommend that the Office of the Provost provide a higher level of support for the administrative functions associated with the senate activities. This should include one semester teaching relief for the steering committee chair. There are a number of important administrative functions that are carried out with very limited support. This is the ideal time to request additional support from the Office of the President to enable those on the steering committee to carry out their duties effectively.

Summary of Recommendations

Michigan State University will be a better university if there is greater faculty engagement in academic governance through its Faculty Senate. We propose changes to improve the effectiveness of senate meetings and strengthen this important university body.

1) We recommend that all new senators receive orientation to the senate. At-large members of the steering committee should meet with all new faculty senators in August, prior to the start of the academic year. During that meeting new faculty senators will receive a *quick guide* that clarifies their role and sets expectations. A version of this *quick guide* is provided in attachment. We also include the agenda for that orientation meeting.

2) We recommend that all senate meetings be held in Erickson Hall, in a flex room with tables arranged in a circular format and microphones distributed around on the tables. To enhance participation and enable genuine discussions of topics, it is important that the tables be arranged in a circular format and that microphones be placed on the tables. This reduces the threshold for participation of all faculty senators and permits a natural flow for the conversation.

3) We recommend that the steering committee follow a senate calendar for covering a broad range of important topics. In order to ensure that the most relevant topics get addressed in Faculty Senate prior to annual decision-making calendars in the university, and that this discussion feeds into decisions in the upper administration, we propose that a senate calendar of topics, aligned with other university calendars, be followed in preparing the agenda for senate meetings.

4) We recommend that the steering committee chair accept suggestions for additions to the senate agenda by direct email up to 2 days prior to the senate meeting and include to the agenda those items that merit prompt discussion. In situations where there are emerging topics, it is important that the senate gets a chance to discuss them and has the flexibility to act in a timely manner. A direct email to the chair of the steering committee should be sufficient to get an urgent topic on the agenda (see recommendation 6 on administrative support).

5) We recommend that the agenda be reorganized such that all the topics that merit discussion and input from the faculty are covered before those topics that are informational. To optimize the time spent during the senate meeting, it is critical that items involving discussion be addressed first, since other items can be shared by email following the meeting.

6) We recommend that the Office of the Provost provide a higher level of support for the administrative functions associated with the senate activities. This should include one semester teaching relief for the steering committee chair. There are a number of important administrative functions that are carried out with very reduced support. This is the ideal time to request additional support from the Office of the President to alleviate the tasks of those on the steering committee.

Proposal for a Typical Calendar for MSU Faculty Senate

In order to ensure that every year, Faculty Senate gets to discuss all the faculty-relevant topics, we propose that these topics are addressed annually at a time that is aligned with the upper administration calendars and allows for input in the processes. In green as the topics that are specific to this coming year.

September:
> Updated from various committees: what's on the docket for this year
> Budget (report on budget that got approved)
> Vision for the new Postdoctoral Office

October
> Undergrad recruitment and performance: report and discussion
> Graduate recruitment and performance: report and discussion

November
> Discussion of major long-term investments
> Undergrad support services: report and discussion

January
> Faculty recruitment, hiring and retention: report and discussion
> PTRC: report and discussion

February
> VP for research: report and discussion
> Outreach and engagement: report and discussion

March
> Budget (plans for next FY budget): report and discussion
> Communication: report and discussion

April
> MSU's efforts on Diversity and equity: report and discussion
> New (or changes to) MSU policies: report and discussion