News, Views and Careers for All of Higher Education

Aug. 8

Affirming Professors’ Role or Denigrating It?

At a time that many professors fear that administrators don’t value tenure, the headline on Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute’s Web site seems like something that would draw applause: “Rensselaer to Review Faculty Governance to Strengthen Role of Tenured, Tenure-Track Faculty.”

But the e-mail flying at RPI Tuesday wasn’t full of praise. That’s because the governance reform is viewed by some professors as nothing more than an attempt to abolish a Faculty Senate that this year decided — against the wishes of the administration — to grant voting rights to “clinical” faculty members (RPI’s term for full-time, non-tenure track faculty members who focus almost entirely on teaching).

The announcement of the governance reform said that the RPI board had decided that governance must be restricted to tenured and tenure-track faculty members. To drive home the point, the board said that during the period in which governance is being changed, the recently elected Faculty Senate and its committees would not have power because they were elected in votes that included the non-tenure-track professors. Instead, key committees from the prior year — before the Faculty Senate had expanded the franchise — would continue.

RPI’s provost, Robert E. Palazzo, said in an interview that the reforms were all about recognizing the importance of the tenured and tenure-track faculty. “The key in faculty governance comes from the investment of the tenured and tenure-track faculty,” he said. “Tenure is extremely important and tenured and tenure-track faculty really should be in the lead in terms of advising the president and the provost and the board.”

The problem with that argument, faculty leaders said, was that tenured and tenure-track faculty members had expressed their views on governance: that they thought those off the tenure track were entitled to participate. How does it show respect for tenured and tenure-track faculty, they asked, to ignore their vote and invalidate this year’s Senate elections? Then there’s the problem that this governance reform is coming from an administration that has not endeared itself to the faculty. Last year, the faculty narrowly rejected a no confidence vote against Shirley Ann Jackson, the president, who is seen as a national leader on many science and technology issues, but whose priorities have been questioned by many in its Troy, N.Y. home.

Not surprisingly, faculty leaders said that reforming a Senate that had challenged Jackson didn’t sit well with them. “The administration doesn’t like what the Faculty Senate has done, so they are going for something more compliant with the queen’s wishes,” said E. Bruce Nauman, a professor of chemical engineering who was elected vice president of the Senate in the elections that the administration is now not counting as valid.

Cary Nelson, a professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and national president of the American Association of University Professors, said that he was stunned and angered by the developments at RPI. He praised the “progressive and sensitive act” of the tenured and tenure-track professors in recognizing that people who teach at a university — whatever their tenure status — deserve a voice in governance. “The very notion that full-time faculty off the tenure track could be barred from the governance process is immensely retrograde and reactionary,” he said.

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The idea for giving clinical faculty a vote came from years of discussions about their role, professors said. "The clinical faculty really play a major role in the teaching on campus. They need to feel part of the endeavor," said Larry Kagan, a professor of art and president of the Faculty Senate.

At RPI's main campus, there are 348 tenured and tenure-track faculty members (excluding those in administrative slots) and 46 clinical faculty. At RPI's Hartford campus, the 19 full-time faculty members are all clinical. Palazzo, the provost, said that while non-tenure track faculty members are always going to be needed to fill in for those on sabbatical or for emergencies, his goal is to have teaching done only by those who are tenured and on the tenure track. "Ideally all of your faculty are tenured and tenure track," he said.

Faculty leaders questioned the realism and commitment of the institute to that ideal. Kagan said that the figures on the number of professors may underestimate the importance of the clinical professors because they are only engaged in teaching, while RPI's tenured and tenure-track professors have major research agendas, and have been encouraged to place more of an emphasis on research. In many departments, Kagan said, a majority of undergraduate teaching is done by clinical professors — and professors feel more and more pressure to produce research grants. "It's understandable that the provost would like to see more teaching done by tenured and tenure-track faculty, but it's unclear how we are going to get there with the emphasis we are putting on research," he said.

Palazzo, the provost, stressed that the faculty governance reform would reflect the views of the (tenure-track) professors and he stated repeatedly his belief in their importance. "A university should focus on optimizing the greatest number of the highest caliber scholars possible," he said. "It's not a question of good or bad [teaching by clinical professors], but of optimization for the university." The board's idea, he said, is that in "the balance of a first-class teaching and research university we have to be careful about our distributions."

Other areas of governance also need reform, he said. For example, Palazzo said that the system the board has just thrown out had for years given retired faculty members the right to vote, which he said he did not consider appropriate. "So you see how this was a bit outdated," he said. "The board wants to be assured of the greatest possible participation of tenured and tenure-track faculty members." (Several faculty members acknowledged that there are areas of the governance system that need reform and said that they were not opposed to the idea of a re-examination, but to the way it was being done.)

While Palazzo acknowledged that the newly elected Faculty Senate would not be recognized, he rejected the idea that the university was abolishing the body. He said that the current situation, in which committees whose terms expired will be recognized instead of the new bodies, is "a transition state in a suspension."

Bram van Heuveln, a clinical professor of cognitive science, who is a member of the Faculty Senate, said that he accepted the idea that people off the tenure track don't have the same say as those on it. For example, he said that given the differing responsibilities, he understood why clinical faculty members shouldn't vote on tenure decisions.

But he noted that much of the work of the Faculty Senate is about issues, such as the curriculum or student affairs or faculty life, on which those who teach have plenty to offer. "We do the bulk of the teaching," he said. "Of course we should have a say. And we are in a position to have an informed say on this."

The message from the administration to clinical faculty members, he said, "is not a very encouraging one," especially given the commitment many of them feel to RPI.

"We have opinions. We teach here. We live in the same culture and same departments," he said. "I care about the institution."

If the administration believes the professor off the tenure track must be excluded from governance, van Heuveln asked, "who are we then? Are we contributing members here?"

— Scott Jaschik

Comments

Contingent Faculty Denied Shared Governance Nationwide

Printed for Julie Harrison 8/14/2007 Page 2 of 6
The rhetoric of RPI’s administration cannot conceal its disdain for contingent faculty, who remain disenfranchised at most of the nation’s colleges and universities.

But the case reveals how the increasing use of contingent faculty makes a mockery of the very concept of “shared governance.”

If the administration can rescind a vote of the faculty senate, and keep many professors from voting, then the faculty senate only serves as a fig leaf to hide the naked power of the RPI administration.

Richard, at 6:05 am EDT on August 8, 2007

Provost Robert E. Palazzo

Robert E. Palazzo apparently imagines that he is the head of a banana republic rather than a university. The incoherence of his position makes the head spin: setting aside not only a decision of a duly elected body, but suspending that body itself. And then to have the gall to talk about his desire that all faculty be tenure track. Speaking as the former chair of my own institution’s Faculty Senate, I’d recommend to my colleagues at RPI that the Senate should continue to meet & do business in defiance of the provost. At the same time, they ought to pursue a grievance with the AAUP & consider a lawsuit.

Joseph Duemer, Professor at Clarkson University, at 6:45 am EDT on August 8, 2007

Governance 101

Mr. Nelson and others who have expressed various forms of displeasure at the decision of the RPI Board generally do so on the basis of their belief that non-tenured/non-tenure track faculty should share in the governance of the Institute. Their case has merit, and it is defensible on any number of grounds. Most appropriate is their call to recognize the legitimate role of colleagues whose contribution to the academic enterprise warrants representation in the governance process. This laudable objective aside, the Senate’s unilateral decision to extend the voting franchise to this cohort had the effect of undermining the notion of shared governance, to which the Board has a vital and legitimate obligation to maintain.

The faculty senate is not a club, nor is it similar to a student organization whose prerogative to invite other cohorts to become members would be seen as a matter of polite interest. Faculty senates typically seek a meaningful, if not a strategic role in charting the course of the institutions of which they are a part. In that capacity, they are obliged to avoid “acting locally,” such as by enfranchising another constituency. The rationale for including non-tenured/non-tenure-track faculty, while meritorious, does not imply that the decision to do so rests solely with the faculty. Would any of us support a U. S. Senate bill that had the effect of extending voting rights in Senate elections to a cohort that the U. S. Constitution had not extended that privilege? In order for faculty governance to work effectively to the benefit of the faculty, its leaders have to maintain a position that ensures the integrity of institutional governance.

Russell Kitchner, HE Consultant, at 7:15 am EDT on August 8, 2007

The Rules of the Game

I commend the RPI Senate in thinking in terms of inclusivity when thinking about governance. Too often the non-tenure track voices are obscured and ignored in the learning process.

However, when those of us who engage in the pursuit of graduate education are being shall we say ‘socialized’ into the world of the Academy, we learn very quickly the hierarchy of that world. We learn that OUR VOTE in the university system is given to those who have proceeded through the guided doors of tenure. We also learn (soon after taking our first TT job) that the activites of the Tenure Track prof (teaching and publishing) that ensure our livelihood allow us the ‘perks’ of greater voice. In short, we know the price we pay for the pain we endure.

Giving the non-tt faculty A VOTE on the faculty senate is problematic with this mind. Because their advancement track is vastly different than the TT—how then can they be given a VOTE in shaping policies that may indeed impact the tenure deliberations or expectations that they themselves will never have to submit to?
A voice is different than a vote. The needs of the non-TTF could be addressed by giving them greater voice within their departments to shape (not lead) discussions regarding curriculum and teaching.

**The Secret Professor**, at 10:50 am EDT on August 8, 2007

**Contingent Affirmation**

Greetings, Scott Jaschik has given us another good example that contingent faculty participation in shared faculty governance is in jeopardy. Regardless of the status of tenured faculty at Rensselaer or anywhere else in the U.S., contingent faculty are here to stay. To help ensure the viability of academic institutions, contingent faculty must be actively involved in organized and legitimate feedback and recommendations to senior administration. Sincerely, Art H

**Art Huseonica**, Collegiate Associate Professor at UMUC, at 11:00 am EDT on August 8, 2007

**Where’s the respect?**

It is so disappointing to me that we have yet to leave behind the “good ole’ boys” mentality in higher education. When will adjunct/contingent faculty members get the respect they deserve? They contribute so much to institutions that grant them little financial benefit and much aggravation. Why shouldn’t they have a say in an institution’s policies? I think it’s unfortunate that higher ed seems to be moving away from offering tenure-track positions, but the reality is that non-TT faculty have always been a part of the academy and they are increasingly important to our institutions. In fact, I would argue that the TT faculty who are idolized on campuses because they represent the academy in its purest form are growing archaic in a society that requires our students to be taught by folks who bring more practical experience to the classroom (and that’s not meant to offend anyone; I have a different sort of respect for people who represent the more classical liberal tradition of higher education).

And so I end with a great big HARUMP!

**I’m not an adjunct, but...**, at 11:30 am EDT on August 8, 2007

**Adjuncts**

Most colleges/universities seem to want a plethora of adjuncts to cover those courses the tenured track professors don’t want to teach. That is okay, I guess, but then they pay them so little and then give them no say in the life of the institution. What does that say about how much they value the adjuncts? Not a lot, I am afraid to say.

**Don Inbody**, Adjunct Instructor at Concordia University of Texas, at 6:10 pm EDT on August 8, 2007

**Naked Power Grab**

An increasing percentage of university faculty is made up of non-tenure-track contingent labor. One effect of this development is to shift control of the day-to-day governance of the university from faculty to central administration. The RPI faculty senate is to be commended, not only for giving “clinical” faculty a say in the institution’s governance, but for attempting to counter the shift of power from faculty to admin.

In this light, the naked power grab on the part of RPI’s administration only goes to show how deliberate and calculated the shift to adjunct labor is: this stinks of an attempt to break the power of faculty to govern their own universities. I second the call for the AAUP to censure RPI for this despicable behavior.

**Shane in Utah**, at 7:45 pm EDT on August 8, 2007

**Education smeducation**

This dialogue presumes that the management of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute is actually concerned with “higher” education. It’s not. This is an institution of “lower” education, where the administration’s interest in the intellectual development of students is strictly limited to what will be needed on the job. RPI is probably best understood as part of the
supply chain for global capitalism—a corporation cranking out raw material for other corporations, in this case young people trained to know how things work but not why. No big surprise, of course, but then why should it be a surprise when Rensseler applies corporate management techniques to its employees? When a college president who earns more than a million dollars a year gives the order to crush the unionizing efforts of service employees earning barely $10 an hour, why wouldn’t she also stop adjunct and clinical faculty from organizing? She tried not long ago to eliminate the use of adjuncts almost entirely—not because they’re bad for students, but because adjuncts represent a flexible labor pool from which cost savings can be wrung without opposition. Of course, it didn’t take long (one semester) before the folly of attempting to realize cost savings by eliminating the hardest working and lowest paid employees became evident. RPI is an interesting story—how long can the school continue piling up multi-hundreds-of-million dollar capital spending projects and cutting departmental operating budgets before the sheer weight of its bloated administration (in which numerous top officials receive salaries of a quarter of a million dollars or more annually) causes an unpleasant “market correction”? Watch that Standard and Poor rating!

**Dark Shadow**, Adjunct professor at RPI, at 5:05 am EDT on August 9, 2007

**dfranchizement of faculty**

Much of the degradation of undergraduate education in the United States is the direct result of an on-going effort to dfranchise faculty. As “political and individual comfortableness” becomes more the milieu in which little Tommy picks up a book, instructors at all levels are pressured to keep him happy. The “I worked hard” is now more important than “I didn’t learn much”. “I have to have an A” is almost a constitutional right. Rather than cornering the faculty, any administrator who is really interested in education as learning should be working to inpower faculty. Students evaluate an instructor. An instructor evaluates the student when a grade is given. I strongly suspect that the instructor’s evaluation is based more on facts than the student’s evaluation. Give him a C and watch how the instructor is rated!

Jerry Johnson
Academic Director
ISEPS at Seville

jerry johnson, academic adviser at ISEPS at Seville, at 5:45 am EDT on August 9, 2007

**Adjuncts and Faculty voice**

Certainly, contingent faculty are essential to the survival of nearly every institution, and they are entitled to have views about campus issues: after all, they have academic/intellectual expertise, they know our students, and they genuinely want what’s best for the students. One important difference: they don’t have a time commitment beyond the classroom, so they can’t be _required_ to attend meetings and serve on committees. When I was department chair, all of our adjuncts were invited to participate in department meetings. (The current chair does not, and other departments vary in this.) In the Faculty Senate at our college, contingent faculty may at their option attend Senate meetings and have “privileges of the floor,” although they don’t have a vote. The committee burden here is often fairly onerous, so we don’t often hear complaints about being excluded from that. In short, there are many ways to provide input for/from contingent faculty, and it’s prudent (and right!) for department chairs and higher administrators to nurture them as professionals. A couple of earlier posters, however, have indicated correctly that, as contingent faculty don’t have the personal investment (in the college) that the full-timers have, they ought not to be making (voting in) fundamental issues determining the future of the institution.(I also question the wisdom of allowing fundamental decisions to be made by drive-by administrators, who too often are earning notches on their pistol-handles so they can gallop on to greater glory elsewhere. But that’s another story.)

Robert Copeland, Professor of Music at Geneva College, at 10:50 am EDT on August 9, 2007

**Disengenuous behavior at Rensselaer**

There is some confusion here. I would call it misdirection by the administration. The vote to enfranchise RPI’s clinical faculty was a general vote to the “Faculty” as that term is defined in the constitution of the faculty senate. It passed by approximately an 80% majority. Hundreds of faculty voted, not just the faculty senate, but the clinical faculty did not participate in that vote as they were ineligible according to the constitution. The recent elections which the administration now attempts to invalidate were also confined to the “faculty” as currently defined in the constitution. I note that the constitution as is now exists was approved by RPI’s board of trustees and has not been amended to reflect the administration’s recent desires to restrict voting to tenured and tenure-track faculty. The current voting pool includes retired faculty who maintain an RPI email address (a semi-tortuous process that confirms ongoing involvement with the Institute)
research faculty (soft-money positions). The current voting pool does not include clinical faculty (full-time teaching but not tenure track). The administration’s attempt to invalidate the recent elections is a travesty of due process. It violates the constitution of the faculty senate, but it is what we have come to expect from RPI’s current administration.

Silent, Professor at RPI, at 10:55 am EDT on August 9, 2007

another clarification

To add to the previous clarification, another confusion is that giving the clinical faculty a vote could allow them to compromise Promotion and Tenure (P&T) decisions. But the Faculty Handbook is very clear that Clinicals cannot be on P&T committees. Neither can Librarians or Research Faculty, who at least until the recent Administratin decisions, could elect members to the Faculty Senate. I have not heard anyone claim that Librarians might attempt a power grab in tenure decisions!

Thus, two big arguments used to defend the RPI Admin’s decision — that (i) the Faculty-wide vote was invalid because it allowed Clinicals to vote, and that (ii) Clinicals will interfere in tenure decisions — are at least misinformed.

Fed Up, at 4:45 pm EDT on August 13, 2007

Got something to say? Add a comment.

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