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At rare Senate meeting, MSU faculty deliver a message

April 28, 2004 Publication: Lansing City Pulse (MI) Word Count: 1586

PULSE:NEWS&OPINION :: APRIL 28, 2004

At rare Senate meeting, MSU faculty deliver a message

Administration criticized for not seeking their views

By DANIEL STURM

When 700 professors gather together in a lecture hall, the mood of the event is worth noting. Michigan State University's Academic Senate met in Wells Hall last week for the first time in 15 years, and the mood was decidedly argumentative.

The meeting was organized to discuss plans to relocate the College of Human Medicine to Grand Rapids and Provost Lou Anna Simon's proposed restructuring of the Colleges of Liberal Arts and Sciences.

But the room of tenured and tenure-track professors illustrated a symbolically broader demand for more faculty input in important university decisions. In a large lecture hall, some faculty stood quietly, reflecting on points they wanted to make. Others looked at neighbors and laughed at the excitement and novelty of their first Senate meeting.

The university bylaws contain bureaucratic obstacles that made such faculty oversight discussions (which are common at other universities) difficult to organize at MSU. The Senate chairs, Simon and President Peter McPherson, sat at the front of the hall, wearing unreadable expressions. They read the minutes of the last Academic Senate from 1989.

When the floor was opened to discussion, poor communication between faculty and administration was a key point. American history Professor John Coogan gave the example of an MSU colleague who was recently offered a one-year post as Japan's delegate for the United Nations Refugee Council in Geneva. Coogan said this was "precisely the sort of position I would have assumed the university would want its faculty to chase after."

But when the colleague requested unpaid leave to work for one year, she was turned down by the dean's office. The colleague then decided to quit, giving up a tenured position, to accept the opportunity.

Coogan quoted from an e-mail the colleague had sent from Japan: "The thought of giving up a tenure position is a very scary thing. It breaks my heart. John, I am truly angry at the way MSU treats its most loyal faculty. It's beyond

stupid. It's insane."

He then addressed the audience: "President McPherson, I'm sure, believes she's wrong. And I'm sure provost Simon believes she's wrong. The problem is [] that she's leaving. MSU is going to miss her for decades. We need to do something, because I don't want to lose more colleagues like this." At the end of the meeting, I observed Coogan's unsuccessful attempt to discuss the case with McPherson further.

Five days after the Senate meeting, Coogan said he was glad to see that his speech has made a difference. "Dr. Simon instructed one of her people to fix the situation," he said. "I give the provost full credit." He said his colleague is currently reconsidering her decision to leave MSU.

The drama and tension in the air on this day was a spillover from the April 16 Board of Trustees meeting (Provost Simon reportedly left in tears), during which several professors spoke vehemently against recent administrative decisions to reorganize and eliminate programs in the Colleges of Arts and Letters, Human Ecology, Communication Arts and Sciences, and Social Sciences.

At that meeting, the Department of Zoology chairman, Fred C. Dyer, strongly criticized the administration for failing to adequately engage faculty members. He saw it as part of a broader pattern indicating "a basic lack of trust between faculty and central administration."

Dyer said that the only recognized faculty input in the restructuring of the liberal arts programs came from a few hand-picked "focus groups," in which others reported a reluctance to speak freely because recordings would be handed directly to the administration.

Whether this concern was well-founded, the very idea of faculty members being placed in such a situation represented an "appalling situation for a university," Dyer said.

Dyer also criticized the lack of faculty input in the proposal to relocate the medical school. In spite of the far-reaching consequences of such a move, he said most professors and staff learned of it only after reading the newspaper.

Similar to the Board of Trustees meeting, during the two-hour Academic Senate one often heard humanities professors speak on behalf of the medical college, and vice versa. The pace and style of the proposed restructurings had apparently unified a broad cross-section of faculty who would otherwise never attend the same board meeting. Expressing the overall mood, medicine Professor Howard Brody (a columnist for City Pulse) warned: "Inadequate faculty participation reflects a broader problem across campus." Brody's comments, which were strongly applauded, also addressed the concerns of medical students.

Philosophy Professor Richard Peterson presented a proposal that the Faculty Council review and assess the faculty role in the College of Liberal Arts reorganization by the end of the fall semester 2004. Peterson said he worried that if the university went forward without faculty input, the results could be devastating. "There's a real possibility of a downgrading of arts and humanities at this university," he said. Since the future of liberal arts is at stake, it's important that the faculty has an opportunity to make clear what it thinks the future of liberal arts education would be."

The Senate unanimously passed Peterson's resolution, as well as a second resolution to form a Committee on Faculty Voice, which would examine faculty input in governance.

Epidemiologist Nigel Paneth, who initially contacted the Executive Committee of Academic Council to call for a Senate meeting, warned that if the university did not carefully avoid "pitfalls," the medical school could lose its accreditation during its move to Grand Rapids. The Liaison Committee on Medical Education, which evaluates the medical programs of 126 U.S. medical degree-granting institutions, would not tolerate poor teaching standards during a transitional period, he warned. "The same doctor will be operating on you in 10 years," said Paneth. If they do a poor job, "the excuse that we were in a period of transition" would not work.

Aron Sousa, an assistant professor at the Medical School, criticized Michigan State University for not releasing any financial spreadsheets. "If the college is to move, it cannot do so under false assumptions and with skimpy resources."

Don Bowersox, a supply management professor who led the committee assigned to assess the medical school's expansion, said the committee had gathered financial data but has not released it.

Bowersox defended the decision, saying that there were too many uncertain variables to make exact quantifications. "In due time, all the numbers will be laid out."

The only economic assessment that has been made public comes from a study conducted by the Lansing-based Health Management Associates, a firm hired by an ad-hoc committee of Lansing-area officials and private-sector representatives who are concerned about the potential loss for the local economy if the medical school were to move.

The firm's March 8 report concluded that the move would likely result in "numerous significant negative implications for the East Lansing/Lansing community" and would be a "blow to the prestige of the community." It stated that the College of Human Medicine's departure would impair area hospitals' abilities to recruit top specialists, and result in a need to raise the costs of medical treatment. While the relocation would be "highly beneficial" for Western Michigan, it would negatively impact the Lansing area economy and raise expenses for the remaining College of Osteopathic Medicine. The \$25 million in state funds that the college receives annually couldn't be withdrawn from the Mid-Michigan area "without doing harm," the report said.

Finally, the assessment questioned MSU's assumption that it will receive \$20 million to \$40 million in financial support from wealthy Grand Rapids donors each year. "We have not received anything that would tell us where these funds would come from, how these funds would get to MSU, what conditions might accompany such contributions nor how firm the commitment is."

With these uncertainties in mind, the Academic Senate also approved the creation of an Oversight Assessment Committee to evaluate the Medical School's expansion in terms of finance, accreditation, faculty support, programmatic quality and its impact on MSU and the Lansing area.

The committee will consist of seven faculty members □ four from the College of Human Medicine, one from the College of Natural Science, one from the College of Osteopathic Medicine and one designated by the Executive Committee of Academic Council.

Following the Senate, faculty members referred to it as "a success," although some doubted whether the administration will take the recommendations made by the newly formed committees seriously. Sheila Teahan, a member of the American Association of University Professors and a driving force behind the movement for more faculty input, called the meeting "momentous." She said it had sent out a powerful message to the administration and had expressed that the faculty was "taking the university back." Teahan was confident that between the explosive April 16 board meeting and this Academic Senate, the administration had finally gotten the message. "We have a long way to go in creating and implementing effective protocols for faculty governance," Teahan said. "But we've made a start."

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Lansing City Pulse (MI)

Date: April 28, 2004

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