

Minutes from the September Meeting of the Faculty Senate

The regular Faculty Senate (FS) meeting was held on Monday, September 13, 2021 at 3:30 PM. The meeting was conducted both in-person in JUB 100C and via Zoom for those who were unable to attend in-person due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Present:

Jeremy Aber, Anne Anderson, Sanjay Asthana, Jake Avila, Sal Barbosa, Vaughn Barry, Vishwas Bedekar, Larry Burriss, Lando Carter, Paul Chilsen, Claire Cook, Rick Cottle, Douglas Dabbs, Betsy Dalton, Andrea Dawson, Laura Dubek, Rudy Dunlap, Michelle Finch, Robert Gordon, Lisa Green, Michael Hein, Christina Hiers, Ryan Jones, Kyle Kennedy, Rachel Kirk, Rebecca King, Francis Koti, Preston MacDougall, Lei Miao, Dan Morrell, Kari Neely, David Nelson, Martha Norkunas, John Ouellette, Sharon Parente, Alicia Pence, Arianna Postlethwait, Pat Richey, Dianna Rust, Stephen Salter, Scott Seipel, Daniel Smith, Nat Smith, Raj Srivastava, Ben Stickle, Suzanne Sutherland, Zhen Wang, Andrew Wyatt

Excused:

Song Cui

Faculty Senate President Gordon called the meeting to order at 3:34 PM.

Approval of Minutes from the May 3, 2021 Meeting of the Faculty Senate

Gordon called for a discussion of the May 3, 2021 FS meeting minutes. Patrick Richey moved to accept the minutes as written and Anne Anderson seconded. The motion carried by unanimous vote.

Reports

Treasury

The treasury report was unavailable at the time of the meeting.

Unfinished Business

Answers from Administration to Faculty Senate Questions

Gordon presented FS questions to Provost Byrnes at the President's Cabinet meeting.

Gordon has not yet received a formal written response to the question as to why MTSU did not cover the full 4% salary increase. Byrnes relayed President McPhee's determination that there was not enough money to cover the full 4% primarily due to the enrollment decline and the impact on income from tuition. Byrnes promised to get an answer in writing from McPhee.

In response to the question as to whether students will be told that attending classes in person is optional, Byrnes responded that it was never the intention to give the impression that in-person attendance is optional. The goal of remote options for students is to ensure that students who must miss classes because of illness or quarantine will be able to keep up with those classes.

In response to the question about alternative course delivery options for faculty with sick and/or quarantined dependents at home, Gordon indicated that McPhee's most recent message issued to campus affirms the existing policy. That is, if faculty are sick or exposed to COVID-19, they may teach remotely; if faculty must care for a dependent at home, they must use sick leave.

In response to the question about options for faculty who feel unsafe in the classroom, Byrnes affirmed existing policy that states it is too late to change class format because we need to offer courses in the formats students registered for. Due to the easy accessibility of vaccines as well as masking in the classroom, the administration views this teaching year as different from last.

In response to the question as to why UT Knoxville was able to award a 4% salary increase when MTSU was not, Byrnes stated that UTK had a 30% increase in its freshman class and received an enrollment boost in transfer students, some of whom came from MTSU and some from community colleges.

Gordon's report on Byrnes' responses to FS questions was followed by Q&A:

Q: Why are we losing students to UTK? Gordon did not have an answer available but mentioned that we are in competition with Liberty University due to Liberty University's online program offerings.

Q: What was the official drop in enrollment for Fall 2021? The final figures have not been made public. Gordon will request the exact figures.

Q: Has there been any discussion of how Biden's vaccine mandate will be enforced on campus? There is local political pushback to the vaccine mandate, as well as mask mandates. At the moment, there is no indication of what MTSU will do regarding the vaccine mandate.

Q: Are faculty allowed to have an official attendance policy? Do administrators understand the implications of current attendance policy? Senators noted problems with in-person student attendance. In some classes, the majority of students attend via Zoom, which is more useful than Panopto lecture capture for certain subjects. Some senators stated that they would prefer greater flexibility in course delivery options. Gordon encouraged senators to collect feedback on these issues from colleagues in their departments to understand how many faculty members are negatively impacted and what their experiences are.

Q: Do we have updated data on the number of students vaccinated? Gordon will consult Dr. Clark's statistics and send them to FS by email.

Q: If we are not doing contact tracing of students, how do we know which students have legitimate COVID-related absences? It is unclear.

Other senators reported technical problems with Panopto. Gordon offered to invite a representative from ITD to the next meeting to discuss tech issues.

A senator noted that if you have an ADA request for reasonable accommodation, it is not too late to change course format. However, it is difficult to navigate the ADA policy on MTSU's website.

Anne Anderson moved that FS discuss the Steering Committee's proposed revision of MTSU COVID-19 policy and Kari Neely seconded. The motion carried by unanimous vote.

The proposed revision stated (see the italicized text):

“Faculty and staff who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, or are quarantining because of potential exposure to the virus, *or else must remain home to care for a dependent who is sick or quarantining due to possible exposure*, may reach out to supervisors to discuss the possibility for remote teaching and/or work, if mutually agreeable between the University and the employee. Not all job assignments are able to be performed from home, and therefore, employees should be prepared to use sick leave as necessary.”

Gordon reminded FS that in the last presidential address, McPhee reiterated the policy that faculty may only pivot to remote teaching if faculty have COVID-19 symptoms or are aware of a personal exposure to COVID-19.

Senators agreed that MTSU's current policy does not reflect the reality that significant numbers of faculty children are being exposed to COVID-19 at schools and daycares and are required to quarantine at home. Faculty who are neither sick nor personally exposed to COVID-19 must remain home to care for children who are required to quarantine.

Senators also agreed that if a faculty member must stay home to care for a dependent and must take sick leave, that faculty member will miss class and cause disruption to student learning. It would make more sense to pivot to remote teaching on a temporary basis than to miss class. The proposed revision to the policy benefits students.

Another senator asked whether this is a gender equity issue since women may take more sick leave than others. Untenured faculty in particular require support.

A senator proposed changing the wording of the revision from “sick” to “diagnosed with COVID-19.”

Senators raised questions as to who qualifies as a dependent and whether this policy revision speaks to other caregiving needs faculty may have. It was agreed to amend the language of the revision from “dependent” to “household member.”

Senators agreed to add the word “temporarily” to the revised policy statement (as in, “who must temporarily remain at home to care for a household member”).

The final proposed revision stated:

“Faculty and staff who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, or are quarantining because of potential exposure to the virus, *or else must temporarily remain home to care for a household member who is diagnosed with COVID-19 or quarantining due to possible exposure*, may reach out to supervisors to discuss the possibility for remote teaching and/or work, if mutually agreeable between the University and the employee. Not all job assignments are able to be performed from home, and therefore, employees should be prepared to use sick leave as necessary.”

Anne Anderson moved to approve the proposed revision to MTSU’s COVID-19 policy and Daniel Smith seconded. The motion carried by unanimous vote.

New Business

Senate vote for Steering Committee

Larry Burriss moved to accept the 2021-22 Steering Committee members as presented to FS and Anne Anderson seconded. The motion carried by unanimous vote.

Faculty Senate Committees per Bylaws

Gordon announced he would send out the list of committees along with issues for the committees to address and also recruit volunteers to serve on said committees by email. The committees are as follows:

- Bylaws Revision Committee
- Faculty Senate Board of Trustees (mirrored committee): Rudy Dunlap is currently serving on this committee.
- Faculty Senate Committees Based on Senator Feedback from the Retreat: Health, COVID-19 (procedures), University Resources, Faculty/Staff Pay, Academics. Gordon requested that a Steering Committee member chair each of the following committees

Raj Srivastava moved to adjourn the meeting and Larry Burriss seconded. The motion carried by unanimous vote.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:46 PM.

Documents handed out at the meeting:

2021-2022 Steering Committee Nominees

Article VII and Article VIII

These minutes were approved by the Faculty Senate on October 4, 2021. Respectfully submitted by Suzanne Sutherland, Recording Secretary.