Faculty Concerns with the Faculty Handbook Process, Ballot, and Outcome

The faculty on the faculty handbook are concerned about changes to the process, and with it, the votes and final proposals, of the Faculty Handbook Committee. The original idea was to have equal numbers of representative faculty and faculty come together and work thoughtfully and collaboratively to make changes in the FH for the common good. In every year 2017-2022, this process resulted in consensus recommendations from the committee with no more than one vote against any proposed change to the handbook, even with large and controversial changes like new chapters on faculty workload, evaluation, and discipline/termination. This year, however, we fear that this collaborative consensus process has broken down.

Concerns about the Process:

In the last two years, the committee endeavored to share our work more transparently and in a more timely manner. Abbreviated agendas were posted on the Provost's Web page for faculty or administrators to review and submit comments. In recent years, we have strived to stop adding new items in the Fall or at least early Spring and voting and consulting on items 4-6 months before they would go into effect. This gave time for true shared governance and ongoing feedback from all stakeholders to improve proposals. This year, however, updates and changes were no longer posted to the Provost’s web page for the general community to view, items on a running agenda remained unaddressed, and new items were added up to one hour before our last meeting on 4/7/23 (see item #1) which resulted in other items not being discussed (such as #2, below).

Earlier in the term, after being away for a conference, one of the faculty members expressed concerns about the minutes from the previous meeting. Rather than dealing with it at that time, we were told that we could have another chance to consider and discuss these items at the meeting where we would vote on the issues. That meeting never happened. Instead, we were told that we had to vote via an email ballot based on past discussions.

When faculty leadership asked for another meeting to discuss these new items, they were told it was too late. The explanation was that the changes had already been presented to the Deans, Department Heads, and the Provost (before we had voted to proceed) and that there wasn’t time to do so again before the end of the year.

This commentary was written at the suggestion of Associate Provost Vallentine. Given that he felt that another meeting wasn’t practical, he thought that sharing our concerns for the Senate consultation would be a viable alternative to holding another meeting. He was confident that Provost Herrera would hear and give weight to our concerns as well as any others Senators might raise. Further, he agrees that specific deadlines, funnel dates, balloting processes, or other shared governance guardrails be set in place early next year so that these problems are less likely to recur. For our part, we pledge to bring monthly updates and minutes to the Senate to keep faculty better and regularly informed.

There are significant concerns that faculty have about a number of items on the ballot. Faculty who voted no on specific items have outlined their concerns below. The faculty are committed to collaboration and meeting consensus whenever possible, including on the items below. We believe that had we been able to both meet and reflect in a timelier manner with our administrative colleagues, if
the past is any indication, these items would have been ironed out to the satisfaction of both parts of the committee. Likewise, we have not had adequate opportunity to consult with our faculty to adequately ascertain their wishes.

Here are the main concerns expressed by Faculty:

**Explanations/rationales on the Ballot items:**

**Item #1 on the Ballot: New Titles, Renewing Term positions.**

There are really two very different proposed changes included within this ballot item.

The **first** proposed change in this ballot item calls for a wholesale change in all titles for term and renewable term (RT) faculty. Faculty on the committee are deeply concerned with the process and timing related to this proposed change. A key provision was a last-minute agenda addition, brought up for the first time at our 4/7/2023 meeting. As such, committee members have not had sufficient opportunity to discuss with stakeholders. Discussion is important, and the change is significant as it would result in the renaming of all instructors (with or without terminal degrees) to titles like “professor of practice,” “professor of instruction” and “clinical professor.” The faculty are not averse to the needs of specific disciplines like the School of Business, the College of Education, and the new School of Health and Human Sciences for different titles that fit with common practice, but we do have concerns and know our constituents will have concerns as well. One such concern, is that giving professorial titles to non-terminal degreed individuals would undermine the case for the importance of tenure with the legislature and would be both confusing internally yet also potentially distracting to the loss of tenured positions. On the other hand, since all faculty must meet HLC qualification requirements, some form of professorial honorific may be appropriate for all faculty. The key is getting the language right, with broad support, and we are not confident the current language is there.

The **second** is a change we fully support, allowing term faculty to be renewed through Department Head recommendations and administrative approval without an additional search. This, in conjunction with additional language below on PAC review, allows faculty in this position their own lane of promotion, see additional language below.

These two issues, which are very different, but occur in the same place in the handbook, were put together as one ballot issue; indeed, faculty requested (unsuccessfully) that these items be separated. We cannot vote for one and against the other. That’s a problem. It would have been solvable if we had been able to meet for the vote. As it is, this is why most faculty are voting “no” on item one.

Our recommendation is that the second part on renewal of term appointment that underwent the full process be accepted and move forward. However, we recommend that the first part (on new titles) be postponed until early in the Fall. It does not make sense to make large scale changes to titles without more consultation. Following early fall discussions in the FHC, we can
then make recommendations that the Provost can, if needed, implement as a temporary deviation (if needed for searches in December) until the full process is complete.

**Item #2 on the Ballot: Limit on % Renewable Term Positions**

This item regards the limits on renewable term faculty within the university in order to protect the university’s commitment to tenure-track lines. The FHC convened a subcommittee to address this issue, which is a holdover from the contract and complex. The committee requested data in order to ascertain whether % of renewable term faculty is the appropriate measure. The general consensus is that it is not. The administrative position is that this language does not belong in a faculty handbook at all. The full committee did not return to discussions of this item, and the language remains the same as previous years with the percentage increased.

Current FH language allows the 8% limit to be exceeded with the permission of the Faculty Petition Committee, a process that is working until the full FHC can return to the measure issue. What’s particularly troubling about this item is also wasn’t really discussed this year, although languishing on the listed but not discussed agenda. We had asked for more data and further study, it was evaluated by a subcommittee who would then come back with a proposal. It was actually on the agenda for the final meeting, then removed at the last minute. The subcommittee noted that this was never an issue of % of RT Faculty and always a concern about maintaining tenured and tenure track positions. The main concern about a loss of tenure/TT positions remains, which is why most of us voted no.

We would prefer this language focus on maintaining a high percentage of faculty as tenured/tenure track. Historically, we have consistently been at or near 70% on this measure, through years of enrollment and budget ups and downs. The number and percent of faculty in each employment category should be reported each semester to Faculty Leadership to monitor. While we recognize there may be temporary circumstances why a College might dip below 70% tenured or tenure track faculty, we believe it should trigger a high level of shared concern and collaborative action plans to return the College to that level within several years.

**Item #9 on the Ballot: Student Assessments in Every Semester, Every Class for All Faculty**

UNI is facing several issues with student assessments, most critically extremely low response rates that make the resulting data unreliable. Additionally, some departments continue to use student assessment data outside of their formative nature. UNI is currently piloting a new assessment instrument. The faculty believe requiring more assessments with a brand new instrument is not wise, especially when it is interpreted inappropriately and does real harm to teaching, particularly around innovation. The faculty urge constraint and patience for the new instrument to prove itself and for implementation procedures that provide reliable data and interpretation guidelines that provide more protection from misuse.

**Item #10 on the Ballot: Traditional Peer Review**
Grants may or may not undergo “traditional” forms of peer review, yet this provision inaccurately applies the label of “traditional” review to grants, including unfunded ones. This language is overly broad, inaccurate, and unnecessary. Departments should determine what are appropriate forms of peer review for grants, particularly those not funded. The current language and distinctions between traditional peer review and additional forms already allow departments to appropriately classify grants according to their actual peer review process, rather than forcing them to apply an inaccurate designation of review. We support the language in #18 that recognizes the importance of grants and makes clear that departments determine how to incorporate grants into evaluation standards.

**Item 16 on the Ballot: Post Tenure Review**

The Faculty Evaluation Committee devised a new post-tenure review system based on the faculty member’s career cycle. This system builds off of the yearly review system already in place, which sparks a review by PACs on top of department head review when faculty members receive needs improvement three times. Administration has proposed moving the full-review (including the PAC) guidepost to after two needs improvements. The faculty oppose this for several reasons. First, PTR has not been implemented yet, and administrators are proposing a radical change to the terms developed collaboratively across campus before the first PTR review has taken place. We do not know how PTR will look in practice and if the system will be effective in doing what it is designed to do: To support faculty development while protecting academic freedom and tenure. Second, there are already adequate mechanisms to deal with the issue that the administration is attempting to address with this proposed change. Third, it is bad practice to implement far reaching policy to address an issue that is extremely narrow in scope. It will create more unnecessary work for multiple PACs in order to address what administrators agree is an issue with a very small number of individual faculty members. Those individual issues can be addressed adequately through current measures. Fourth, PAC workload is increasing while PACs are shrinking, and adding unnecessary workload is harmful. No PAC has ever conducted a PTR, and it will take considerable time and care to do so appropriately. Fifth, the proposed timeline is too compressed: needs improvements are given at the end of the AY yet PACs work is immediately in the fall. That’s not enough time for faculty to implement an improvement plan, particularly if it involves professional development.

**Item 20 on the Ballot: Summer and Winter Term Compensation**

While this has some support, there were also unaddressed concerns. To list:

1. The intent of the change was so that, once a faculty member agreed to do a course at a certain reduced salary, that salary would not further decrease if a student dropped the course. However, if additional students added the course, thus increasing the tuition, the intent was that the faculty salary would go up proportionally, up to the usual salary they would have been paid prior to these changes. The language implies, but does not state, this last point. We would like the language to state it directly.

2. Faculty have noted the specific issues with cohort models (such as in the College of Education). Without faculty agreement to these reduced terms, the cohort cannot move forward. Is this truly voluntary? Why should the faculty member agree to a greatly reduced compensation for a negligibly reduced workload? What about models at other institutions that give additional credit/compensation on the upper end?

3. Concern about whether this model could ever be truly voluntary for contingent faculty.
The faculty members of the Faculty Handbook Committee are committed to the process of shared governance, and are dedicated to a fair, thoughtful, and collaborative FHC process. We thank the UNI Faculty Senate for its consideration and consultation on these concerns and all of the proposed changes to the Faculty Handbook.