

Minutes of FAP Meeting #19 AY2020-21

January 25, 2021

4:00 PM – 5:00 PM

Meeting Held Electronically via ZOOM

Members in Attendance: Joseph Fehribach (FAP Chair), George Pins (RPC Representative), Mike Radzicki (FBC Chair), David Spanagel (FAP Secretary), Kris Sullivan (Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs)

Absent: Jeff Solomon (Executive Vice President/CFO)

Call to Order. Chair Fehribach called the 19th FAP meeting of the year to order at 4:05 PM.

1) **Financial/Enrollment Update.** With CFO Solomon's absence, this item received a very brief discussion. It was noted, however, that a meeting on the FY22 budget was scheduled for the next day (Jan. 26, 2021), whose content FAP could look forward to discussing at its next meeting. For now, we were assured that some TT and TRT faculty searches had been approved to go ahead, and that all the costs associated with the completion of the new classroom building have been covered.

One FAP member noted elevated concern levels among higher education faculty all around the nation that there may be an institutional temptation to "normalize" Covid-induced budget cutbacks in ongoing budget years. WPI faculty will be anxious to see indications of an intention to return toward more normal patterns of expenditure in areas (such as travel for professional development) when conditions allow.

2) **Faculty Academic-Year Time Buyouts, Good or Bad?** Picking up one of the committee topics that had been identified for FAP consideration this year, Chair Fehribach proposed that we take this item on today. AVP Sullivan shared several insights into the financial workings of a grant-funded faculty course "buyout." The short answer is that such buyouts do save WPI some money, and that the Provost's Office budgets for an expected annual amount to be contributed to the operating budget in this manner (this year's target was \$175K). Typically, a grant can be charged 1/8 of the faculty member's annual salary (which justifies the course release to free up the professor for grant-related research time). He noted, however, that departments also need to fill the instructional vacancy created by such course buyouts, and that while these gaps can sometimes be filled by redistribution of teaching assignments, at other times the departments must rely on their respective Deans to fund the hiring of appropriate adjunct instructors.

Sometimes, the Provost's Office has to supplement the Deans' adjunct budget lines to support program offerings in a given year. AVP Sullivan went on to explain that there is no direct link between the course buyouts institutional revenue line and the adjunct instruction expenditure line. But, at least since the current arrangement was negotiated (in 2012 or 2013), 30% of that course buyouts line goes back as revenue sharing to the strategic funds in departments whose faculty grants contribute to it. Department Heads may save or spend their strategic funds to serve the department's growth and vitality, including returning some portion to the faculty members who helped to directly generate that revenue. In other words, there are financial incentives (for both departments and individual faculty) to attract external research funding.

- a) In open discussion of these matters, FAP members noted how, on the whole, the course buyout model appears to be a "win-win-win" for everyone involved. We did, however, explore the potential drawbacks of an excessive level of such activity:
 - i) If a faculty member gets bought out of specialized instructional responsibilities that are extremely difficult to replace by collegial substitution or adjunct hiring, the academic program of the department could be diminished for a period of time, which hurts student prospects. This risk would be unlikely in a single course buyout situation (since the Department Head can negotiate with a professor not to buy out their most specialized instructional expertise/contribution), but when a faculty member obtains research support for an extended absence from all WPI course responsibilities, this situation could arise.
 - ii) If too many of a department (particularly a smaller one) or program's core faculty take course buyouts, then students in that department may suffer some discontinuity of program delivery, disruption in timings of required course sequences, or alienation from the ordinary benefits of majoring in that field (being less able to establish consistent, longitudinal instructional and advising relationships with potential MQP advisors and/or career mentors).
- b) In further conversation about the positives, one idea emerged that might be worth exploring—some universities establish "escrow" accounts that a faculty member can pay into to afford an occasional course release (similar in its impact to the effect of a startup package that promises periodic course releases for a probationary faculty member seeking tenure, but available potentially throughout a professor's career should they wish to make that investment over time). The faculty escrow account provides an alternative means of obtaining a course buyout without

requiring an external funding source. Some WPI faculty who have taught at other institutions have relevant experiences they might be willing to share with FAP.

3) **Planning for Other To-Do List Discussions.** A few possibilities and questions were raised:

- Reviewing, understanding, and communicating clearly back to the community “What are the financial implications of establishing the teaching path to tenure (in relation to the proposal coming before the Faculty for a vote later this week)?”
- Preparing to analyze the implications of COACHE survey data (given the Provost’s recent informative remarks to committee chairs that the next round of COACHE information will be divvied up among faculty governance committees for review); perhaps examination of the last round of COACHE data and questions will be useful as a preparation for that work during the coming year?
- Timing of the next cycle of faculty salary benchmarking? This was done last year using our in-house Talent and Inclusion institutional research staff, so it will be a couple years out from now – but we learned that the timing of the review could take advantage of the most recently available comparative data from other institutions if we initiate the study in the spring rather than in the fall.

4) **Retirement Plan Committee (RPC) Update.** RPC representative Pins reported that the RPC had its most recent quarterly meeting on December 8, 2020. The RPC discussed the timing and execution of RFPs’ to solicit bids for a retirement plan investment advisor, and a retirement plan auditor. The incumbent advisor, and auditor have each been servicing the retirement plan for many years. A best practice is to put these services out for bid from time to time. The RPC also went over quarterly due diligence regarding performance of the components of the WPI retirement investments plan, which revealed nothing of major concern. The next quarterly RPC meeting will take place on March 9, 2021 (Professor Pins may need to arrange for a substitute to attend in his stead, since he teaches at that hour on that day).

5) **Approval of Minutes.** Minutes from the January 11, 2021 meeting were approved as amended after consultation with all attendees prior to today’s meeting (4 Yes votes, 1 member who had been absent for that meeting Abstained).

6) **Other Topics the Committee Wishes to Discuss.** The mention of faculty loading models in FAP Meeting #16 minutes had excited some responses. AVP Sullivan assured FAP that Dean King’s WPI

Forward subcommittee is continuing its work on this topic, and that the emphasis in those conversations has continued to be “holistic” rather than “evaluative,” to focus on how to channel resources and support more effectively to all faculty members, and with great sensitivity being shown in illustrating the wide variety of activities that faculty work may entail (from one person to another). He also called attention to the excellent workshops that have come out of the WPI ADVANCE grant team’s work, and their constructive interactions with Department Heads.

7) **Adjournment.** The meeting was adjourned at 4:57 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

David Spanagel

FAP Secretary

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