

Minutes of FAP Meeting #21 AY2020-21

February 8, 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), Jeff Solomon (Executive Vice President/CFO), David Spanagel (FAP Secretary), Kris Sullivan (Associate Vice President for Academic Affairs)

Call to Order. Chair Fehribach called the 21st FAP meeting of the year to order at 4:02 PM.

- 1) **Approval of Minutes.** With helpful input from CFO Solomon to supplement FAP's RPC Representative's report, FAP approved the revised minutes of its 19th meeting (held on January 25, 2021). After a brief but productive discussion, approval of minutes from the 20th FAP meeting was tabled until our next meeting. There were no objections to either of these minutes decisions.
- 2) **Financial Impact of Tenuring TRT Faculty.** AVP Sullivan began by noting that Provost Wole Soboyejo will soon be meeting jointly with members of COG and the TRT Council to have a longer discussion about implementation steps to be taken in the wake of the historic vote on January 28, 2021 by the Faculty, which approved the establishment of a teaching path to tenure at WPI. With respect to the question that had been directed to FAP earlier this year about examining the financial implications of such a move, AVP Sullivan reiterated his sense, based on preliminary work and scenario modeling that he had conducted, which anticipate minimal financial consequences of the marginal costs to be associated with the new policy. These marginal costs do include a small increment in professional development expenditures to be earmarked for pre-tenure Professors of Teaching (at all ranks). When asked how those monies would be budgeted (whether departments and programs will receive additional professional development support to cover their tenure-seeking TRT members), AVP Sullivan indicated that the targeted professional development support would more likely come in the form of small "start-up" packages for TRT faculty as they enter the tenure-track for teaching. As another financial consideration, AVP Sullivan also noted that a fraction of the annual "merit, equity, and promotions" pool of the operating budget will now have to accommodate the modest salary bump that will be attached to achieving tenure for this category of faculty members.

While the absolute financial impact to the operating budget of the creation of this teaching path to tenure will be negligible, AVP Sullivan did want FAP to be aware of the administration's larger concern about making a career-long commitment to a larger portion of our overall faculty profile. Having more faculty on the tenure track may constrain the institution's ability to respond to the challenge of staffing departments and programs appropriately to meet shifting levels of instructional demand in each area. One FAP member countered with the observation that WPI's current proportion of tenured and tenure track faculty is a historical deviation from the typical profile of the WPI Faculty. During the first several decades of the Plan, the WPI Faculty was predominantly composed of tenurable faculty. A rapid expansion of NTT positions followed the 2011 Faculty vote to eliminate the 3- and 5-year rules, so this move now (as well as other changes that have been promised to provide greater job security to all full-time TRT faculty members) really signal WPI's return toward the kind of stability and long-term commitment that it used to make to all faculty members who build and sustain our signature programs. AVP Sullivan observed that there is support for this move now, despite the risks that it may entail, because it strengthens the institution as a whole.

That same FAP member also praised the Academic Affairs division under Provost Soboyejo, for all the work that has already been done to bring our Institute into a healthy state where the creation of the teaching path to tenure would not entail a financial shock. He applauded such moves as getting full-time teaching faculty lines formally into the operating budget in the first place, and increasing the levels of compensation for those full-time positions (as compared with the piecemeal adjunct employment rates that used to pertain to most categories of NTT faculty employment).

A second FAP member asked where these new tenurable lines will appear in the budget. AVP Sullivan indicated that they will be lines belonging to departments and programs, just like other TT and TRT lines. Though the details are yet to be ironed out, presumably an allocation process for such lines will go through the ordinary channels that all tenurable faculty lines/searches traditionally have involved (Department Heads make requests to Deans, which get prioritized and brought up to the Provost and then the President for approval). AVP Sullivan reiterated the administration's recognition that the TRT faculty play a vital role in delivering instruction, and he noted how the practice of faculty cluster hiring both to fortify core and/or add desirable new research areas now

may have a complement in our ability to use tenurable teaching lines both to fortify core instructional resources and/or add desirable new areas of our curriculum.

That second FAP member also asked whether the interests of students will be reflected in research position hiring? He noted how TRT faculty lab space in Goddard is shared with classes, and how strain on this resource may need to be incorporated into medium and long term capital budget plans. He also pointed out how faculty governance (particularly COAP and CTAF) may need to immediately revisit their charges, sizes, and compositions to manage the new category and added number of tenure and promotion cases to be considered, especially in this initial transition period of 3 years.

- 3) **TA Distribution.** CFO Solomon reminded FAP that this topic is being taken up directly by Dean John McNeill's task force on the Budgeting for the academic portfolio, and incidentally by Dean Jean King's task force on Faculty Activity. AVP Sullivan commented that the budgeted number of TA lines has been static for a number of years, despite the clear pedagogic value of having them. He also described how he had worked with Dean of Graduate Studies Terri Comesano to develop a TA incentive program which would allow new and growing graduate programs to receive additional otherwise unbudgeted TA lines based on the number of new full-paying master's program students they attract. This "carrot" has effectively enabled institutional growth in support for TA lines, notably in data sciences and robotics, but the program did not cover the budgetary impact of declining graduate tuition revenue in other areas. The Deans underwent a reallocation exercise during the annual budget preparation work which was aimed at the FY21 budget, but we are currently in a situation where the TA lines are substantially over budget, and further work needs to be done before the revenue and expenses can be better aligned.

One FAP member commented that this really is a strategic planning question: "What is WPI going to be in the 21st century?" Where do we intend to land on the spectrum between one extreme (a liberal arts college's focus on its faculty providing hands-on intensive instruction and advising to all undergraduate students) or the other extreme ("Big 10" universities where undergraduate instruction is often delegated to graduate student teachers and section leaders)? Perhaps we need to recalibrate our attitudes toward at least being open to the possibility of having Ph.D. students delivering instruction at WPI (more like what is considered normal at other research universities).

- 4) **Adjournment.** The meeting was adjourned at 5:05 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

David Spanagel

FAP Secretary