

Committee on Governance: Minutes
Meeting #16: February 17, 2020
Faculty Governance Conference Room

Present: Kris Boudreau (Secretary, HUA), Tanja Dominko (Secretary of the Faculty, BBT), Tahar El-Korchi (CEE, by Zoom), Glenn Gaudette (Chair, BME), Arne Gericke (CBC, by Zoom), Mark Richman (ME), and Wole Soboyejo (Provost).

1. Prof. Gaudette called the meeting to order at 10:09; the agenda was approved.
2. The minutes from meeting #15 were approved.
3. Motions from COAP:
 - a) **Motion 1:** That review of sabbatical leave applications no longer be handled by COAP, but instead be reviewed by the appropriate Department Head and Dean prior to sending the request to the Provost. This revision formalizes policy to reflect current practices. COG discussed whether COAP serves an important function by offering a judgment that is independent of Department Heads and Deans. To help protect against arbitrary negative decisions, COG will ask COAP for a clarification about the criteria on which decisions are currently based and about the possibility of an appeal in the case of a negative decision.
 - b) **Motion 2:** Clarify the wording in the Faculty Handbook related to years required for eligibility to take a sabbatical leave. This motion makes clear that faculty who return to WPI after termination of a previous contract with WPI cannot count years served in their earlier contract toward sabbatical leaves. COG will ask COAP also to revise ambiguous language in the Handbook (“ . . . faculty are eligible to apply for a . . . sabbatical leave after 6 years of full-time service. . . .”) so as to make it clear that faculty members are eligible to apply for sabbatical leaves commencing in their seventh year of continuous full time service. Prof. Gaudette will ask COAP to clarify that leaves of absence (at NSF, for example) would only stop the clock for leaves rather than reset it, and to clarify how leaves sometimes granted to faculty members who accept other full time positions should be handled with respect to the sabbatical leave clock if they were to return to WPI.
 - c) **Motion 3:** Change the review process for requests for unpaid leaves of absence to parallel the process for requests for sabbatical leaves of absence. This motion removes COAP and adds the appropriate Dean to this process. One COG member noted that the language about leaves does include criteria.
 - d) **Motion 4:** Remove mention of one-term sabbatical leaves of absence, which have been unavailable since 2006. COG will also ask that motions 2 and 4 be combined into one.

e) **Motion 5:** Modify the procedure for providing feedback to faculty candidates who are denied promotion. This revision corrects a complication raised by the recent changes to promotion criteria calling for a letter written jointly by COAP, the Dean, and the Provost; the complication arises in cases where any of these parties differ. It also protects the candidate by explicitly stating that the Provost shall forward to the Board of Trustees only those cases with positive recommendations. COG affirmed the importance of this change. COG discussed whether, in the case of mixed decisions (a positive recommendation from COAP and a negative decision from the Provost), candidates should have access to both letters. Prof. Gaudette will ask COAP to consider that question. On balance, COG favors the proposed changes represented in these motions.

4. Reactions to the “WPI Forward” report at the Feb. 13 Faculty Meeting: COG took time to share impressions of the faculty meeting (which was attended by over 200 people) and faculty responses since then, and to consider next steps, particularly regarding what Prof. Dominko, Prof. Gaudette, and Provost Soboyejo might say at the Board of Trustees’ meeting later in the week. Provost Soboyejo said that he had been encouraged by the constructive tone of the meeting, the thoughtfulness of the questions, the leadership shown by the President, and the responsiveness of CFO Solomon. He believes that some important questions have been asked and the time frame for instituting budget cuts has been expanded to allow for a more collaborative process. He expressed appreciation of the faculty’s conduct during the meeting. COG members expressed great pride in how the faculty conducted itself given the anxiety of the campus, but cautioned the Provost not to interpret this as an endorsement by the faculty of “WPI Forward.”

A discussion followed regarding the general feelings expressed by various faculty since that meeting, the content of faculty concerns, and suggestions about what could be done to enlist faculty confidence in the process and outcomes.

The concerns COG members have heard from the faculty can be grouped in several categories:

Understanding the importance of increasing financial aid:

Faculty who have spoken up either publicly or privately to COG members are unanimous in their embrace of the idea that WPI should be offering more financial aid in order to make an exceptional education available to more students from the lower end of the socio-economic scale. Faculty understand that the cost-cutting measures required will be painful. Faculty and staff are anxious about the potential negative impact and how long it will last. People want to commit to a university that is stable and has the right values.

Leadership of “WPI Forward”:

COG members agreed that in general, faculty confidence in the leadership of “WPI Forward” is low. Two points written into the February faculty meeting slide presentation have raised concerns:

- “Careful examination of our spending is not something we have deep experience in” (slide 2); and
- “We were not having crisp, data-driven conversations about net cost compared to our actual competitors for students” (slide 5).

COG discussed the many attempts of the faculty in the past several years to have data-driven conversations about spending and cost, including consistent efforts by faculty members on the Board’s Budget and Finance Committee, Academic Planning and Budgeting Process (APBP), and Financial and Academic Policy Committee (FAP). Faculty experience and these two bulleted statements above have shaken the confidence of the faculty. Faculty have described practices to date as opaque and uncollaborative.

The Provost and President have a responsibility to restore the faith of WPI employees in the WPI leadership, and many faculty hope the Trustees are aware of the conversations on campus. The faculty (and staff) are expressing significant uncertainty, fear, and disappointment.

Concerns about executive compensation:

Many faculty members have expressed concerns about the levels of WPI’s executive compensation. Many of them regard these salaries and bonuses as unjust, and especially now, when we can see the connections between our overspending and the inadequate financial aid we offer students. In an industry that is in trouble and in which we want to avoid the mistakes being made by our peers, the practice of benchmarking executive salaries against other higher education executive salaries may not be the correct approach. Instead, individual COG members strongly advised that executive compensation be re-examined, looking inwardly to consider our values.

The manner in which executive compensation was presented at the February faculty meeting was unclear. On slide 14, in the column “Approx. Current Spend,” all numbers indicate current spending except for the field marked “Admin Re-Org and Exec. Comp.” at \$1.3M, which represents only cuts to executive compensation, not the full amount being spent there. It is not clear why the full amount of executive compensation was not provided, nor why this one “project” (out of 16) was described as completed when the project teams have not begun their work.

Some suggested short-term actions concerning “WPI Forward”:

COG considered lessons learned and explored possible changes to be made in response to these concerns that might elicit faith in the process and its leaders.

- COG urges maximum transparency from here on out;
- COG recommends a follow-up faculty meeting before the end of the academic year to consider the “WPI Forward” process once WPI has a clearer picture of its incoming class size, discount rate, and any other factors that are now only projected; and
- Because WPI faculty want to be involved, a clearer way for them to do so should be provided. The content, purpose, and membership of Project Teams 1, 2, 3, and

4 should be provided. COG asked the Provost to request that the “WPI Forward” team provide information to encourage faculty participation.

The Provost will propose to the COG and the President that we schedule more interactions between the faculty and the “WPI Forward” team to ensure that faculty inputs and perspectives contribute significantly to the outcomes of the “WPI Forward” process.

A suggested longer-term action concerning shared governance:

COG urged the administration to learn from this experience and rethink the “stay in your lane” theory of shared governance, where faculty input is not always welcome in such administrative responsibilities as budget planning. COG members recommend following the practices of shared governance that are reflected in faculty governance structures (faculty committees, etc.) that include administrators and have developed precisely because of the overlap and close links between academic and administrative decision-making. Department Heads should also be deeply involved and respected in the process.

COG members expressed the willingness to work collaboratively with the “WPI Forward” team to provide input and suggestions for a sustainable solution to our present crisis. Members also expressed hope that we can all learn from these circumstances and appreciate that we are all in it together.

5. The meeting was adjourned at 11:45 am.

Dutifully submitted,

Kris Boudreau
Secretary, COG