AY1516 Committee on Administrative and Financial Policy (FAP) Minutes

FAP Meeting #3 11a.m. Thursday September 3, 2015 in Finance Conference Room

Attendees: Provost Bruce Bursten (invited guest), Professor Hossein Hakim (FAP member; FBC Chair), Executive Vice President/CFO Jeffrey Solomon, Professor David Spanagel (FAP Chair), Assistant Vice President for Academic Affairs Kristopher Sullivan (FAP Member).

FAP Chair Spanagel began the meeting at 11:01 a.m.

1. Chair Spanagel announced that he had conferred with Penny Rock to remind her of FAP's hopes that information on the faculty governance web site will be updated once the new assistant is on board. All committee meeting reports and minutes from now on should be posted in a timely way, but we are also interested in helping her to recover and post any missing ones from 2013-14 and 2014-15 (at least for FAP and FBC). Penny indicated that her new assistant will start work on Sept. 8, and she expects that progress on completing these tasks will be seen thereafter.

2. Chair Spanagel invited Provost Bursten to share his thoughts about transparency and about the ways that he might be able to work more closely with FAP to better support and implement the academic mission of WPI. The provost noted at the outset that he is still learning about WPI's faculty governance structures, while focusing on getting to know the people with whom he will be working in all areas of the college. He also expressed thanks to Kris Sullivan for taking on the FAP membership role and thus providing a more direct link between the Provost's office and FAP.

   Provost Bursten proceeded to share some initial impressions gathered thus far, and to relate in detail an example of transparency in how he handled the approval process for new faculty hires this time. The Provost commented that at WPI, the people in the Finance division seem to understand and are better aligned with the academic mission, than has been the case in some other institutions where he has past experience.

   In terms of the faculty hiring process this year, the Provost described how: 1) each of the various school Deans had worked with Department and Program Heads to submit prioritized requests for a total of 40 new lines; 2) a team composed of the Provost, the Vice Provost for Research, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and the Dean of Graduate Studies vetted the requests in terms of both the Deans' sense of departmental needs and alignment with WPI's emerging strategic priorities; 3) these faculty line requests were clustered into five groups of 8 (in descending order of desirability and urgency); and 4) each group of 8 new faculty lines was then analyzed with attention to two different kinds of budgetary impact – the annual compensation (salary and benefits) costs, and the one-time startup costs (including increases in staffing and upgrading/modification of facilities) – associated with securing all of those hires in the context of a competitive market.

As the vetting team worked its way down the prioritized lists of grouped requests, the budget's capacity to meet startup costs was the first category or resources to be exhausted. To authorize searches for just 16 of these new faculty lines, it was necessary to trim startup funding requests severely from the Deans' initial estimates of $8.2million needed (for those 16 positions) to approximately $6million. The salary requirements for adding those 16 fit fairly comfortably within the expected resources available for faculty salaries. By the end of this process, the prospective list of approved faculty searches stood at 17.

The Provost concluded that he felt the process was far more transparent than such decisions may have been in the past, since the criteria for his decisions were communicated more clearly to the requesters, and the vetting process had involved key stakeholders on behalf of various aspects of the academic mission (research, undergrad, and grad programs) in addition to the Provost himself.

Provost Bursten added that he would really like to see a broader discussion of "who WPI wants to be," to help determine where in that competitive market for new faculty we really ought to be shooting (trying to compete against top tier research universities like MIT for new hires is part of what drives the startup package figures through the roof). He hoped that FAP might be able to contribute in a helpful way to getting this issue of "who we are and who we want to be an institution" discussed and better defined. Who are we really competing with? What is a reasonable expectation for what we can offer, and who we can hope to retain not only through the tenure process, but beyond?

3. Professors Hakim and Spanagel shared some of their respective thoughts and experiences with the Provost regarding the possibilities for, and continuing challenges to, implementing greater transparency at WPI. They also shared some concrete suggestions about how the new Provost might constructively engage (and perhaps overcome) the lingering negative consequences of how the decision to create Schools and Deans was executed in the first place, and for how he might build strong relationships with and better protect the investments made in our excellent faculty members (some of whom are at risk to leave either before or after they earn tenure at WPI).

4. Prof. Hakim asked the Provost about his views on the role of FAP and its participation in the collaborative leadership as defined by President Leshin. He specifically asked:

   1. Whether FAP will be allowed to have access to all WPI information necessary for FAP studies?

   2. Whether FAP will be allowed to ask tough questions and request explanation about all WPI administrative and financial policies matters?

   3. And whether there are red lines that FAP should not cross.

Provost responded that as he is new at WPI, he does not have firm opinions on those questions.

5. The meeting was adjourned at 11:57 a.m.

Respectfully submitted,
David Spanagel, FAP Chair (and Acting FAP Secretary on this day)