

Senate's role may change after June Assembly vote

After a year marked by poor attendance and apathy, University Senate members have proposed another change in the Senate's role as a legislative body, stepping yet again toward resolving its historical identity crisis.

"Senate X," which will be voted on at the June 5 University Assembly meeting, would increase the power of next year's Senate and make governance more effective, says Kappy Eaton, Senate president.

Currently, motions are raised in the Assembly, the all-faculty governance body; they then go to the 54-member Senate for discussion and a vote, and later back to the Assembly for the final vote.

But Eaton says because the Senate is a representative body, with its members voted in by the entire faculty, the new Senate would originate all motions and refer them if necessary to the Assembly to make faculty legislation more efficient.

As developed by the Senate from six options presented by an ad hoc committee, "Senate X" would take on a variety of new functions, including:

- Communications. Involving the publication of a newsletter with Senate minutes and administrative and committee reports.

- Hearings. Becoming a receiving group for committee reports at least annually so the more than 40 campus committees would have a common place to report to.

- Timeliness. Meeting twice a month, instead of once, to act on motions initiated in the Senate.

The new Senate would keep its current one-third/two-thirds student-to-faculty ratio. It would, however, lose its traditional duty of choosing a faculty member to receive the Distinguished Service Award, leaving this to another committee.

Eaton says one of the reasons for the lack of participation by Senate members this year (of 54 members, the average turn-out each month was about 30) is that senators do not feel they play an important role in faculty legislation.

Eaton also says it is increasingly difficult to attract active faculty members to fill Senate positions because they perceive the Senate as being ineffective.

The new Senate would probably eliminate this problem, making service on the Senate of greater importance, Eaton says.

She also says she would like Senate service to count in the promotion/tenure system. Only a few departments and colleges consider Senate service in determining a faculty member's promotion or tenure.

This is not the first attempt by Senate members to change its function and structure.

In 1983, a governance task force, looking at how faculty governance could become more effective, made a series of motions to the Assembly to change the Senate.

The task force recommended not only more power for the Senate but also a reduction in the number of Assembly meetings, which was viewed by some faculty members as a decrease in power for the faculty as a whole.

On the first vote, the motion passed by exactly the two-third vote necessary to make it effective. Then University President Paul Olum, who

also chairs the Assembly meetings, expressed his dissatisfaction with the measure. Another vote was called because of the closeness of the first one.

About six faculty members changed their minds, defeating the motion on the second vote.

Although Eaton feels Olum's comments were "probably inappropriate as the chair," she says the current motion seems to be a more positive option because it does not affect the way the Assembly operates.

But Olum says he did not mean to change the outcome of the vote but was only trying to explain that, although he did not favor the motion, he did not want to vote and overturn the wishes of the majority.

The Assembly chair has the power to vote when it would break a tie or make a tie.

Although he says he is not completely familiar with the motion, Olum says he would like to take a close look at it before making a decision about whether he supports it.

But he added that it seems like "they're doing it casually, as if it were a routine thing."

Olum says his reservations stem from the idea of a faculty that maintains a sense of importance in University decisions.

"I cherish a little bit the notion of a faculty that meets once a month...that has a sense of control," Olum says. But, "That doesn't mean I'm opposed to it."

And Eaton says there still seems to be strong sentiment within the faculty for some more viable role for the Senate.

Last spring, after being denied additional power, the Senate voted to abolish itself, but this move was rejected by the Assembly.

"We've gone from a reasonable motion to strengthen the Senate to a motion to abolish itself and a few things in between," Eaton says.

After sparring back and forth on the issue, Eaton says it seemed appropriate to re-evaluate the role and future of the Senate.

Eaton says she hopes at least some of the changes are approved, although realistically she assumes there will be a typically low turn-out at the June Assembly meeting.

Of the more than 800 eligible faculty members who could attend and vote at the Assembly meetings, Eaton says it is rare to have more than 90 at a meeting.

The University's two-body governance system is rare among other institutions, Eaton says.

At most universities, the Senate is the power center, and about 90 percent of university Senates have no student representation, Eaton says.

But she says this is one of the criticisms faculty members have of the Senate — there is too much student representation, and students tend to vote in a block on many issues.

"If students have more members present, then the vote has greater consequence," she says.

Eaton says she would never support eliminating students entirely from the Senate, but she would favor having less representation, possibly between 20 percent and 25 percent.

By Jolayne Houtz

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