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Serving the University: Better Mentors for Young Professors Would Help

By Kenneth J. Sufka

I am coming to the end of my second term as chair of the Faculty Senate at the University of Mississippi after having served as a senator several times over my 17-year career. I have gained much in personal growth and in understanding the complexity of university operations. While teaching and scholarship certainly occupy the most important aspects of our professional lives, a university's operations cannot function without faculty involvement. Faculty participation in decision making in our senate and on university standing committees allows our teaching and research careers to grow and prosper in many ways.

But few professors understand the role of faculty senates, the responsibilities of university standing committees, and matters of faculty governance in making policies in a university setting. Some faculty members assume the senate at my institution is the body to handle grievances or that it sets university policy. Neither is the case at the University of Mississippi, although one or both could be at other universities. And when it comes to serving on standing committees, I have discovered that some faculty members are

unclear of the committees' responsibilities and of the constituents whom they serve.

In fact, while colleges have long focused on scholarship, and they are beginning to emphasize better teaching, the third responsibility of faculty members—service—does not seem to receive similar attention. I have found that few senior faculty members are willing to commit to departmental service and, as such, pass this task off to their untenured colleagues. The same seems to be true when the senate is tasked to fill appointments to university standing committees. On my campus—and from what I've heard, on many others—we have a clear need for a more thoughtful approach to mentoring junior professors and for more encouragement of senior faculty members to serve their university in such an important form of faculty governance.

Department chairs should not protect junior faculty members from such obligations. Rather, they should organize orientation programs for junior professors that include sessions explicitly detailing how faculty governance is carried out through faculty senates and standing committees in their particular institutions. Nor should such mentoring end there. Standing-committee chairs also have the responsibility to offer some kind of orientation so that new committee members clearly understand the function of the committee and the role of each member on it. I recently encountered a situation in which six of 10 professors on a university committee voted down a policy recommendation that was endorsed by more than 80 percent of the faculty members they represent.

One major problem I confronted last year was that junior faculty members are far too inexperienced to contribute to the more challenging matters placed before the Faculty Senate by the

administration. For example, most colleges in this country are experiencing serious fiscal crises, and at my university, the chancellor asked our senate to develop a faculty-endorsed framework to help the administration meet major objectives in aligning strategic plans with current revenue streams and anticipated shortfalls. Few untenured faculty members, however, have any real grasp of university budgets—and, in fact, the same could probably be said for many senior professors.

How many professors can answer questions like: What percentage of revenue is provided by the state, generated by tuition and fees, and provided by grants and contracts? What percentage of revenue goes to various expenditure categories? The senate should take certain actions to educate itself and other faculty members on such matters. At the University of Mississippi, members of the Faculty Senate now receive an annual "State of the University" address by the provost, including considerable data from the chief financial officer and other financial administrators on campus.

Most of all, I have found it helpful to have members on the senate who have some institutional memory—and thus are familiar with university missions, strategic plans, and the like. But it seems that far too few veteran faculty members are willing to take on such service to the university. Department chairs need to encourage, perhaps even arm-twist, their very best faculty members to be an integral part of such faculty governance. Once senior faculty members become involved and knowledgeable, they can in turn encourage junior faculty members and help train and guide them on governance issues.

The benefits of that approach can be significant for the individual as well as the institution: I have found that serving a university in

these roles acts as a training ground of sorts for the development of many of the skills required to be an effective future leader within a university's structure. Those include communications skills and the ability to see how everything connects with everything else and the long-term impact of decisions. Indeed, department chairs, college and school deans, and vice presidents who made a commitment in their early careers to support the university in such ways have found the experience has helped them a great deal in their current positions.

We need more veteran professors to come forward today in a similar way. Effective mentoring of junior professors as they become increasingly involved in university service ensures a high-quality pool of candidates who may one day be called upon to serve their universities in leadership roles.

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