

Report of the Ad Hoc Investigative Committee
to the
Radford University Faculty Senate Executive Council
October 1, 2009

FINDINGS

Having undertaken an extensive examination of materials submitted to it in June of 2009, the Ad Hoc Investigative Committee established by the Radford University Faculty Senate has come to the following overall conclusions. A complete description of the Committee's actions and a more detailed narrative of the issues reviewed by the Committee follow these findings.

University Governance

The Committee identified a pattern of decision making by Academic Affairs administrators and the Board of Visitors that reflected the lack of adequate or meaningful input from academically qualified faculty in programs affected by restructuring. The Committee agrees with faculty perceptions that such decision making is inconsistent with the commitment to academic excellence expressed in Strategic Directive 2 of the *RU 7-17 Strategic Plan*.

Faculty Primacy in Curriculum

The Committee found that multiple college and departmental restructuring decisions made by Academic Affairs administrators during the past three years lacked sufficient consideration of faculty concerns regarding curricular and programmatic implications. Furthermore, these decisions were not in keeping with axiomatic principles of faculty roles in university decision-making.

Expedited Program Viability Review

Regarding the spring 2009 Expedited Program Viability Review, the Committee found that the process and actions violated no existing, official, university approved policy or decision process. Nonetheless, the haste with which the program viability review was conducted and the vacillating messages about the purposes of the review process highlight the risks that are involved when important and complex decisions are made in a context that limits sufficient discussion and reflection.

COMMITTEE CHARGE AND ORGANIZATION

At its April 9, 2009 meeting, the Radford University Faculty Senate passed a motion to “Establish an Ad Hoc Committee to Investigate Allegations that Administrative Actions with Respect to Academic Affairs have Contravened the RU Internal Governance Document or the Core Values of the Radford University *7-17 Strategic Plan*.” The Committee was charged with inviting any concerned party to submit information about actions that might constitute a violation of Internal Governance policies or to be inconsistent with the *RU 7/17 Strategic Plan*. Such submissions were to be examined and evaluated by the Committee and a report of the Committee’s findings was to be provided to the Faculty Senate by October 1, 2009.

As required by the Senate’s action, the Committee membership was to include the Faculty Senate President and elected representatives of each undergraduate college. The following representatives were chosen:

Dr. Steve Owen—Faculty Senate President
Dr. Roann Barris—College of Visual and Performing Arts
Dr. William Flora—College of Education and Human Development
Dr. William Hrezo—College of Humanities and Behavioral Sciences
Dr. James Lollar—College of Business and Economics
Dr. Claire Waldron—Waldron College of Health and Human Services
Dr. Chester Watts—College of Science and Technology

The Committee conducted its first meeting on May 6, 2009 and Dr. Hrezo was selected to chair the Committee. After considerable discussion, a letter was composed and subsequently sent to the faculty which outlined the manner by which submissions should be developed and forwarded to the Committee. By unanimous agreement of the Committee, two changes were made to the original charge from the Faculty Senate. First, the Committee felt it was both appropriate and necessary to include the Radford University Code of Ethics to the list of criteria under which concerns could be raised. Including the Code of Ethics reflected the Committee’s strong desire to recognize that all University related activities, including those of the Committee, are both subject to the Code and should aspire to the ethical standards it sets. Second, as stated in its letter, the Committee felt that it was essential to “proceed as carefully, reflectively, and fairly as possible.” In pursuit of such fairness, the Committee decided not to accept anonymous submissions.

In order to maintain its neutrality, the Committee declined to use terms such as “allegations” or “charges” during its investigations. However, this process involved activities that, by their very nature, reflected the adversarial relationship between those who submitted materials and those named in the submissions. In this context, it seemed only fair that each side have the opportunity to know who and what were involved in issues that related to them. As anticipated by the Faculty Senate, this change probably did influence the number and nature of submissions. Multiple members of the Committee were contacted by people who were considering presenting materials to the Committee, but felt uncomfortable doing so if their names were to be

made public. This situation troubled the Committee, but the conclusion to proceed transparently and fairly was critical, even at the risk of having to forgo potential additional information.

COMMITTEE ACTIONS

From early May through early September, the Committee met approximately twice weekly. As the group understood its task, it was to establish a process whereby information from the materials submitted to it would be examined and evaluated. The goal was to consider the information which came to the Committee, determine important questions and problems contained in this information, generate questions related to such problems, seek answers to these questions, and finally to synthesize all of this information in a report to be presented to the Faculty Senate.

In response to its call for submissions, the Committee received 19 separate replies. Responses were received from more than 30 people who either wrote or signed on to support the submissions. The combined presentation and supplemental materials totaled approximately 460 pages.

The Committee examined this information to identify specific complaints and the nature of any evidence related to such concerns. When it was deemed that additional information would be of value, the Committee identified and contacted relevant individuals. The Committee decided that the most useful way to gather the information was to provide questions to those people with whom it was important to speak. These people included some faculty, but, due to the nature of the submissions, questions were chiefly addressed to administrators. The administrators for whom questions were generated included Dean Orion Rogers, Dean Brian Conniff, Dean Dennis Grady, Vice Provost and Director of Institutional Research Debra Templeton, Vice President for University Advancement Catherine Greenberg, Provost Wil Stanton, and President Penelope Kyle. Each of these individuals graciously agreed to respond to the Committee's questions and cordial discussions were held with all of them. When the number and range of questions for a particular person were large, the Committee invited the individual to extend the conversation by providing written answers to their questions.

CONCERNS

Expedited Program Viability Review

Faculty in several departments and programs expressed strong concerns about the pace of activities related to this review, failure to recognize the previous findings and recommendations from the established Program Review process, the nature and structure of the expedited process, and the quality of data used in decision making. Administrators interviewed by the Committee often had different positions on these

issues that were reasonable from their perspectives and may have been practical under the circumstances.

One of the submissions called the rapidity of the Expedited Review Process a “Blitzkrieg.” This term, while used by only one submitter, seems to capture the spirit of what was being experienced by other faculty. The process began in mid-December of 2008 and progressed quickly. Many of the submitters said that the speed of the process undermined the ability to produce and discuss thorough presentations of the issues in the reflective manner that they deserved. The administrative rationale for the time-compressed reviews was that demands were being made from the state level that required an immediate response. However, colleges were asked to begin discussions and prepare budget reduction strategies beginning in late summer and early fall of 2008, so the immediacy of the spring scenario could have been mitigated with better planning.

There were frequent complaints that the Expedited Review Process ignored the findings of the recognized and more thorough Program Review Process that has been in place for years at Radford University. As such, the new review was seen as necessitating an unreasonable duplication of effort that possibly could lead to conclusions that were inconsistent with those of broader and more thorough analyses.

Administrators acknowledged that there was significant subjectivity in the selection of criteria included in the decision matrix used to identify programs for the EPR. To be fair, it must be noted that subjective is not the same as capricious. Although there were meaningful questions about the options picked during this phase, none of the choices was baseless. Similar processes from other states were referenced as models for the matrix, the distribution of scoring weights attempted to emphasize the viability concerns, and United States Department of Education statistics were the source of demand ratings. Other statistics, such as the number of majors and whether or not to count double majors, were determined based on established state reporting standards.

The Committee found the answers to its questions in these areas to be reasonable and helpful. Many of the problems might have been avoided, as noted by Dr. Templeton, had it been made completely clear that the process emphasized viability rather than program review. When the Committee discussed this issue with administrators, they said that the process was an attempt to predict the future viability of majors and programs whose productivity was in question. It was not a duplication of Academic Program Review as it is described in the University’s Internal Governance Document. Unfortunately, this demonstrates that even when there are attempts to do things reasonably, haste can cause problems. The unresolved confusion that permeated the process highlights the risks that are involved when important and complex decisions are made in a context that limits sufficient thought and discussion.

General Education/Core Curriculum

The process by which changes were made to transform General Education to the new Core Curriculum was, and remains, controversial. The Committee recognizes that in the end, the appropriate channels were utilized to bring about the new Core Curriculum and that its legitimacy or quality is not under question. However, the chain of events leading up to its submission to the General Education Curricular Advisory Committee remains troubling to many. As the issue of faculty primacy in matters such as the Core Curriculum is at the heart of maintaining the proper direction of educational programs, this situation should not be dismissed as a moot point because it seemed to work out in the end. The entire campus community recognized that there was an established process for changing General Education. The reasons for not following that process initially remain unclear.

At its meeting on August 23, 2007, the Board of Visitors approved a resolution mandating that a Core Curriculum be designed within the parameters of Directive 2: Goal 2.1 of the *RU 7/17 Strategic Plan*. It also mandated that the new curriculum was to be in place for the freshman class entering Radford University in the fall of 2008. The next day the Provost sent a memo to faculty that summarized the Board actions and established a plan for accomplishing the Board's requirements.

Problems began at this point. The Provost directed that an *ad hoc* Core Curriculum Committee be established. The charge to this group was seen by many to usurp the function of GECAC and thereby violate the established process for instituting such changes. In his conversation with the Ad Hoc Investigative Committee, Provost Stanton said that the Core Curriculum Committee was meant only to be a group that generated ideas and that it was always his intention to submit any recommendations to the General Education Curricular Advisory Committee. The Committee respects his explanation. However, correspondence from members of both GECAC and the CCC, as well as multiple discussions in the Faculty Senate during the fall of 2007, suggest that many people did not and do not share the Provost's perceptions. It is puzzling that so divisive a situation was allowed to continue, so much time and energy were wasted, and so much anxiety was generated when a simple clarification of intentions could have ameliorated most of the problem.

The unusual intervention of the Board of Visitors caused concerns that crucial academic decisions were being made to meet deadlines imposed by the Board. For many this diminished the ability of the campus to focus on improving curricular offerings or promoting academic excellence. The established process for revising General Education was implemented because of actions by the Faculty Senate.

Curricular Implications of Academic Unit and Program Restructuring

A recurring theme in the submissions was that administrative decisions had ignored or bypassed the proper faculty role in curriculum decisions. The consistent position of

administrators is that this has not been the case. They pointed out that at no time has an administrator told a department what courses to teach or interfered in the determination of course content.

However, the realities faced by faculty in restructured programs call this narrow interpretation into question. Members of the Departments of Geography, Geology, Biology, Chemistry, and Physics all described the curricular implications of the various reorganizations affecting their departments. While no specific changes in curriculum were imposed from above at this time, submissions from these areas all spoke of the modifications that would be necessary in the future. Furthermore, discussions of new programs in these areas were often used to justify reorganization; e.g. promoting a new degree in Biochemistry as a rationale for combining the Departments of Biology and Chemistry. Once again, such changes have not been imposed, but promoting them as part of the reorganizational rationale without speaking to their curricular implications troubled many faculty.

Other problematic examples arose in this context. The curricular repercussions of the unilateral administrative decision to shorten the semester to 14 weeks cannot be ignored. This pronouncement affected what could be taught in every course at the University and as such it seems quite peculiar to cast it as a purely structural adjustment.

The extraordinary treatment of the Anthropology major is another case in point. First the program was divided and its two disciplines were administratively separated into two different units of the University. Then, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology was told that it could no longer accept new Anthropology majors—the preliminary step to discontinuing that major. The department was told that the Anthropology designation had to be eliminated and that if related courses were to be preserved they had to be redeveloped as Sociology courses. Two of the University's most distinguished professors were permitted to keep the title of Professor of Anthropology, but they will be teaching only Sociology courses. Finally, courses using the Anthropology designation resurfaced in another college. Clearly these changes involved restructuring, but suggesting that there are no curricular implications strains credibility.

These curricular issues raised questions about the Principles of Accreditation of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). Multiple sections of the SACS Principles relate to the primacy of the faculty in matters of curriculum. Obviously any issue that can have a negative impact on accreditation is important. The Committee met with Dr. Rick Slavings, who serves as Radford University's liaison with SACS. He related that he has spoken with SACS officials about such matters and that there are no compliance issues. The Committee recognizes the experience and expertise of Dr. Slavings in this domain and sincerely hopes that he is right. At the same time, the Committee continues to see this as an area of concern. In particular, the Committee believes that the following sections may prove to be problematic:

“Principles of Accreditation of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools”

- 3.4.1, Academic Program Approval
- 3.4.10, Responsibility for Curriculum
- 3.4.11, Academic Program Coordination
- 3.7.5, Faculty Role in Governance

Communication

Concerns about poor communication pervade the submissions. Faculty complained that announcements took the place of meaningful conversations. Administrative decisions have been perceived as *faits accomplis*, accomplished without sufficient input from faculty who have expertise in pertinent disciplines. Dissent has been perceived as unwelcome or even dangerous. Decisions have appeared to have been based on information from single or limited sources rather than that of more authoritative and/or majority opinions. Faculty perceive that there has been selective interpretation of information exchanged in conversations or documents. Concerns were raised that information was not made available to the Board of Visitors far enough in advance of their meetings, thus limiting the ability of Board members to fully reflect on and discuss the business they conduct on behalf of the University.

Good communication will always be difficult in a large institution among people with diverse perceptions, information, and motives. What was submitted to the Committee goes beyond normal difficulties. The issues that prompted the formation of this Committee cannot be construed as simple problems of communication. Bad communication cannot be a valid excuse for every mistake. Claims of communication malfunctions should neither allow people to write blank checks for their actions nor absolve them from responsibility.

The RU 7/17 Strategic Plan

Questions were raised about the version of *RU 7/17* that was submitted to and approved by the Radford University Board of Visitors. The submission that the Investigative Committee received about this issue contended that at some point significant changes had been made to the final draft of the plan that reflected the work of numerous groups over a period of more than two years. That draft was provided to the President by the Drafting Committee, but the draft that went forward to the Board was said to have been substantially altered. The Committee compared the two plans and confirmed that they differed materially. Much of the specificity of the draft had been removed. For example, numerous metrics that would have contributed to meaningful future assessment and evaluation of *RU 7/17* had been removed.

There is no question that what is submitted to the Board of Visitors in a situation such as this is the President's prerogative. The President was not bound by the draft and it was up to her discretion to decide what form the plan would ultimately take. However, there was justifiable unease that such dramatic modifications would be made in a communications vacuum and without the type of vetting that had occurred earlier in the process of developing the plan. Minutes from meetings of the Faculty Senate

Executive Council and the Faculty Senate contain statements that show that further consideration of the plan was anticipated once it had been reviewed by the senior administration.

Concerns were expressed that neither the Faculty Senate nor other members of the university community were included in the final stages of this process. When Dr. Stanton was asked about this during his conversation with the Committee, he suggested that the Committee should take it up with the President. In his written response to this question, he provided background information, but reiterated that the “President can best respond to this question.” When the Committee spoke to President Kyle, she acknowledged that she had made one broad editorial change—a reordering of some sections of the document. However, she repeatedly stated that she did not make other substantive changes and that she was unaware that considerable changes had been made from the draft version to the official document as it exists now. The Committee can readily understand the consternation of the academic community when it feels that it has been deprived of a legitimate role at a critical stage in a process that has far ranging implications for the life of the University. Faculty expressed the opinion that the conclusion of the process contributed to a feeling of “enhanced disappointment” that was making it harder to recruit faculty to participate in internal government operations.

The final, far more general, form of the strategic plan presents its own practical dilemmas. One of the criteria for submitting materials for the consideration of the Ad Hoc Investigative Committee was to establish that some provision of *RU 7/17* had been contradicted. Several submissions did just that. Conversely, administrative responses often cited other sections of the plan as the bases of their decisions and actions. Both sides in these situations seem justified in their interpretations. Unfortunately this points out the problem of a less specific document. In his conversation with the Committee, Provost Stanton used the metaphor of a Christmas tree to describe the plan, in that one could find someplace to hang anything one wanted on it somewhere. The Committee agrees that the metaphor is apt and that is just why so general a plan is of questionable utility.

Utilization of Foundation Funds

Several submitters were troubled by issues of access to funds controlled by the Radford University Foundation. The main question had to do with the ability of departments or programs to spend money that had been specifically earmarked for their use by donors. This concern was raised by both outside donors and faculty. Vice President for University Advancement Catherine Greenberg spoke with Committee members about this situation. Her comments revolved around two main points. First, she stated that strict adherence to relevant legislation and best accounting practices meant that in some cases funds may not be available for uses to which they were put in the past. Second, the Foundation has recently compiled an extensive chart that covers the proper and improper utilization of Foundation monies. This information is now available on the Foundation web site and its use should eliminate much of the remaining confusion. Individuals with questions about specific accounts were encouraged to contact the Foundation directly.

A second issue that arose from these discussions has been the implementation of administrative policies that require departments and programs to submit requests for the anticipated use of their Foundation funds to their Deans and ultimately to the Provost. Vice President Greenberg and President Kyle both suggested that this served a planning function. While the Committee does not have enough information to determine the exact nature or purpose of such a planning function, it does not seem unreasonable in some cases. However, putting additional requirements and restrictions on the use of designated funds is perceived by many faculty as creating a new unnecessary and unjustifiable level of authorization.

CONCLUSION

The very creation of an Ad Hoc Investigative Committee was an extraordinary action. Faculty are typically reticent to undertake confrontational actions that might be disruptive to the normal operations of the institution. The culture of the academy is to respect people in the workplace and not to interfere with them in the conduct of their jobs. That the perceived need for such a committee was strong enough to overcome this tradition speaks clearly of the unfortunate state of affairs at Radford University.

As the members understood its charge, the Committee was to gather information concerning alleged violations of established policies, to compile information from and related to these submissions, and to examine the information to identify major concerns. This report does not cite or respond to each particular point of contention. Nevertheless, it should be noted that there were dozens of specific, serious, and thoroughly documented complaints that were thoroughly reviewed by the Committee. The Faculty Senate may choose to ask additional questions or address these findings at a future point.

Whether or not the Faculty Senate elects to take future action, the big picture as identified by the Committee remains clear. Radford University is in the midst of serious and systemic problems, as evidenced by the sheer volume of allegations from many of the University's most distinguished and respected faculty members. The Committee witnessed the sincere reactions of experienced faculty to their perceptions that policies have been violated and that academic programs have been adversely affected. The sense of disappointment, anger, and betrayal that comes across in these submissions is tangible and alarming.

Unfortunately, actions of the Board of Visitors have not helped to calm this situation. At its April 23, 2009 meeting, knowing that Faculty Senate had formed this Committee, the Board of Visitors unanimously passed a Resolution "that the Internal Governance Procedures have been followed in the recent departmental consolidations and also to recognize and support the work of the Provost, college deans and staff involved in the Program Review Process." Noticeably absent in the resolution is any mention of faculty. Passing such a resolution to declare that procedures had been followed does not excuse the administration or the Board from engaging in appropriate dialogue in the process of making decisions.

In a better climate where there was more trust and confidence, some of these problems might not have arisen or may not have become as serious. The problems noted here are real and important. They do not reflect the views of a few trouble makers or some fringe element of malcontents. They are not the result of a budget crisis. This is not a “business as usual” situation. Finally, while the problems raised in the submissions to the Ad Hoc Investigative Committee probably represent more than the tip of the iceberg, it is clear that they are not the entire iceberg. Failure to recognize the gravity and pervasiveness of the problems that these submissions represent invites the further deterioration of a sense of community at Radford University and will undermine the University’s ability to effectively pursue its mission.