

Report from Faculty Senate

Lysa Rivera

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Dear Trustees,

Thank you for this opportunity to share with you what Western's Faculty Senate has been up to since the last time we met in February. In keeping with the format of my previous reports, I offer a snapshot of the Senate's most robust and substantive issues over the past two month and a brief glimpse into what we have in store, so far anyway, for this quarter.

In our meeting on February 27, the Senate discussed at length the AS Bookstore's recent adoption of what is nationally known as "Inclusive Access," a textbook purchasing model that wraps the cost of digital course content into students' tuition and fees. Just before or on the first day of classes, this digital content is delivered to students, typically through a learning management system (such as Canvas or Blackboard). Faculty raised a few concerns about this sales model, including its "opt out" feature that requires students who are not interested in the digital course material to opt out of the program before being automatically billed for the material cost. Put simply, this model puts students at risk of paying for material they did not intend to use. Another more intellectual concern that arose relates to the proliferation of e-books more generally. Here, several faculty were concerned that Inclusive Access perpetuates what they see to be a disturbing shift towards the digitalization of books. During this meeting representatives from the AS Bookstore offered thoughtful and helpful responses to these concerns. They also made the good point that Inclusive Access can save students hundreds of dollars in course material costs as these digital books are significantly less expensive. The bookstore representatives emphasized that their top priorities are the educational experiences of the students, and they assured faculty that instructors have the final say on the titles of course content. Although faculty continue to have concerns about Inclusive Access and, more broadly, the monopolizing practices of major textbook publishers and this shift to the digital, I believe by and large that faculty found the discussion to be illuminating and helpful. It was also clear that moving forward faculty and the AS Bookstore welcomes more communication in Senate in the future, especially as the needs of our students and the delivery of course material continue to evolve

One issue that has taken up a fair amount of time in the Senate relates once again to course modalities. Earlier in the year, the Academic Coordinating Commission (ACC) reported to Senate that they were learning of some interest in what is known as "HyFlex" course design. Although HyFlex learning does not have a federal or state level definition, it is described by leading industry organizations as follows:

The hybrid flexible, or HyFlex, course format is an instructional approach that combines face-to-face (F2F) and online learning. Each class session and learning activity is offered in person, synchronously online, and asynchronously online. Students can decide—for each class or activity—how to participate. As Brian Beatty notes in *Hybrid-Flexible Course Design*, the result is ‘a student-directed, multi-modal learning experience.’¹

HyFlex is meant to provide maximum flexibility for students. Instructors who teach a HyFlex course must therefore make all three modalities available to all students. What’s more, because “[a]ll participants—irrespective of how they choose to join—must have equitable access to the learning resources, the instructor, and one another,” HyFlex instructors must invest a tremendous amount of time and preparation to develop an effective HyFlex courses. Accordingly, universities that participate in HyFlex learning must dedicate adequate resources to ensure that all students experience their HyFlex educations equally and equitably and that instructors receive the support they would conceivably need as well to deliver the courses effectively. The purpose of this meeting was not to discuss whether WWU should adopt a HyFlex model. Rather, the ACC has asked the Senate to agree on a single definition of HyFlex to ensure that, should discussion of HyFlex return, there is no vagueness or confusion around what it is and how it works.

The last major action item to report relates to budget concerns. As you might have anticipated, members of the Faculty Senate are deeply concerned with the proposed across-the-board, permanent 3% budget cuts. Faculty remain skeptical about the efficacy of such cuts as they pertain to the university’s largest division – Academic Affairs – which they believe to be fundamental to the goals and aspirations of the strategic mission. Several faculty have shared with me their concerns about how these proposed cuts could have unnecessarily harmful impacts on the university’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion by limiting the quality and diversity of faculty we are able to recruit and hire. Faculty also worry that these cuts will disproportionately affect academic departments, whose operating budgets have remained stagnant for several years. All this said, there is also an awareness and belief in the Administration’s commitment to inclusive student success and remain hopeful that these cuts will be strategic as opposed to random and tactical as opposed to unplanned.

Looking ahead to Spring quarter, the Senate faces a number of new and continuing items and issues. These items include voting on a motion to revise the University’s policy on the Outstanding Graduate Award with an eye towards increasing selectivity practices to bring more prestige and rigor to the award and clarifying how these awards are distributed across departments. This quarter will also see the conclusion of the Senate ad hoc committee charged with revising the new course evaluation questions.

¹ Source: <https://library.educause.edu/-/media/files/library/2020/7/eli7173.pdf>

Given the enrollment forecasts the state has released recently, the Senate also looks forward to learning more about the Strategic Enrollment Management team's response to these forecasts. Finally, this quarter the Senate will begin initial planning for substantial updates to the Faculty Handbook. This important project will be led by my successor, Dr. Brandon Dupont and an ad hoc committee of both Senators and a UFWW representative.

I will conclude by sharing that I am going on compassionate leave starting April 4th to care for my mother. Senate President-elect, Dr. Brandon Dupont, will be joining you for the remainder of the quarter. I have thoroughly enjoyed sharing space with you during these Board of Trustees meetings. It is clear to me that you care deeply about the mission of this university. I appreciate the work that you do on our collective behalf.

With warmth,

Lysa Rivera