January 31, 2023

Dear Esteemed Members of the Board,

Thank you for this opportunity to speak this morning. I had hoped to write this report sooner, but Senate met later in the quarter than usual and it has taken me a while to gather content for it. That said, as you will below, there has been plenty of movement and discussion in Senate this quarter.

I am happy to report that Senate has convened an outstanding committee, made up of both tenure-stream faculty and teaching faculty, charged with revising the new course evaluation questions. I have successfully recruited faculty from a range of disciplines who together share a strong commitment to equity, transparency, and efficacy in their approach to these new questions. Included in this committee is Dr. Shevell Thibou, the Director of Teaching & Learning at Western and a current member of Senate. Having now worked with Western's students, faculty, and staff for over a decade, Dr. Thibou brings to this committee a strong record of advancing inclusive and equitable teaching and learning practices at Western. Also on board is Dr. Daniel Hanley, the Director of STEM Education Research and Evaluation at Western. Over the past twenty years, Dr. Hanley has developed and conducted numerous evaluations for prominent organizations, including the NSF, the Department of Education, and Washington State's Department of Education. Our work begins in earnest next week and I am confident that this highly accomplished and decidedly motivated taskforce will deliver a strong proposal to Senate by the end of Spring quarter.

During our January 23 Senate meeting it was brought to the Senate floor that there are varying degrees of concern among the faculty over "ChatGPT," a highly advanced AI chatbot that "delivers information, explains concepts and generates ideas in simple sentences."[1] Of particular concern among faculty is, of course, the potential for ChatGPT to increase cases of plagiarism and, in general, compromise student learning. While there are technologies that make plagiarism easy to detect, it is clear that there is cause for concern as AI technologies like ChatGPT become increasingly mainstream and accessible. During our following meeting (January 30), Senate discussed various ways we can, and must, respond to technologies like this. To this end, we considered the ways that ChatGPT introduces problems, but also potential opportunities, by prompting us to revamp our pedagogies in response to these new technologies. One Senator also pointed out that AI technologies like ChatGPT invite us to remind our students of the essential (and lifelong) skill of critical thinking, which is at the heart of a liberal arts education. It is our hope that once students truly understand the immense value and deep need for critical thinking, they are less likely to abuse these technologies in the first place. There was also a fascinating discussion of the ways we might actually incorporate some of the features of ChatGPT directly into our pedagogies. As one Senator put it (and I'm paraphrasing), new tech is here to stay and faculty can either ignore it, or get in front of it.

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[1] https://www.nytimes.com/2023/01/16/technology/chatgpt-artificial-intelligence-universities.html

Finally, there was consensus that irrespective of ChatGPT's potential impacts, there needs to be support for faculty who wish to learn more about these technologies and how best to address them in their teaching practices. As we continue to discuss this issue, we will work to identify what forms that support might take in the future.

In our January 30 meeting, Senate moved to endorse the Academic Coordinating Commission's (ACC) proposal to extend temporarily course modality policies that were put in place during COVID-19.[2] This extra time is essential for the colleges on campus to develop modality policies that align effectively with the university's strategic plan and its commitment to academic excellence and inclusive student success. Although there continues to be wide-ranging and diverse perspectives and approaches to course modalities, it is clear we all share a deep commitment to student learning and inclusive student success. Senators in the room therefore recognized the clear need for thoughtful college-level policies that ACC can use in ensuring curricular coherence across the many departments and programs on campus.

Finally, a motion was passed in our January 23 meeting to revise the university's "K-Grade" policy. The K-grade is akin to an "Incomplete," and is reserved for students who wish to extend their time to completion in a given class in response to circumstances out of their control. (It is only an option for students who have completed around 80% of the work for a course by the end of the term.) The revised policy limits the number of quarters a student has to complete the K-grade (following the University of Washington's policy) and includes clearer language surrounding when the K-grade is and is not permissible. This motion passed easily and is one of many similar items related to what I have been calling "Catalog housekeeping." I wish to thank Shelli Soto, Associate Vice President for Enrollment and Student Services (and an all-around delightful person), who has taken the lead on this important work.

I look forward to providing you with updates and new items in my next report. Thanks again!

Warmest regards,

Lysa Rivera
Faculty Senate President (AY 2022-23)

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[2] Per the current university catalog: "ACC is a major standing committee of the Faculty Senate whose members are charged with oversight of all aspects of the curriculum, curricular policy and Western's academic enterprise. Through its review ACC ensures curricular coherence, sets appropriate standards for student admission and progress through the curriculum, promotes the assessment of learning outcomes, and enforces guidelines for graduation requirements."