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On the Value of an Independent Faculty Senate

The rhetorical sleight of hand used in the attempt to discredit AAUP principles on academic freedom and tenure as well as to justify the marginalization of faculty senates resembles that used to discredit traditional university education and promote for-profit institutions and MOOCs. As [academic blogger Undine indicates](#) in her discussion of [a promotional piece on MOOCs](#) from the April 29 *New York Times*, faculty criticism of outsourced education is represented as fear of losing status. The defense of face-to-face teaching is reinterpreted as a lack of care for students “shut out” of traditional courses. The sharing of original insights based on current research is the dull practice of “writing one's own lectures” or “one-way delivery of content,” while the use of class time to administer a commercial educational product is “student centered” and modern. These tactics, designed to sideline expertise and experience in the name of democratization and modernization so as to market and create markets for such products, as well as to “flexibilize” staffing in our increasingly corporatized educational institutions, are increasingly evident and have been much discussed. Less obvious to the casual observer may be that the same rhetoric is also used to erode academic freedom and faculty voice in governance.

On the AAUP, former University of Louisiana System President Randy Moffett suggested in his June 12, 2012 [statement on AAUP censure of Northwestern State University and Southeastern Louisiana University](#) that this mainstream professional association only aspires to relevance, and that only 4% of university faculty subscribe to the professional values and standards the AAUP has been articulating and defending for nearly one hundred years. The [Statement of Principles on Academic Freedom and Tenure](#), one hears, is outmoded because it was promulgated in 1940. Indeed, it serves the neoliberal paradigm well to reframe academic freedom and other rights as concerns of alien centuries, unconnected to our own. Moffett's April, 2012 assertion that recent changes in system rules on tenure were merely appropriate updating was another instance of the rhetorical sleight of hand that presents major policy shifts as minor mechanical retooling or slow evolution:

[While many of our Board rules and policies related to faculty are based on AAUP's principles of academic freedom and tenure established in 1940, our rules have evolved over time with appropriate constituent input and approval.](#)

In the 2012-2013 academic year I had occasion to observe the use of similarly soft language in an attempt to revise and “update” the Constitution of a Faculty Senate. The proposed changes were presented not as amendments but as “edits,” although some were more substantial. There was also discussion of possible future changes to “make the Senate a more effective body,” as one administrator put the issue. The comments I offer are based on documents distributed to Senators and relevant administrators, and on discussion at Senate meetings. As such, they are the remarks of an observer without inside information or additional context.

My intention here is not to impute motives or designs, but to call attention to a pattern of rhetoric that can be seen now in many discussions of education in business and government. This rhetoric is not neutral and does not serve us well; we should not take it as our master. Its

hallmarks include a call to revise or abandon allegedly outdated practices which in fact are either (a) straw men such as the deadly “one-way” lecture or (b) principles such as academic freedom, that are time-honored because they are valuable. Our Faculty Senate is composed and structured so as to support greater institutional conservatism than might be ideal. Some of the changes proposed, however, might have re-created the Senate not as a more agile body but as a more obedient one.

The discussion of possible changes to the structure of the Senate was framed in terms of increasing democracy as well as participation and effectiveness. Comments made by some administrators and Senators, and questions posed in a survey taken of Senate opinion, suggested we might (a) limit the number of Full Professors who could serve on the Senate at any given time; (b) institutionalize the number of faculty now in administrative roles who were voting as Senators and chairing Senate committees; (c) radically reduce the total size of the Senate.

Language was also proposed for the Constitution stipulating that the Executive Committee meet to plan and “design” each Senate meeting, insinuating that Senate meetings were not an entirely “regular” process in University governance and stripping the Senate of its independence as a body:

[Senate] meetings will not determine University policy nor shall they undermine the regular processes through which the faculty has input into University affairs. The meetings shall be designed to complement the input through existing channels and to provide an exchange of ideas on broad areas of concern.

The existing Constitution ([Article I](#)) defines a clear role for the Senate and assumes a far more cooperative and collegial relationship between faculty and administration:

As the only authorized, representative body of the faculty under the administration of the University of Louisiana at Lafayette, this Faculty Senate is constituted to promote and implement, consistent with the purposes of the University, maximum participation of the faculty in university governance. In this capacity, the Faculty Senate will assist . . . advise . . . communicate

Given that the role of the Senate had always been advisory, the intention of the additional language was not clear, although its probable effect, especially if enacted in combination with other proposed reforms, was plain enough.

Since the President of the University is President of the Senate and all Full Professors are Senators, it was possible to use the term “patriarchal” to describe the Senate structure. The Full Professors were described more than once as “non elected members” of the Senate. To increase democracy and reduce patriarchy, it was suggested, Full Professors should stand for election and the ratio of less experienced faculty on Senate should be increased. At the same time the size of the Senate should be reduced, on the questionable or even specious premise that this would result in all members being engaged.

Voiced was the idea that with all Full Professors eligible to vote in Senate, they as a class had a disproportionate amount of power relative to the rest of the faculty and were a force for institutional conservatism. Discussion of these possibilities displaced mention of the value that institutional memory and deep professional experience might have, or classed these as negatives. The assumption that opinion would be divided by rank in broad areas of faculty concern such as research, teaching, and institutional policies affecting these was not challenged. At the same time voting in Senate as faculty by administrators also holding faculty titles was considered unproblematic, as though the administration would not be interested in a

clear view from faculty currently functioning as such, and as though participation in the administration would never influence those with such dual roles.

It was not lost on all that these reforms would have caused the composition of the Senate to tend toward less experienced and also more vulnerable faculty. Some still remembered that tenured faculty have a fiduciary responsibility, and not mere seniority in the institution. When it was proposed that the membership of the Executive Committee be expanded to include the chairs of all Senate committees, who are appointed by the Senate Executive Officer, it was pointed out that this measure would not in fact increase democracy.

Reflecting upon the proposals for reform it became clear that innovations like these would not only limit the already moderate powers of the Faculty Senate but also marginalize it as a body. A small group of mid-level to contingent faculty may not always be as strong or as representative of informed faculty opinion as is a large group including as many as possible of the faculty most likely to be national figures. That is, a recommendation or resolution from the latter kind of group is the most likely to carry weight. Desirable in any case is a Senate actively, not merely passively, engaged in shared governance and also strong and independent enough to work directly against the death by budget cuts being inflicted on our institutions by the state.

I once took Faculty Senates and the AAUP for granted, working instead on unionization efforts and in advocacy groups on human rights issues. I never expected I would need to use my organization skills to defend something as mainstream as shared governance at universities. I am disturbed, however, when I see how high the average age is at AAUP meetings, and when I hear newer faculty voice the assumption that Faculty Senate is an empty form.

Perhaps they are right. Perhaps the neoliberal model is already so well entrenched that these modestly democratic institutions have already lost their purpose. Considering the quality of my colleagues here and elsewhere, and their embodiment of academic values, I doubt this. However, as I increasingly hear faculty refer to department heads as “bosses,” administration as “management,” and students as “customers” or even “clients,” I would like to articulate some older principles which remain true, namely that: (a) the quality of the university is still that of its faculty and library; (b) having tenure means working for the integrity of the university and its academic mission; and (c) the administration also serves this mission and supports faculty in carrying it out.

These ideas may not hold much longer, but I would urge we take a good look at them once again rather than simply let them fade. It is worth keeping firmly in mind that we are not in a period of lean budgets but of [structural adjustment](#), and that [economic shock](#) is not the same as natural disaster. As the present governorship wanes we may be able defend our democratic, academic institutions and thrive despite permanent changes to the way we are funded. Now is not the time for faculty to disengage but to increase participation, and to stand together with colleagues in institutions state and nationwide.

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Views expressed in this piece are those of the author and not those of the Faculty Senate or the University. Leslie Bary can be reached at lbary@louisiana.edu.