

State of the Senate Address  
Dr. Magill

Last week, Speaker Elect Bednarz and I received the following from a Faculty Member: (To quote) “Those of us that have been on this campus for any time, realize that the TAMU Faculty senate is a bit of a farce, and 'resolutions' advanced to the local administration are usually ignored. Its primary function is to support the local administration's pretence of faculty involvement in governance. I am just pointing out the obvious and suggesting that it might be interesting (and certainly different) if the faculty senate actually tried to do something for the faculty, as opposed to being a lapdog for the administration.”

Is that who we are?

The Faculty member who sent it was upset that we, as a Senate, had not done more to “kill” the guns-on-campus bill. He seemed to assume that our Administrators must be backing the bill but I can assure you from the Vice President for Student Affairs, to the Provost to the President, that is not the case. If any of you have a good idea of how we could do more for the good of our faculty and Texas A&M on this or any other subject, suggestions are certainly welcome. But, this problem to me represents the majority of the issues we have had to contend with- issues that are beyond our University level administration.

As I look back, this has been an eventful and memorable Senate year, no doubt more for me than for most, but many of the events we have dealt with may well affect the future of Texas A&M.

One of my first actions as speaker was a sad occasion; following the tragic death of Roger Stone in the TAMU Galveston sailboat incident, I volunteered the Senate office as a resource for collecting and transferring donations for the future education of the Stone children. Thanks to many faculty contributions, we were able to pass nearly \$3,000 on to that trust fund.

Of course our primary responsibility as a Senate is to assure that our academic programs, from courses to core courses, to W courses, to certificates and degrees meet our high academic standards. In this area, I think we did make significant progress, in that we have seen a great improvement in the number of course requests, especially undergraduate courses from the Academic Affairs committee, coming through with syllabi that do not violate University rules but that do include course objectives, per the recommendation passed by the Senate last July. We have worked with the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, the Core Curriculum Council and the Graduate Council as well as Sandra Williams, Associate Provost of Academic Programs, to develop a standardized web-accessible form. Improvements are still being made, so it remains a work in progress.

For the most part, this may not seem significant because these course approvals are a part of the consent agenda that seems to be approved almost automatically. What that has too often meant in the recent past is that the Executive Committee has returned way to many faulty forms back to the originating committees and submitters. Those of you who were here will no doubt recall the paragraph of gibberish that Dr. Stadelmann read to us: it was part of a course description that we had just approved. I'm fairly sure that the description he read was one that actually had been sent back for correction by the EC and he was reading the original version, but it points out the need for the Senate to be vigilant lest we embarrass ourselves and the University. Getting the procedure streamlined will allow the EC more time to address other Faculty issues.

Although it began under Angie Price's term as Speaker, the system policy on Criminal Background Checks, with it's in your face "we can check anybody any- time" attitude, struck most of us as being a bit more than extreme. I was pleased to participate along with Senator Ramona Paetzold on a committee headed by Dean of Faculties Watson to develop a Standard Operating Procedure that at least indicates there must be some reasonable basis for running background checks. We can only

hope that this Texas A&M S. O. P. is approved by the new General Counsel for the System.

We were soon again in contention with the System over institution of a proposed teaching monetary awards program that was to be based solely on scores on a common system-wide questionnaire. I believe the resolution that we passed helped in leading to the somewhat improved SLATE process: unfortunately that same issue is looming again. This semester some of the concessions given to the students who took responsibility for managing the program have been withdrawn. Further, we have learned that not all the student-designated winners were actually awarded their prizes by the Chancellor. Specifically those high-scoring teachers involved in 1 or 2 credit courses were ignored, and have been officially ignored in the new guidelines as well. I am still personally much more concerned over the effect such a program might have on our reputation, on the rigor of our courses, and on the potential for grade inflation, but if SLATE is to continue, we must also continue the fight to make it open to all faculty.

Last November we hosted a special open meeting to introduce our new Provost, Dr. Jeff Vitter, which afforded him an opportunity to describe his initiative to create an Academic Master Plan, something that has truly engaged a large number of faculty. The efforts to identify Landmark Research Areas, but also trying to elevate all research programs, led to proposals involving the majority of our faculty.

I am fairly sure that I speak for the three officers who meet with Dr. Vitter at least monthly, in saying that he is a solid advocate of shared governance. I would also like to share that while I do not meet regularly one on one with President Murano, the Speaker does participate actively in her biweekly staff conferences, and that I have been able to visit with her almost instantly on any occasion when I felt it would be helpful. One example was to convey our disappointment over the method of hiring two new Vice Presidents without the types of searches we have seen for the VPR, the Dean of Faculties, the VP for Diversity and

several Dean candidates, including the Dean and Vice Chancellor for Agriculture. Dr. Murano and I are still quite cordial, so I expect you can realize she had reasons for her actions that I found defensible, even if not desirable from a shared governance viewpoint.

More recently, we have had to deal with other issues that have political origins beyond the University. The request from the Governors Office, that each higher education system provide feedback on a document labeled “Higher Education Questions”, or known more generally to us as the ‘U of H document’, asked for feedback on things like salaries, grant dollars, minimum average SET scores required for promotion and tenure, etc. The document raised many questions, but since our System Office never asked for input or information on how best to respond, we have no idea of what response, if any, was made. We do know that the System took the last section to heart; it was the one suggesting cash awards for top teachers as identified solely by student evaluations. By contrast, the UT system interacted with UT-Austin administrators and the UT Faculty Council, to develop the answers that their system submitted.

I was very pleased with what I think was a unanimous vote in the Senate protesting the Policy for Hiring of System Presidents that was recently implemented by the Board of Regents. I sent a copy of our resolution to each of the regents, and did receive a polite reply from Bill Jones, the Chair. Basically he said “don’t hold your breath” but if a regent asks to reconsider, they will look at it. I am not really expecting a change, but hope that at least a few of the Regents realize the potential damage the prestige our University would suffer, if certain of the options they outlined are carried out.

I had a short chance to visit with our former president Dr. Gates at the dedication of the new component of the Becky Gates Childrens’ Center. I told him, and it’s true, that I keep a copy of his last convocation speech, where he outlined his concepts of shared governance, in my middle drawer to read if I get discouraged. We can certainly hope that

the task force on “enlightened governance” (which is the vision 2020 terminology for shared governance), as appointed by Dr. Murano with Speaker Bednarz and Provost Vitter co-chairing, will provide mechanisms to institutionalize the concepts of shared governance. Shared governance requires both open communications and transparency. As Dr. Gates detailed, to be effective, it must operate at all levels, from Departments to Colleges to the University and the System.

I guess one sign that we are making progress is getting the revised Dean and Department Head search and review rules approved after 5 or 6 years of trying. However, we are still having problems getting some Colleges to accept a career ladder system for non-tenure track faculty. Even though the document approved by the Senate allowed for the use of different titles for the positions to suit differences in Colleges, and even though the System has promoted the use of greater than one-year appointments to those in non-tenure ranks, some colleges are really dragging their heels. This is one area where the Senate may need to provide more push.

Just last week we organized and co-hosted an open forum with the University Advisors Council to look at problems critical to the move from SIMS to COMPASS. It was extremely well attended, especially by advisors (this room was full) and some key issues were clearly identified. It will be critical for the Senate to follow up and at least help in getting the needed fixes prioritized. Senate involvement along with the UAC should provide impetus for the EIS team to take the list seriously.

Last month, we significantly updated our by-laws to match current practices but still need to update bylaws for our election mechanism and probably to restructure more committees.

The fact that we had at least one candidate for each of the vacant Senate positions, and perhaps more contested races than in the recent past,

suggests we are making progress as a Senate. I hope this has something to do with our willingness to address important issues. I think I can safely predict that we have not seen the end of outside interference, but we also need to be ready to push faculty goals on issues such as fair and consistent inclusion of service as part of annual reviews. We must address or forfeit the situation that sends many of our students off to junior colleges for core courses that we can't or don't want to offer. We have seen we have a problem of monitoring minors. We no doubt will be affected by outcomes of the Academic Master Plan. From what I've heard, there will be tens of millions less dollars available to TAMU next year. The poor economy has reduced the AUF investment funds and the new formula funding is not as favorable as was hoped. If we do get into a real financial shortfall, I can confidently predict there will be many serious issues the Senate must address.

Now a personal note or two:

When I first ran for a seat on the Senate 7 years ago, I did so because I felt that the degree granting Faculties, such as Genetics and MEPS - I'm a member of both-, were not being appropriately funded or managed by the administration, and I hoped the Senate would be an avenue for input. Rules that the Senate had passed, with presidential approval, dealing with structure and function of such faculties have essentially disappeared from any official records. Five years later, after seeing no real positive changes, I had the same goal as one of my reasons in running for Speaker-elect. Although as Speaker I have had great access to upper administrators, my timing could not have been worse. The primary office of responsibility is the Vice President for Research, and generating changes or new programs is not a high priority for interim VPRs. However, I do look forward to progress in the near future. Dr. Seemann, our next VPR, seemed very interested when I visited with him during his last campus visit.

I want to publicly thank Marilyn Willie and Vanessa Foster for all the work they do to make these meetings run so smoothly and for all they do

for the Senate. Their organization, ability and dedication are all absolutely incredible.

Now I have a request:

I really hope that more of you will be willing to participate in the discussions within the Senate than have in the past; you have surely seen that one or two objections can completely change the attitude of the whole body. Be an active participant here and on your committees!

Finally:

One of the real positives of the Speaker position is the new perspective it offers; I have been amazed by the leadership abilities of our student leaders; something you simply do not pick up on if you only know them as students in your class. I have become aware of the incredible expertise of our faculty in areas that I barely knew existed on campus; things like the College of Architectures preeminence in Hospital design, Professor Urbina's digital Don Quixote project and the Glasscock Center programs. I accepted as many of the invitations to represent the Senate at as many functions as I could- I think about 10 pounds worth of missed noon hour jogging and some fancy evening meals. It has been both rewarding and an honor to represent you and our entire faculty. I thank you for the opportunity to do so. I am confident the Senate is in good hands- after all, they are yours.

Thank you.