

**Statement to the Committee of the Whole, Faculty Senate Meeting, Texas A&M University
August 10, 2020**

Senators,

I come before you today in Committee of the Whole to share issues happening in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences related to academic advising and the complete absence of shared governance.

On Monday, July 20, I received a text message from a colleague in another College asking if I knew that all advisors in my College were part of a reduction in force (RIF) effort. All 26 academic advisors in every department across our college were told that they had 60 days of employment remaining and were encouraged to apply for 23 advising positions posted that morning.

My College had decided to centralize advising without ANY opportunity for shared governance. Faculty were completely unaware that the College was considering this model, despite two previous meetings in the spring and one in the fall with our Dean. That evening, we received an email from our Vice Chancellor and Dean, Patrick Stover, summarizing the eliminated positions across the College and the centralization of IT, Business Services, and Academic Advising.

Though there are many ongoing concerns with these changes, the primary issue for faculty is that academic processes have been significantly disrupted and are being reorganized without ANY faculty input. These RIFs were done under the financial exigency rules where we were told the college was working towards a 10% cut. We learned this past Friday that the College has only cut 2.5% and that this academic reorganization effort did NOT result in any cost savings. Thus, advising is completely disrupted and our advisors are left wondering if they will have a job. Advisors have many concerns, questions, and are powerless in this situation. A decision that was supposedly made to “prioritize students” fails to meet that goal. In the face of a pandemic, creating a situation where our primary contacts with students are left without jobs or forced to accept lower paying jobs seems cruel and unnecessary, especially when there was no reported cost savings from these changes.

Our faculty are concerned that there are still no plans to engage us in the changes ahead. Apparently, an advisory group will form after the reorganization, to which our Dean has agreed to appoint a faculty senator. Sadly, this falls short of required shared governance of changes to academic programs.

When asked about the opportunities for shared governance in this process, we were told that Department Heads were instructed to write strong letters of recommendation for advisors they wanted rehired. When asked how faculty were engaged in the re-hiring process, we were told that there was not enough time as this was a crisis situation and that faculty could not be trusted to put aside their departmental affiliations in that process. It is important to note that the search committee consisted of 3 associate deans and 1 staff member, all who have departmental affiliations. Apparently, administrators and staff are more trustworthy than faculty.

I am deeply disappointed with this approach. In an email this past Friday, the Dean pointed directly to my involvement with the Student Success Initiative, including my name in the email, as the catalyst for these changes. He pulled a partial quote from the 68-page report that suggests a centralized reporting advising structure to improve student success. I caution my students about pulling quotes out of context to support a position. If our College administration had taken the time to read the full report, they would have discovered that the context of that recommendation requires that advising be viewed as an integral issue to student success that is closely tied to departments and degree program

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requirements. Here is the full quote from the overview on page 51 of the student success initiative, subcommittee report on academic advising that I co-chaired and co-authored:

“We believe that academic advising is a cornerstone to student success. Creating a university culture that values the important role of Academic Advisors is paramount to the success of any initiative aimed at improving student success at our institution. We recognize that Academic Advisors do not have consistent roles across colleges and departments. While we recognize that any uniform effort must come from upper administration, we also value the important role of departments in providing context to the advising function, especially in terms of high impact practices. By enhancing and improving the job description of advisors and creating a centralized effort with a holistic view of student success to target students of potential, we can increase retention, shorten time to graduation and close gaps across ethnic, first-generation, gender and socio-economic differences.”

One can hardly suggest that the changes in my College seek to value advisors. Furthermore, that report suggested that advisors remain in departments, but report centrally to the AOC dean or similar structure. Had our college simply moved reporting lines as they did with Business Services, we likely would not be here today. The major angst with these issues is that all our advisors have lost their positions and are being interviewed centrally, with no input from FACULTY.

I appreciate that the EC has requested a meeting with my Dean to ask him directly about the absence of shared governance on these academic issues. As faculty, it is important that we represent those we were elected to serve. Though I have been warned that speaking up could cost me personally, as a champion of shared governance and former speaker of the faculty senate, I am determined to ensure that shared governance occurs at every level of our institution, including my own college. Claiming that these were human resource issues to deny a shared governance approach is simply unacceptable to faculty.

Lastly, I want to thank our university administration for leading with compassion, empathy, and dignity during the last several months as we have dealt with a pandemic and a myriad of related issues that have impacted our faculty, staff, and students. I am sincerely disappointed and concerned that my own college has capitalized on these challenges to change our structure in an effort to avoid the shared governance process. It sets a precedent that should be concerning to us all.

Thank you all for the opportunity to address you today.

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