

FACULTY SENATE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

Tuesday, 13 February 2024
4:00 p.m. – Via Zoom

ACTION MINUTES

MEMBERS PRESENT: Julia Albarracin, Chair; Everett Hamner, Vice Chair; Denise Gravitt, Secretary

ALSO PRESENT: Mark Mossman, Interim Provost; Jeremy Robinett, Parliamentarian; Annette Hamm, Faculty Senate Office Manager

GUESTS: President Guiyou Huang; Bobbi Smith, Director, Financial Aid

1. *Enrollment Verification Process*

Financial Aid Director Bobbi Smith visited the Executive Committee to summarize the enrollment verification process, emphasize its importance, and explain the reasons why the Financial Aid office now asks for it. She recalled that a few years ago, during a full program review audit by the Department of Education (DOE), the University of Missouri was found not to have any mechanism in place to establish academic activity for Pell grant recipients. In order to disburse federal Pell grants, universities are required to verify that students have started academic activity in their classes. Ms. Smith explained that since the University of Missouri had not done so, the Pell grants they had paid to students became not of the previous year's

ns, which are very intensive. Ms. Smith related the
ugh the financial aid world, and many institutions realized
cause they relied on information at the back end of the
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Interim Provost Mossman remarked that,

Chair Albarracin asked about the process for students taking in-person versus online courses. She observed that in-person students are just asked to show up for class, but with online students the process becomes more complicated because the question the instructor is asked at the end of the semester is whether the student turned in any coursework. She thinks that to log into the online course would seem to be equivalent to attending in person, so there appears to be a double standard at work between the two formats with online students being judged more strictly. Ms. Smith acknowledges there is a different standard because in-person students attending a lecture is considered academic activity; if a student is present when an instructor is talking about the subject matter, students can absorb it through osmosis even if they are not fully listening. When attending online, however, the student might not even be in the room, so Financial Aid requires online students to actively engage with the subject matter rather than just log in. Ms. Smith explained this could be as simple as an assignment for online students to say why they are taking the course or what they want to get out of it, but not just an assignment for students to tell the instructor a little bit about themselves because that is not subject matter related. Ms. Smith said she appreciates academic freedom, but if faculty want to comply with the statute there needs to be activity specifically related to the curriculum.

Chair Albarracin observed that some faculty members post recordings of their lectures for those students who cannot attend in person or at the standard time. Ms. Smith responded that as long as the instructor has a tracking mechanism, this would count, but otherwise there is no verification that a student watched the video. She said if the instructor has a short quiz that the student takes and submits after watching the recording, that would be the verification of academic activity. Ms. Smith added that if a course is being livestreamed through zoom as well as being taught in person, the instructor can verify the student is engaging in academic activity if they can be seen online.

Parliamentarian Robinett pointed out that instructors can see how long students spend accessing things on WesternOnline, so if they watch a couple of videos and email the professor, even if they do not turn in an assignment, that would seem to count as engaging in an academic activity. He stated that in his role as faculty Athletics rep, he works with students across the campus, part of which involves weekly grade checks (with their permission), and Parliamentarian Robinett has been astounded at the number who do not have a grade entered because they have not yet had any assignments, even in online classes. He thinks the bigger challenge is how to get all faculty to assign something to use for verification because if they do not make assignments in the first four weeks it is unlikely they will do so in the first ten days. Ms. Smith said she often gets emails from faculty stating that they don't make assignments in the first few weeks and asking how to verify academic activity, and she sends those questions to the Provost's office.

Interim Provost Mossman remarked that no one is asking for a report; it is a very low bar, but it is also a compliance issue. He noted that students may have attendance problems that can be corrected as the semester goes on, but instructors need to have some sort of engagement with students to be able to verify that they are academically active. Chair Albarracin stated that, because students sometimes cannot purchase their books at the beginning of class, she changed to giving assignments three or four weeks into the semester. Ms. Smith said that Financial Aid is not looking for rigor but for substantive interaction between the instructor and student. She said this could involve the instructor emailing students the syllabus and asking them to email back confirming that they received it and listing one thing they want to get out of the class. She stated that the DOE writes their statutes in a way that is open to interpretation, so if a faculty member can show something that verifies student engagement the DOE would accept that in an audit versus not having any verification.

Ms. Smith would like to see the response rate from all colleges at 85 percent because that would show

statute. Ms. Smith attended faculty orientation this year to reinforce the importance of compliance to new faculty. Interim Provost Mossman agrees that not being able to show continuous improvement is troubling, and what is even more troubling is that the percentage for some colleges has declined, which puts the institution at risk. Ms. Smith stated that if the DOE finds out that verification has not been received for one out of 20 classes, they will extrapolate that percentage out to assume that is the case for many more classes and those students should not have received Pell grants. She informed ExCo that 54 percent of WIU students receive Pell grants, which is really high for a public university, so if WIU had to pay all of it back, as the University of Missouri did, it could bankrupt the university.

ExCo meeting adjourned at 6:17 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Annette Hamm, Faculty Senate Office Manager
and Recording Secretary