Minutes of the First Meeting 1 September 2005

The first meeting of the Faculty Senate was held at 3:00 p.m., 1 September 2005, in the Board of Trustees Conference Room. Senators present: Marc Brettler, Stephen Cecchetti, Bulbul Chakraborty, Jon Chilingerian, William Flesch, Richard Gaskins, Ira Gessel, Jane Hale, Jytte Klausen, Margie Lachman, Harry Mairson, Robert Moody, Richard Parmentier, Laura Quinney. Senators absent: Leonard Muellner, Aida Yuen Wong.

Professor Robert Moody opened the meeting and conducted the election of the chair of the Senate for 2005-06. On behalf of the entire Senate he thanked Professor Dagmar Ringe (Biochemistry) for her contributions as Senate Chair last year.

ELECTION OF THE SENATE CHAIR AND THE SENATE COUNCIL
Harry Mairson (Computer Science) was elected Chair; William Flesch (English), Jytte Klausen (Politics) and Richard Parmentier (Anthropology) were elected to the Senate Council.

FACULTY HANDBOOK REVISION COMMITTEE
Last spring the Senate constituted a Senate Subcommittee on Handbook Revision to provide a mechanism and manage the process for taking Handbook changes to the faculty. The committee appointed by the Senate includes Richard Gaskins (Legal Studies, Chair), Bulbul Chakraborty (Physics), and Laura Quinney (English). Professor Gaskins said that Professor Trenery Dolbear (Economics), faculty parliamentarian, would be consulted as the committee proceeds. Professor Gaskins added that the committee will coordinate its efforts with the Senate Council before taking issues to Faculty Meetings. The subcommittee is not a policy making body; rather it will provide a mechanism for vetting and presenting to the faculty issues that have already been discussed by other study groups. He added that Provost Marty Krauss and Dean of Arts and Sciences Adam Jaffe have agreed that the Senate subcommittee should be the mechanism for Handbook review. Professor Gaskins asked for an additional Senator to join the committee: Professor Richard Parmentier (Anthropology) volunteered.

CONFIDENTIALITY OF SENATE DISCUSSIONS

The issue of the confidentiality of Senate discussions was raised due to several occasions last year, when confidences appeared to be compromised in a way that several Senators found uncomfortable. How do we discharge a responsibility to communicate with the entire faculty, while preserving a meeting environment where colleagues can speak freely?

A Senator proposed that we must respect requests for confidentiality from senators and visitors: in the context of expressed personal difficulties, in not repeating the unintended infelicities that are all too common in informal discussion ("I wish I hadn't said that.") , particularly of contentious issues, and to some matters of political consequence.

In response, it was observed that there are no secrets: information revealed to a dozen-odd people is inevitably repeated. (Perhaps every speaker should have academic Miranda rights read to them.) Also, it is inappropriate for visitors to the Senate (most likely, senior administrators) to divulge critical information of substance, while simultaneously insisting on confidentiality---a compromise
which reveals information, where the Senate cannot then respond. Such confidences resemble out-of-order comments in a courtroom, where the judge instructs the jury, impossibly, to ignore what was said.

The following was offered as an informal guideline. We learn less when discussion is assumed completely open. While visitors should know that complicity in matters of academic consequence isn't possible, Senators should be careful what they say to colleagues after meetings. Furthermore, we cannot rule out offering confidentiality to those who come to the Senate to consult: we should not deter those who want to run initial ideas by us, in announcing these ideas-under-construction to the whole community.

We can encourage good judgement, concluded the Chair, without making rules about what can and cannot be repeated. However, we can set up a protocol for the minutes. Observing that the minutes in previous years have been minimalist, the Chair expressed a preference for minutes reflecting more of the dialogue between speakers. Penultimate drafts will be sent to those present, who should feel free to amend comments until a fixed email deadline, after which they will be generally circulated.

A Senator urged discussions to be open, describing his personal rule of assuming comfort with anything he said appearing on the front page of a newspaper. The Chair encouraged Senators to speak with respect, conviction, and to stand by their words.

SENATE AGENDA FOR THE ACADEMIC YEAR
The Chair outlined some of the issues before the Senate for academic year 2005-06:

Integrated planning process. A report on integrated planning was released by the administration to the Board of Trustees; the Senate may wish to comment on it, and have the University and Trustees be cognizant of these views.

Dean’s advisory council. Last spring, Dean Jaffe expressed an interest in setting up his own advisory council. Discussion with last year’s Senate Council reached no agreement on a jointly appointed group: how many, how chosen, etc. The Senate encourages the Dean to talk to as many faculty colleagues as possible, and to solicit their advice. But it needs to be stressed that such an advisory council would have no formal (Handbook) status as a decision-making body, and is not a replacement for faculty governance.

Contract faculty. The end of last academic year saw a comprehensive report issued on contract faculty, the work of a committee chaired by Professor Malcolm Watson. The Provost pledged to implement the report's recommendations that strengthen fair employment practice at Brandeis, including modifications to the Faculty Handbook. While showing the utmost respect for contract faculty, attention must be paid to balancing this respect with the maintenance of the tenure system. Tenure, its potential for creating oligarchy notwithstanding, bestows citizenship on faculty. That citizenship allows faculty to participate in institutional governance in a way that would be impossible, for example, in a corporation.

Guests (President Jehuda Reinharz, Senior Vice President of Institutional Advancement Nancy Winship, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer Peter French, Vice President for Students and Enrollment Jean Eddy, Board of Trustees Chair Stephen Kay). The invitation of guests to speak at the Senate was largely put aside last year during the time- and energy-consuming discussions and negotiations regarding integrated planning. University leaders, whose work is so crucial to the institution's success, can update the Senate on University issues and priorities. The Senate will have to do its homework beforehand.
Course Evaluations. How are they used, particularly in the context of promotion and retention? (This issue was highlighted in a recent news article in the Justice: see "Evaluation jitters", http://thejusticeonline.com/media/paper573/news/2005/08/30/Features/Evaluation.Jitters-971806.shtml.)

[In addition, the Chair failed to mention Diversity at Brandeis. At the end of last year, the Provost's Diversity Steering Committee prepared a draft Mission Statement on diversity, and asked the Senate Council for endorsement. The Council provided comments, but did not concur. The matter remains unresolved.

Subsequent to the meeting, a proposal was also made to the Chair regarding Course banking. Could there be rules set up allowing a more staggered teaching load, where faculty spend certain academic terms in a more teaching-intensive or research-intensive mode, with a "memory" to ensure fidelity?]

Discussion of the issues above included the following comments:

The Senate should be a first mover in matters of University policy, and not merely react. Faculty elections last spring were largely uncontested. Does this reflect indifference, apprehension, or prudence among the faculty and the Senate?

In both public and private remarks, some administrators have characterized last year’s Senate as contrarian. In response, it was observed that the faculty's role isn't simply to affirm. The Chair added that in a participatory democracy, conflicts are inevitable---what's important is that we have a civil means of resolution. A brief discussion of last year ensued, with its competing priorities of interdependent constituencies. This discussion again underlined the importance of inviting guests, and of encouraging constructive engagement and conversation.

As expressed since Senatorial time immemorial, it was urged that standing committees provide reports to the Senate. (Professor Nyangoni, who served for several years as Chair, repeatedly urged these committees to provide such reports.) These reports could provide a useful basis for discussion with visitors. Senators must be knowledgeable before discussions with the administration.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:30 p.m.