Brandeis Faculty Senate
Friday, February 12th 2021
Via Zoom

Brandeis Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes

Welcome, Approval of Minutes
*No quorum, approval of minutes will be pushed to the next meeting.
*Quorum met at 11:40.

Motion to approve the minutes
Approved

Chair's Update
This will be a wild ride of a semester, not just because of Covid but also because of issues of our own making. The budget will be unrolling until April 8th. It is a work in progress.

Discussion of Budget Planning

The two other items that I want to discuss are the Engineering Proposal and the way it is being presented as well as the strong push to build Science 2a, a new building, at the Board of Trustees meeting. There is a push to finance this building on debt which is concerning.

Comment: To me the most disconcerting thing is that we have yet to do any strategic planning around these decisions in the Strategic Planning Committee. We have no clue what their strategic thoughts are.

Comment: As a veteran of 2009, I think it is an outrage that the administration is thinking of continuing the retirement holdback. It might lead to a strike, I find it unthinkable.

Response: The proposed model has some of the retirement benefits returning.

Comment: Some is not enough
Comment: It’s insulting
Comment: The retirement benefits cannot be a fund that they leverage, it’s contractual.

Comment: There are all these pieces that I’m concerned about. The structural deficit is old and, all of the sudden, we are going to address it now during a period of crisis? It seems like the administration is scrambling to put together a piecemeal solution.
Comment: I want to echo the concern around the Strategic Planning Committee, it is very concerning that there is not much coming out from those Committee meetings. As for the structural deficit, addressing it is always put off and there have been years and years of thought put in towards how to address the deficit so I don’t see the push to address the structural deficit as coming off the cuff. As for the Engineering Proposal, I was very excited to see it. With the impending challenge to recruit incoming undergraduates, we need creative thinking on how to keep recruitment up.

Response: We should divide the content of the Engineering proposal from how it is being presented. The way it is being presented is concerning. There is a Handbook way to present new proposals that is not being done. The real problem with the proposal is that they are asking for eight new faculty and that the program will be running once it has adequate funding but the proposal does not define what “adequate funding” is or who decides what the amount of funding is. There seems to be a lot of pressure on getting this proposal on the agenda.

Question: What do you mean by pressure?
Response: Pressure by the administration to get this proposal on the agenda for the next Faculty Meeting.

Comment: These are symptoms of larger issues and the question is how do we build greater solidarity with the sciences and begin to discuss the destitution that the humanities are going to face in future. Also in funding these new buildings and programs are we going to be hiring diverse candidates? And will they have pathways to tenure? These are existential issues.

Response: In the sciences we have the largest number of faculty and the largest percentage of tenure. The humanities and creative arts are lower and these numbers reflect institutional power.

Comment: We were consulted about the Engineer proposal and we thought it was a good thing to bring together many departments that are not currently working very well together. We support it and if there is something we have to do as the Math Department we will do it.

Comment: Overall the Engineering Proposal is something that will probably be a net gain for Brandeis but it has to be done in a meaningful way.

Response: Some students feel there is a gap in their education around engineering.
Response: I just feel like we need to take a breath, slow down, and think about these choices. I’m not opposed to an Engineering program but we are in crisis right now.
Response: We would do the world a service by creating liberal arts engineers. It’s a small thing but helpful.
Priorities for the Semester and New Business Suggestions (including Focus Group plans)

I want to invite the proposal writers to come talk to the Senate. I also want to invite Stew to come talk to the Senate. Another update this semester, the Dignity at Work Committee came back with another revision. We are at a place where we can all work together and come up with something that does not require a Handbook vote. We need to have a full senate meeting with the new provost so we can get to know her. Also we should meet with Aretina. Is there anything else or do you have other concerns?

Discussion of the Faculty Meeting agenda and the Antiracism Plan

Update on Senate Antiracism Plan and Election Planning

Question: Can we get a report on the diversity and demographic numbers?

We want to talk about education and ongoing education rather than a “training.” We’ve met with Aretina and she takes this approach as well. She will be a really terrific resource. We didn’t want to put too much more on this until we met with Aretina but we wanted to engage the full faculty and have the make-up of the Senate reflect the diversity of the university. We would like to see members and new members of the Senate and the administration undergoing this education. There is also an important caveat that the work of the antiracist education does not fall on faculty of color.

Comment: I appreciate the last point. There is also a lot of activity on these points but the students want to see more specific rhetoric around official language from the university. Can Brandeis go to the lengths to articulate itself and bring in more of that aggressive antiracist language?

Response: The document is out there for the Senate to look at and intervene in.

Response: When we talk about Brandeis, who do we mean? There is not one. It is our responsibility as faculty to push where we can. I think the next step is to further diversify the Senate and engage more faculty in that process. We should make continual education a priority as well as the next Senate election to bring in new people.

Comment: With respect for diversifying the Senate, I want to bring a related observation. One the one hand it is so important to have greater diversity in the Senate, but while I was looking to bring in more help for the Dignity at Work I noticed that the BIPOC faculty are disproportionately junior faculty members and we don’t want to put more weight on their shoulders.

Response: We don’t want BIPOC faculty to stand as tokens on dozens of committees where they just make up numbers.

Comment: What a lot of BIPOC faculty feel is an extreme fatigue. The challenge is the system which puts a drain on BIPOC faculty.

Response: Carina Ray has an excellent mentorship program. The mentorship process is absolutely critical so perhaps we can have a conversation with Carina.
Elections will run at the end of March so now is the time to start attempting to engage the faculty. I’ll draft up an email and we can reach out to individuals to nurture relationships. I’ll also do the regular call for nominations.

Comment: We need departments to understand that service in the Senate can be the main service commitment for individual faculty members.

Comment: Those of us who come straight from a department should provide a brief update during departmental meetings to present what the Senate is doing. For the departments and programs without direct Senate representation, we should let those chairs know that a member of the Senate can come to departmental meetings to briefly report on the Senate activities.

Response: At the business school we rarely have departmental meetings.

Response: Part of the work of the senate could be to prompt deans and faculty heads to have these types of meetings.

Response: I want to reach out to people and be a resource but I am “at-large” so I feel that it shouldn’t necessarily come from me.

Response: Perhaps we should have Senate Office Hours but the at-large reps can still reach out to their home departments and divisions.

Response: We should have conversations with the individuals we are trying to recruit about what their service commitments are and what it would take to get their interest.

I’m hearing a lot about outreach to individuals and chairs/heads. Also more office hours. Anything else?

Question: Is it too radical to have a full voting eligible space for adjuncts?

Response: The adjunct position will have voting power in the Senate but we aren’t currently pushing to change the voting eligibility rules. The first step was to get a member in the Senate which we’ve done. It’s a step in the right direction.

Comment: Going back to what the Senate should take up this semester, I want to address the caste system on campus around individuals with different degrees, staff, faculty, tenure track vs. non tenure track.

Response: We should follow up on our faculty survey from the fall. We should have some fact finding focus groups but the administration doesn’t seem to have the bandwidth.

Response: A thought was to have folks randomly invited these focus groups with some questions and a relatively simple framework. Many of us here have run focus groups and could do a relatively good job but I wanted your thoughts on the different breakdowns and approaches to forming these focus groups (by career stage, intermixed, etc.)
Comment: I like the idea of having the groups intermixed so that individuals don’t feel that they have to conform to their direct peers.

Comment: Last semester we created the Working Group on Brandeis Families which mixed BUSAC and Faculty. One of the criticisms I heard was that the staff felt that they couldn’t speak up against the faculty and that the faculty ran the show.

Comment: We might want to try one time by status and one time by school. A lot will depend on the prompts.

Comment: I would favor having groups by rank and not by school.

Discussion on ways to organize and mix focus groups as a well as a discussion on issues facing junior faculty, senior faculty, and the role of the Senate in addressing these issues.

Comment: Perhaps have two rounds of focus groups with the first being a safe space and then invite them to be part of a round two where we intermix.

Response: It’s always good to do more surveys and hear what their struggles are but in many places we already know what the struggles are. We should try to address these issues and not always try to get more data. We know the basics, we just don’t get any responses from the administration.

Response: Where we know about these issues we should absolutely be pushing forward, but what we heard in our open office hours really surprised us and the focus groups can be an intervention as well as a data gathering endeavor. There are some places where we do know and should not gather more data but there are other areas where we should learn more so we can better advocate.

Comment: I want to discuss the merits and demerits of presenting the focus groups with a more pointed question.

Comment: Also the issues around decolonization. We need to face these issues and ask what it means to decolonize the curriculum and the faculty.

I would like us to reconsider the language here, “caste” is a culturally charged term. I’d suggest we use “hierarchy.” One of the issues we have to talk about with Aretina is progressive hiring and the issues around promotion from there.

Action Items: Volunteers for Focus Groups, Informational meeting sometime in early to mid-march for elections to the senate, Extra meeting just on the by-laws sometime before March 15th and April 1st. Meetings to Schedule:
1. Early March: Meeting to Revise and Edit By-laws
2. Mid March: Informational Session for Senate Elections
3. Suggest times each month for open office hours. Perhaps a week after meetings.

Invitations to send for Senate meetings:
   March: Avital Rodal and Seth Fraden for Engineering program; Stew on Budget (maybe an additional meeting for either of these)
   April: Aretina Hamilton from ODEI; Carol F.

Review of By-laws, Continued

Attendance: Rajesh Sampath, Grace Zimmerman, Joel Christensen, AK Nandakumar, Carol Osler, Monika Mitra, Dmitry Kleinbock, Pu Wang, Sue Lanser, Ilana Szobel, William Flesch, Joel Cutcher Gershenfeld, Gordon Fellman