Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes

Welcome and ongoing updates; meeting updates

- Joel Christensen is on leave due to the birth of his daughter, Carol Osler will chair the meeting in her capacity as a member of the Senate Council.

Meeting with Aretina Hamilton

- I am the Director of DEI Training. I consider myself to be a scholar-activist. A lot of my work looks into spacial and racial violence, my PhD work looked into how Black Lesbians built space for themselves in the American South. Recently, my work has shifted and I’ve started to look at violence and the role of the institution of higher education therein. The DEI Training is only part of it, there is a history at the institutional level and there is a geography within our departments. When we talk about diversity, search and selection, and retention we have to be disciplinary specific. Many young faculty, junior scholars, etc. leave and there is a disconnect with the senior faculty as to why. The non-tenured and contract faculty, as well as our graduate students, are vulnerable and one of my goals is to start conversations around these issues.

  Question: Thank you for choosing to join us at Brandeis. One of the perennial struggles is how to get faculty to de-prioritize their own work and stretch themselves to attend events, specifically events around BIPOC scholars?

  Response: We have to acknowledge that our faculty are extremely burnt out. I think in some ways building this out into department anti-racist plans and having faculty include these areas into their own research and add element of professional development to these events. We need to have these conversations at a departmental level.

  Question: The one piece that is missing at Brandeis is white people engaging with their own racism. What are your thoughts around how to find vehicles to proceed with this.

  Response: I’m a big proponent of affinity groups. This is also part of training and having conversations specifically around race. We have these moments of panic where it comes up. We have to have honest conversations and ask ourselves if we are ready to have these conversations. We also have to ask how these conversations will affect our numbers. This will have an impact. We will lose students if we don’t engage.

  Question: How do we build up a community that feels invested in these conversations? These are conversations that can bring us
together as a community. I’ve missed out on important events because
the departments advertise their events to their own departments.
Response: Communications at the university are fragmented and there are larger structural issues at the university that leads to people not knowing about the work of the faculty. There is a lot of red tape around communications at the university.

Question: Whatever you have been starting is working! Our department is beginning to engage with these conversations. You were talking about the diversification of the campus, the other day I spoke with an incoming student whose parent was concerned about Brandeis being “too Jewish.” In the twenty-some years that I’ve been here, the number of Jewish students has decreased from 70% down to 40%. So we are becoming more diverse but we don’t have the image in the public. We also had a holocaust survivor come speak and the majority of the students at that event were Jewish. So even though we are becoming more diverse, we are becoming more segregated it seems.
Response: We have to look at what diversity means. We aren’t that diverse in our departments or in our courses. I want to look at sustainable diversity. We have to be more expansive because at every level of the university we are changing. We have to offer something else in order to address retention.

Question: Can you expand on affinity groups?
Response: We need to have more conversations. How do we talk across “difference?” We need more dialogue between faculty and staff. We need to have larger conversations and have spaces to engage in dialogue, where people can bring up the things that happen to them every semester and not be judged.

Question: There is a rise in anti-asian violence and how do we include this as we move forward. 19-20% of our students are Chinese citizens, not just Asian Americans. So how do we engage with that. In one of my classes we had a great conversation around racism in China.
Response: There are a lot of students that come from an Asian Diaspora and many are racialized on campus. The affinity groups and conversations will be a helpful start. It is a “both... and” situation in which we can talk about both anti-Asian and anti-black sentiment. Our students feel like they have to fix everything but they are young scholars and we have to guide them, they need affinity spaces too. But this is additional work circles back to my earlier point that faculty are burnt out. How can I train faculty if they are on empty? We have to have dialogue and conversations about all of these aspects.

Question: It sounds to me that there is a lot of careful and empathetic listening that needs to happen. Should there be a focus on full faculty? Senior faculty have the power and set the tone. We have the most responsibility because we have disproportionate influence. It’s partly
just culture change. Are full faculty a specific point of leverage for you?

Response: Yes, specifically in training. Everyone is not capable of being a mentor. For many of our students and young faculty, they aren’t asking for professional advice; they are in crisis and are looking for empathy. For many of our senior faculty there has to be a reality check. We also have to examine power. The only way we can have a real shift is if senior, tenured faculty engage and acknowledge the inherent violence in higher education and PhD programs. There is also the issue of the hierarchy. While I have created my own path, it was very difficult and there was an element of shame around me not being a member of the faculty. There are so many ways that people with a PhD can change the world outside of the academy. We have to be more expansive, we can’t just sit here.

Comment: I recently had some conversations with some of our graduate students and we spent hours talking about their worries and their experiences, not even their work. It highlighted the slump from the pandemic. Our conversation here today also highlights for me that we need affinity groups for the faculty.

Response: Mental health is rarely ever considered and the faculty are expected to be perfect but it is okay to check out occasionally. We have to give each other space and grace. Our students have to be able to see us as human.

Question: A few years ago, one of my students of color ended up meeting with my daughter and through their conversation they realized they had this Brandeis connection through me. The student expressed her discontent around how white Brandeis is. I considered reaching out to her but one of my colleagues told me not to. They felt that I would make a mistake.

Response: It can be a Catch-22 - it can seem like it is pandering sometimes and there is an emotional labor involved. It can be exhausting and students can often feel like they don’t know how to respond. But don’t shut down, reaching out might be genuinely helpful for someone.

Comment: When institutions are apathetic and refuse to pay attention, it can be a deep betrayal for students and vulnerable members of the community.

Response: Yes, we have to be empathetic and we have to be human. It doesn’t detract from our authority in the classroom.

Discussion of new Positions: Provost’s Office, Dean’s Office

• The Provost has sent us the job description for our feedback and is eager to work with us on these. Do we have any comments or thoughts?

Comment: It seems to me with both of job descriptions that the Provost wants to do a better job with faculty affairs and supporting research. As much as I’m less about lots and lots of layers, it makes sense to support the provost if she feels these roles will help with that.

Question: Are these new positions?
Response: Not entirely, we’ve had similar roles in the past. The role of Provost at Brandeis has been broadening over the years and Carol has expressed that these roles are the norm for most Provost Offices.

Comment: Coming from a larger institution, it makes sense to me that we’ve been broadening the role of the Provost. Having a specific role that serves faculty is essential.

Comment: I support the position but we just had our survey where we got feedback about the concerns of faculty - should we roll that survey data into the job description.

Comment: I feel like there is a lot missing from the job description, it needs more detail.

Comment: There are some really important things around contract faculty that need a lot of work, such as promotion timelines and communication. In general, the contract faculty have to have their needs recognized. Also there are issues around our teaching evaluation system and the transition to full professor is murky and not adequately handled.

Comment: I wanted to make sure that everyone knows that “contract faculty” refers to different groups - some contract faculty are in the union but others are not. It is not a catch-all label.

Comment: One issue that our contract faculty raised is that there is an awful lot of work around the activity report but then almost nothing comes back. It would be nice to get feedback on this enormous document. We should have parameters and get some kind of review on it.

Response: In essence, I think you’re referring to something like the performance reviews and bringing the university management of faculty into the 21st century. We can politely bring this up as a suggestion, I think.

Response: It’s a system issue. What is the purpose of this giant document? It was built in the 1970s and is outdated. It is a lot of work and it goes nowhere.

Comment: We do the worst job at relations with faculty. It is so ad hoc. I would like to suggest that a small group of people from the Senate work on this job description so we can get feedback back to Carol so that she understands the wide ranging roles of this position.

Comment: In my experience, the main purpose of the report is to check on the publications. Everyone gets the 2% raise regardless of what they do. There is a lot of redundancy at Brandeis.

Comment: There is nothing about the effort or quality of work for the service that the faculty do. There are improvements that can be made there.

Response: I hesitate to seek improvement unless we know the purpose of the document.
Question: I’m assuming this is an internal search?
  Response: The Provost wants it to start as an internal search but if everything falls apart then they will look externally?

Question: Are both positions internal?
  Response: I believe so.

Comment: The way the research position has been handled has been problematic. In the perspective of the humanities, it has not been a helpful position. I think it depends on who is in the role. If this is going to be a robust position, the role has to be clear. There is a lot that has to happen at Brandeis to create a culture that actually supports research.

Comment: There is a certain amount of inequity around who is recognized and visualized as doing research. There is also a lack of clarity around some of the different roles in the university that interact with research grants. Some disciplines and fields don’t feel like they are getting attention.

Comment: My impression is that these roles favor certain faculty and ignore the rest. There is an undercurrent of unacknowledged and perhaps unconscious ranking of which faculty are more important. There is a lot here to look at in terms of equity and justice.

Comment: In Heller, “faculty” includes research scientists who rely on grants and the current language around some of the grants at Brandeis excludes PhD researchers. It is important for this role to understand the unique set up of Heller.

Comment: This is written in a way to service faculty who are on traditional paths but many faculty at Brandeis are not on these traditional pathways.

Comment: The success of this role is dependent on knowing Brandeis. I think this has to be an internal search.

Comment: These two roles really need to be working together.

- Discussion of the larger grant infrastructure in higher education

Discussion of Focus Group data and next steps

Attendance: Carol Osler, Rajesh Sampath, Ilana Szobel, Grace Zimmerman, Sue Lanser, Susan Dibble, Monika Mitra, Gordon Fellman, AK Nandakumar, Elanah Uretsky, Dmitry Kleinbock, Sabine Von Mering, Pu Wang, William Flesch, Joel Cutcher-Gershenfeld

Guests: Aretina Hamilton, Nina Kammerer