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Faculty Regent Report for University Senate

September 17, 2010

This report focuses on my activities as Faculty Regent this week; I will send out an additional report later covering the two Board of Regents meetings from this summer (June 2010 and the two-day retreat at the end of July 2010).

I have just returned from the Governor’s annual Trustee Conference, in conjunction with the meeting of the Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE) at Northern Kentucky University. Today’s trustee/regent sessions focused on the conference theme, “Strengthening Our Capacity to Serve: A Summit on Productivity, Efficiency, and Cost Containment.” Obviously, cost containment is a familiar theme to faculty, not only in this state but also nationwide. Unsurprisingly, this theme was coupled with the usual call to “increase degree productivity” and “reduce remediation” while containing costs. The CPE also announced that productivity and efficiency will remain their focus for the next few years.

I wish I could tell you that the speakers presented the state’s regents and trustees with a magic bullet that would reveal how we are to do all of these things without sacrificing academic quality. Alas, no such solution was presented. Furthermore, we face financial and political realities in the state in which maintaining the current state appropriation is the best outcome for which we can hope.

So for me and for other regents across the state, the question remains: how can we as regents, and faculty as the academic community, get this message out to the political bodies? There are not enough efficiencies to cover the increased costs of educating students, let alone the other aspects of our intellectual lives. The charge given to all of the state governing boards was to work with faculty and administrators to find ways to contain costs while protecting academic quality. To that task, I would add the additional element of protecting our intellectual livelihoods by adequately funding our research, our academic instruction needs, and the things that create an intellectually stimulating academic community. These are not optional; they are necessities for any university. This strikes me as an appropriate role for the board, and I will work with my colleagues to rise to the challenge. The five board members who attended this conference were attentive, engaged, and genuinely want to work together to protect WKU’s academic mission, and I look very forward to working with them towards that end. In sum, it was a productive day, even if answers remain elusive.

I also attended the COSFL meeting in conjunction with the CPE conference, and I am happy to report that the increased faculty presence (COSFL presence, more accurately) is starting to bear
some fruit. Peg Munke (Murray State) and Nancy McKinney (NKU) are now established parties in discussions at the Council, and we believe that faculty concerns statewide can reap benefits from this newly constructed bridge. Kudos to them, and to all the faculty leaders who worked this year through COSFL to keep the legislative interference with academic freedom (House Bill 160, a/k/a the transfer bill) and damage to academic quality minimal. We will remain vigilant on that point, since these ideas could resurface at any point as a misguided attempt to improve degree production (another term that bothers me, and which comes up all too frequently). Finally, congratulations to Molly Kerby of our COSFL delegation, who was re-elected Treasurer of the organization for the coming academic year!

Obviously, these are challenging times for higher education, and for the nation. Still, with solidarity, many things are possible. I look very forward to working with you this academic year, and please feel free to contact me anytime with questions or concerns.

Coming up: Board of Regents Committee meetings and full Board meeting at the end of October.