

*Stress Points and Structural Challenges for the Continued Viability of the University Faculty Senate*

Remarks Delivered at the Luncheon Honoring Past Chairs of the  
Penn State University Faculty Senate

Larry Catá Backer

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It is my great honor to be here with you this afternoon, share a meal and memories and address you respecting an institution with which we are *all* altogether too well acquainted. Today, the stresses that confront the institution of the University Faculty Senate are stronger than they have been in a generation. For many members of our faculty, I am sure, the Senate remains a great model of faculty governance in a large and complex university organization that is itself both in transition and under stress. They are proud to have played a helpful role in its development. Still, for a large enough portion of our faculty to concern some of us, the University Faculty Senate appears increasingly remote. For others, the leadership of the Senate appears excessively docile. For others, the Senate has been reduced to either a technical ministry, more able to accomplish the sort of low level ministerial work suitable for the staff of department heads than to engage in the shaping of the larger policy and programmatic matters of deep concern to faculty. For some of our contract faculty, the University Faculty Senate remains an elitist enterprise, willing to sell out its contract colleagues to preserve its diminishing numbers and status even as the enterprise of education changes all around them. For still others, the Senate has been reduced to a mechanism for providing the appearance of engagement even as it loses the ability to function autonomously.

Whether any of these assessments are correct is less important than that they point to a sense of malaise within the faculty about the institutional effectiveness of the Senate, and its function within the university's governance structures. This malaise lowers morale and might contribute to institutional breakdown—from reduced attendance at Senate meetings to an unwillingness to participate in the work of our committees. More importantly, they also, and perhaps unconsciously, point to a number of stress points in the organization and institutional habits of the Senate that might contribute to the sense that things are not entirely right. Let me take the few minutes left to me to describe those stress points that may present the greatest challenges for the institutional viability of the University Faculty Senate going forward.

First, the Senate has yet to master the art of communication with its constituents. Communications between the Senate leadership and its own members is hard enough, but communication with unit faculty leaders and the faculty remains fundamentally both underdeveloped and underutilized. The web site of the Senate remains a difficult to navigate work-in-progress better geared for the convenience of insiders than to the needs of those who might wish to access from the outside. There is so much of an air of the past about communication that, though one can point to a number of venues through which the Senate “speaks,” many of them are increasingly poorly targeted given the information accessing habits of the Senate's constituents. Many of even these available venues are often underutilized increasing the sense of the remoteness of the Senate leadership from its constituency. The good news here is the substantial improvement in the scope and depth of communication between the board of trustees and the Senate leadership.

Second, the Senate's administrative structure does little to contribute to the autonomy of the elected leadership and indeed creates incentives to shift effective power from annually replaced elected leaders to a long serving bureaucracy whose interests, beyond self preservation, may not be identical to those who they ostensibly serve. Indeed several characteristics of the

administrative function of the Senate now create incentives to shift power to its staff and through them back to the provost's office to which they ultimately report. These include exclusive power over the Senate budget, control of information and institutional memory of the Senate, and a reporting requirement that ultimately connects senate administrator more closely to the administrative center of the university than to elected leaders who enter and leave the scene with rapidity. There is no need for individuals to serve as a Senate memory other than to protect turf and to manage elected officers. Indeed, the failure to make that memory readily available suggests both the consequences of poor communication and the governance effects of regimes in which of control information may become the most effective instrument of influence and managerial control of elected leadership. An inability to contribute to budget discussions effectively makes the Senate leadership captive to budgetary constraints over which they have little control. Participation in the inner councils of the Senate leadership creates a situation where decision making is managed to some extent by a participating non elected member of the Senate, whose inclusion weakens the democratic and representative legitimacy of those councils.

Third, the Senate has failed to shift its focus and emphasis even as the business of university administration has shifted, and shifted in sometimes dramatic ways, all around it. Even if it operates well, its tasks do little to advance functionally effective engagements in those matters that are becoming increasingly important in university administration. The Senate expends a tremendous amount of effort on curriculum, program and student management, some of which tasks it shares with a variety of administrative organizations. Much of this work is ministerial, though important. But that leaves little time or the development of expertise in the broad issues of policy, macro policy, that effectively directs and manages the form and function of the micro policies with which we tend to like to embroil ourselves. We no longer have direct access to the sorts of information vital to the effective participation in consultative and advisory functions, nor, even if we had such access, is our role meaningful when, more often than not, our opinion is called upon after policy has been framed and to be delivered only a short time before implementation. That produces the *form of participation* but robs it of its function. Beyond re-organization—a formidable task for this institution—the Senate can shift its focus to more effectively conform to the new realities of administrative practice. It could, for example, adapt the practices, cultures and behaviors of modern NGOs to its own work—seeking to serve a monitoring and assessment role. This function is closer to the way the faculty work on their own research and puts us in the role of ensuring accountability to power that is otherwise little controlled and accountable only in the broadest terms by our board of trustees and the state government. There are signs of some improvement here, though it is serendipitous and ad hoc—some committees are showing a greater willingness to engage in robust monitoring and accountability. The recent report on Administrative bloat from the University Planning Committee serves as a great example.

Fourth, none of the work of the Senate is made easier by a *senate structure*. As currently constituted, the standing committees, Senate Council, Senate leadership structure along with a number of additionally permanently constituted groups forms an institutional structure that is in many ways administratively incoherent and that does not harmonize with the administrative organization of the university. Conversation becomes harder as even willing administrators find navigating the Senate's committee structures a daunting, and sometimes unrewarding, task. Indeed, the increasing resort to ad hoc committees, to assignments to multiple committees and the like over the last several years suggests how very much out of alignment our structures have become with the realities of governance in the university. There is a silver lining here: some ad hoc committees have produced outstanding work that might have been beyond the abilities of

standing committees. Two noteworthy examples were the Special Board of Trustees Governance Committee and the Senate Self Study Committee, the work of both of which has been influential.

Fifth, the Senate has yet to confront the issue of contract faculty and the future of tenure. Both affect in fundamental ways the organization, character and function of the Senate. While the administration may have the luxury of appearing to adopt a passive approach—reacting to and adjusting behaviors to suit the market, the Senate may not have that luxury since the “market” appears to make discussion of the fundamental relationship between faculty and university of little relevance.

Sixth, there is a sense among some that perhaps the Senate is altogether too much affected by what can be understood as cronyism. It might take one of two forms. The first suggests *entrenchment*—a small group of faculty appears to constantly rotate from one important university and Senate committee appointment to another. That suggests, whether or not true, that people are either rewarded for doing the expected or are chosen for their reliability to apply a certain approach or perspective. The second suggests control from the top—the penchant for making most decisions and managing the Senate’s business by a group of three elected and one appointed senior leader at closed door meetings does little to inspire confidence in the representative character of the organization or in the freedom of its members to engage meaningfully in Senate business.

Seventh, cronyism has corrupting effects. It produces a tendency toward fear of transparency. The case for a need to keep most proceedings confidential has yet to be made—except in the cases where personal privacy or ongoing negotiations with critical outsiders are central to the discussions. Closed-door Senate Council meetings do little to enhance the ability of that body to share power meaningfully with the upper leadership and its unelected executive director. The corrupting effect is enhanced where protections against retaliation for engaging in shared governance is largely weak and ill defined and where even this body has consistently shrunk from insisting on the development of contractual policies by the university that would define the protections against retaliation beyond that afforded by our courts under a generalized but ambiguous post-facto First Amendment based jurisprudence. There is some good news to report here, news that proceeds from the work of the Senate Self Study Committee and the reforms it proposed that were adopted by the Senate last year. But it is too early to tell whether these reforms will have long term effects.

Eighth, even the Senate’s authority over curriculum and its influence in shaping educational programs is being quickly eroded through the transformation of educational policy issues into financial ones. This affects everything from the way in which discussions about experiential learning, the changing form and content of general education, and the de-centering of faculty from student based learning is being shaped. It also suggests that much of this discussion is being driven not from the perspective of academic quality but from the necessity of financial expediency, and driven by the financial side of the academic house. There is little by way of good news here. The best I can do is point to the fact that these efforts include administration selected faculty participation. But this sort of ad hoc participation may itself promote cronyism or reward particular sorts of loyalty that may not advance the institutional interests of the faculty.

All of these stress points have been much in evidence this past summer as the faculty and staff respond to the imposition by the University of its extensive changes to employee health and wellness programs. The history of the development of the policy and then the form of this program last year is a model of targeted engagement controlled by the administration both as to

the amount and timing of information provision and in its choice of the manner of engagement. Bits and pieces of what was to become the plan were introduced over a year, and engagement consisted of the provision of information—controlled by the administration—with requests for comments over a very short time windows and only after policy had been adopted and the plan prepared in essentially final form. Once announced, in the middle of the summer, the structural and cultural constraints of Senate effectively limited the range of response, one that was further constrained in the face of an indication from the administration of little taste for engagement other than with respect to the provision of more information. This is no criticism of the current leadership. It is, though, a clear example of the way in which the current structures and cultures of the Senate and its operations tend to constrain, the ability of the Senate to assert an effective leadership role beyond the mass of small ministerial tasks at which it has become quite proficient.

Despite these challenges and obstacles, the Senate continues to move forward and to do good work, some of it led by the folks in this room. I have every faith in the current leadership and their good faith willingness to confront these issues and to endeavor, to the best of their abilities, to do right by their constituents and to undertake their obligations with honor and fidelity to the institution, that they will continue to preserve some form of faculty shared governance.

Thank you.