TO: University of Oregon Senate
FROM: Assoc. Prof. Ian F. McNeely, Academic Council Interim Chair
RE: Academic Council end-of-year report
DATE: May 20, 2011

The first year of the Academic Council

It’s a shame that the UO lacks a venue where professors can deliberate together about teaching and research, our core academic missions. The Statutory Faculty Assembly theoretically has this duty (which it shares with the University President), but delegated its responsibilities to the UO Senate in May 2010. Nor is this the function of the Senate itself. This is because the Senate also includes staff and students and often deals with non-academic matters—riverfront development and facilities use policy, for example, to name two issues that it took up this year. The Senate is an admirably inclusive institution both in the range of constituencies it represents and in its attention to a wide variety of concerns affecting the university, both academic and non-academic. By the same token, the Senate doesn’t really provide a forum conducive to sustained, thoughtful deliberation on academic questions by the group that is principally responsible for teaching and research: the university’s professors.

The Academic Council was designed in part to redress this problem by focusing the Senate on academic issues when appropriate. In its first year of existence, the Council did play a key supporting role in two important discussions bearing on the university’s academic mission (see below). At the same time, our experience revealed certain limitations inherent in the design of the Council and in its role within UO’s shared governance system.

First, the Academic Council only includes, as voting members, chairs of other campus committees that focus on academics. These are people who by definition already carry significant service responsibilities. Understandably, many of them may be reluctant or unable to take on much additional committee work. Chairs may of course appoint designees to serve on the Council in their stead, but overreliance on this practice would undercut the group’s legitimacy by filling it with unelected appointees. That said, the one member this year who did act as a designee, Prof. Hal Sadofsky, did real service to the Council by managing the production of its report on grade culture.

Second, while the Academic Council is broadly representative of the major faculty-led campus committees with an academic brief, its members may not themselves be representative of the faculty at large. Embarrassingly, all eleven Academic Council members this year were white men—an unavoidable consequence of the fact that all the posts from which the Council’s membership is drawn happen to be occupied by white men. (Our one designee came from the one committee with a female chair; she herself
was unable to serve.) Such a small and unrepresentative group cannot credibly deliberate on the broader faculty’s behalf.

Third, it is not clear what role, if any, the Provost and the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs want to play on the Academic Council. Both are *ex officio* non-voting members but neither participated in any of the discussions the Council had this year. If one function of the Council is to bring faculty and administrators together to discuss general academic matters that transcend individual committees, then it cannot be said that to have served that function this year.

Finally, the Academic Council merely advises the Senate, which, again, has a very big agenda not confined to academic issues and a very inclusive membership not confined to professors. The Council can issue reports and explain them to the Senate—as it did on two occasions this year—but there is always a danger that these reports will be overlooked amidst all the other business the Senate has to attend to.

Future Senates may want to consider making adjustments in the composition and role of the Academic Council (but only the Statutory Faculty Assembly, if ever reconvened, would be able to adopt more consequential changes). The Senate may also want to ask whether the dearth of women and minorities this year is indicative of a deeper problem. Perhaps there is a reason they are disinclined to serve as chairs of the standing committees represented on the Council, or are somehow discouraged from doing so.

**Activities of the Academic Council**

The Academic Council was first convened by the UO Senate President in December 2010 and soon took up two important matters bearing on UO’s academic mission.

1. **The New Partnership**

   In its first act, the Council studied the New Partnership proposed by President Lariviere in May 2010 to reorganize the University and change its relationship to the State. The result of this study, an eleven-page analysis dated January 24, 2011, recommended that the UO Senate endorse the New Partnership. The Council’s interim chair presented this report and answered questions about it at the February 9 UO Senate meeting. He also testified on behalf of the Council at two committee meetings of the Oregon State Legislature in March and April. The Senate Executive Committee ultimately proposed a resolution to endorse the New Partnership (US 10/11-10) but withdrew it in April amidst concerns that the Senate had not had sufficient opportunity to digest the New Partnership’s specifics.

2. **Grade culture**

   The Council also analyzed three UO Senate motions put forward by the Undergraduate Council to improve grade culture at the University (US 10/11-11abc). Since the
Academic Council interim chair is also the Undergraduate Council chair, he recused himself at the suggestion of the Senate Executive Committee. At that point, Prof. Sadofsky graciously volunteered to produce the Academic Council’s report on the grade culture motions. The report, dated April 5, endorsed all three motions and offered a friendly amendment to 11b. At its March 9 and April 13 meetings, the Senate duly debated the motions, although it cannot be said for certain whether most Senate members had read the Academic Council report before the latter meeting. In any event, the Senate approved 11a but rejected 11b (as amended by the Academic Council) and 11c.

Rules and procedures

The Academic Council does not yet have any internal rules and procedures because there was no need to adopt any for the purpose of writing these reports. In both cases, collegial deliberation over email sufficed to generate consensus on their findings and recommendations.