Minutes of the February 16, 2021 faculty meeting

The meeting was called to order at 3:00pm on Zoom by Dean Adrian Randolph.

I. The minutes of the Faculty Meeting of October 13, 2020 were approved.

II. Proposal for a Departmental Major in Data Science

Assistant Dean for Curriculum and Assessment Laura Panko explained that in the last few years the Department of Statistics has offered a minor in Data Science, student demand for which has been enormous. Panko referenced an analysis of peer institutions which confirmed that the inclusion of a Data Science major would be consistent with offerings from other research universities.

The proposed major includes foundational courses in statistics, mathematics and computer science and would incorporate existing courses while requiring the development of specialized advanced courses to flesh out the curriculum. Panko noted that since the major would be open to students outside Weinberg College, and the Department of Statistics included an ethics course requirement that for students in the College could also fulfill one of the Ethics and Values distribution requirements for a Weinberg College degree. The intended launch date for the major would be fall 2022.

Assistant Professor of Instruction Michael Maltenfort asked if there was a plan to increase enrollment caps in the Statistics 301 sequence, noting the already high demand. Professor Jiping Wang, Chair of Statistics, responded that two additional Assistant Professors are to be hired this year to increase capacity in the sequence.

Professor Elisabeth Elliott inquired as to how many ethics courses would be required in the major. Wang confirmed one ethics course would be required. Panko responded that many courses fulfill the Weinberg ethics and values requirement, so students will have plenty of options in creating their course plans. Randolph commended Statistics for including an ethics requirement in their curriculum proposal, while noting that the College should be mindful of creating majors with too many required courses.

Associate Professor Ursula Porod asked which Mathematics courses would be included in the major. Wang responded with MATH 220-1, MATH 220-2, MATH 230-1, and MATH 240. Wang also stated that Statistics is proposing a new course that will include study of multi-variable integral calculus, STAT 228.
Professor Suzan van der Lee recalled when there was discussion about data science as an interdisciplinary program, akin to environmental science, and wondered what factors were weighed in the decision to propose a departmental major. Randolph noted that Statistics has taken the lead on developing the proposed major and eventually an applied data sciences program might be possible, given the broad scope of data sciences across disciplines.

III. Undergraduate Academic Affairs and Advising Update

Associate Dean for Undergraduate Affairs Mary Finn called the faculty’s attention to the High School Pandemic College Readiness handout distributed with the meeting materials. Finn acknowledged that students will be coming into university with vastly different pandemic experiences. Finn and her colleagues in the Office of Undergraduate Students and Advising brainstormed some mitigation tactics for underprepared students.

Finn spoke about the Arch Scholars program, started in 2008, that is tailored to low-income, first generation students focused on academics and community building. Under the rubric of Arch Scholars she also highlighted the Bridge Program with pre-matriculation programs in biology, chemistry, economics, and the humanities. Finn reported that the hope is to expand enrollment in these programs by 50% for the upcoming academic year. With increased enrollment comes a need for more instructors, and interested individuals were asked to contact Finn or Assistant Dean for First-Year Students, Lane Fenrich. Finn then spotlighted a task force that is interpreting the inclusive teaching practices from Central Administration for Weinberg College.

Finn’s attention turned to survey results from students who took remote courses in the fall. She recommended remote instructors read the report and noted that she along with Associate Dean of Facilities and Planning Joel Trammell and Senior Director of Information Technology Michael Satut would be coordinating programming for spring in-person instructors soon.

Randolph added that there are ongoing discussions related to commencement and convocation, given social distancing and space restrictions by the state of Illinois and that many particulars are in flux and dependent on vaccination numbers.

Professor Leslie Harris asked how many students are currently enrolled in summer programs, to get a sense of what an increase might look like. She wondered about the possibility of graduate students being instructors for the Arch Scholars program. Finn affirmed that graduate students are utilized for instruction in these programs and stated that the enrollment is around 200 students.
Professor Eric Zaslow asked if Finn had any insights related to the mentorship component of these programs, given the remote environment. Finn responded that limited in-person meetings have been occurring and mentorship is being maintained remotely when in-person is not possible. Randolph added that mentorship is a high priority for the college.

IV. Faculty Advancement and Reporting in the Pandemic

Randolph acknowledged that the pandemic has made faculty activity reporting an increased challenge and its impact has been varied across the faculty. He noted that faculty administrators that review faculty activity have been instructed to take the pandemic into account when making recommendations. He also noted that this year, academic year 2020 activity reports will be reviewed. Randolph stated that flexibility in pandemic-year activity reporting would be maintained, but that the information collected as part of annual activity reporting was critical in maintaining equity.

Randolph then addressed promotion and tenure processes and assured the faculty that the committees are instructed to examine context and circumstance in these deliberations. He stated that it would be ideal for equity solutions to be university-wide, rather than college-level, though Randolph presented some solutions that have been discussed amongst himself and the Associate Deans of Weinberg College. For promotion cases—inherently not beholden to a timeline—Randolph expressed that targeting pandemic-related research recovery has been a priority for the College. Randolph stated that his focus for teaching-track promotions was mainly in raising salaries.

Associate Professor Katharine Breen appreciated the individualized approach to faculty advancement but posited that absent the systematic capturing of information—the scope and breadth of the most impacted populations could be lost. Randolph acknowledged this concern and relayed that the question in Faculty Folio where individuals can report pandemic-related impacts is meant to systematically record data for the purpose Breen described, while recognizing the adverse impacts of making it a required field.

Assistant Professor Kimberly Suiseeya expressed hesitation that tenure-clock extensions, and time policies broadly, are enough to right the pandemic-imposed inequities faced by women and other underrepresented minority groups. Randolph welcomed solutions beyond time-contingent policies to address inequities and looked to the Organization for Women Faculty to partner with the University in creating policy to this end.

Professor Leslie Harris expressed that there have been “covid advantages,” not just impediments, and faculty members’ disparate experiences with COVID-19-19 should
be weighed in faculty advancement proceedings. She suggested that an off-cycle capture of COVID-19 impacts, facilitated by the Dean’s Office, could be meaningful in building trust and assuring individuals that they will not be penalized for raising pandemic-related concerns. Finally, Harris addressed that an individuals’ evaluation largely rests on their chair’s vision of equity and this could be cause for concern. Randolph recognized the challenges in administratively analyzing and advising committees to account for “covid advantage” and committed to the language of ‘special circumstances’ so as not to impart a negative or positive connotation to the field in Faculty Folio.

Professor Jacqueline Stevens expressed a lack of trust in the processes of evaluating faculty work and suggested that greater salary transparency could mitigate trust concerns. Stevens also stated that, given the University’s financial surplus, the restoration of withheld retirement contributions could be meaningful in addressing equity concerns. Randolph affirmed that he is vigilant in advocating for increased compensation for faculty and staff.

Professor Karen Alter distinguished faculty activity reporting from tenure processes and put forth the benefits of requiring COVID-19 impact reporting for tenure cases so the committee is aware of whether an individual has been COVID-19 advantaged or disadvantaged. Randolph acknowledged this as a possibility while noting the challenges this could pose. He also commented that committees are representative by design, and individuals on those committees will have lived through this unique time and will weigh cases with proper consideration.

V. Dean’s Updates

Randolph updated the group on the University’s COVID-19 climate, citing low positivity rates. He encouraged faculty to comply with requests from building monitors. Randolph also stated that Northwestern’s in-person presence in the fall will crystallize as vaccination rates and local guidelines become clearer leading up to the start of term.

Randolph noted that the College will not be requesting Teaching Award nominations for this year, rather the previous years teaching will be recognized.

There being no further updates, Randolph thanked the faculty in attendance and the meeting was adjourned at 4:07 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Quinn Leach, Weinberg College Program Assistant.