Minutes of the October 13, 2020 faculty meeting

The meeting was called to order at 4:00pm on Zoom by Dean Adrian Randolph.

I. Discussion with President Schapiro and Provost Hagerty

President Morton Schapiro announced that Northwestern’s dining halls, facilities, and operations will be reopened in January 2021. President Schapiro stated that this announcement would be promulgated sometime in the following week. He noted that a survey went out to students regarding these changes and did not reveal significant reasons why this should not go forward.

Provost Kathleen Hagerty affirmed President Schapiro’s desire to have students returned and welcomed feedback from faculty regarding this and other challenges they experienced in the pandemic. She reported that the Chief Medical Officer of Northwestern Memorial Hospital had a meeting with the deans regarding safety and security.

Professor Susan Manning asked Provost Hagerty about instructional modality for winter quarter. Provost Hagerty answered that, due to reduced capacity caused by social distancing, no one will be required to provide in-person instruction, though hybrid options would be encouraged if faculty are interested in the possibility. Dean Randolph added that everyone should be prepared to teach online in the winter.

Assistant Professor of Instruction Michael Maltenfort asked why in-person instruction was being promoted given the poor direction of national COVID case numbers. Provost Hagerty responded that the experience of going through the fall semester accommodating the pandemic has prepared Northwestern to adequately conduct in-person instruction in the winter. The positivity rate at Northwestern is 0.1%, which informs central administration’s optimism. The student compliance rate is also high.

Professor Omar Farha asked if Northwestern is getting to a point where labs can be reopened safely. Dean Randolph said one the hurdles in reopening labs is building trust with Teaching Assistants. Associate Dean Mary Finn added that it is difficult to plan for labs when it is unknown what the in-person student population will be in the winter and noted the circular nature of these problems. Provost Hagerty noted that when guidelines are followed, massive COVID upticks have not followed so she is cautiously optimistic that labs can be reopened.
Professor Eric Zaslow asked about enforcement of COVID-related policies, expressing concern if the task of enforcement falls onto faculty. Provost Hagerty expressed that, in consultation with peer institutions, compliance has not been a major issue. Dean Randolph expressed sympathy for the concern and stated guidelines for managing student opposition to protocol are to follow. Provost Hagerty then left the meeting.

Associate Professor Susan Pearson inquired on a status update on the letter and requests from the Organization of Women Faculty report. Dean Randolph reported that Provost Hagerty is organizing a meeting with the deans to discuss the report. He stated that there are differential impacts, so policy has to be targeted and specific to individuals’ circumstances. Dean Randolph returned to this topic in the meeting’s final minutes and mentioned that a website is forthcoming.

Assistant Professor Megan Geigner asked for an update on the financial health of the institution. President Schapiro replied that the financial health is better than initially expected in the summer. Discussions have begun to return retirement matches in the new year. Dean Randolph emphasized the importance of reinstating merit increases and investment in existing faculty. President Schapiro also confirmed that the endowment has increased back to pre-pandemic levels.

Associate Professor Nitasha Sharma issued a statement in the chat in response to Provost Hagerty’s quotation in the New York Times article that articulated pandemic-related difficulties of tenure-line women academics. Dean Randolph assured that policies will be released soon, considering the issues raised in the Times articles. He also encouraged anyone who is experiencing difficulties to bring them to their chair for discussion and amelioration. Dean Randolph also spoke to structuring policies with long-term impacts.

Professor Vicky Kalogera asked about the potential shrinking of PhD and graduate programs in the upcoming recruitment cycle. President Schapiro noted that some cohorts will be smaller next year but there are no plans to stop enrolment this academic year. Dean Randolph then expressed that the main goal of the college is educational continuity.

Professor Carole LaBonne noted that aforementioned economic impacts have been particularly damaging in the sciences, saying that research groups needed to spend financial resources paying salaries and tuition for personnel who were unable to work or who could work only limited hours, leading to no productivity returns on that grant money and significant damage to research programs. She said this would negatively impact the renewal of grants and the health of research programs going forward. This resulted in a larger discussion of adverse impact on the research of graduate students. Dean Randolph indicated that those might be good programs for lesser enrolment so funding could be dedicated to existing students who experienced research barriers. President Schapiro departed the chat after this question.
Assistant Professor of Instruction Veronica Berns asked about faculty illness and resulting complications. Dean Randolph noted that this is essential to think about and discussed various ideas (such as a faculty buddy system) that have been discussed and not implemented. He indicated he would work with Associate Dean Mary Finn to develop further guidance. Dean Randolph further noted that in-person courses could be reverted to remote courses if necessary.

II. The minutes of the Faculty Meeting of May 26, 2020 were approved unanimously.

III. Undergraduate Teaching and Advising: Update on fall and Preparing for winter

Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs Mary Finn gave an overview of the successes and challenges of spring and summer 2020 instruction. Successes included the maintenance of the advising structure, the college seminar program, experienced faculty members knew how to adapt to the remote environment by spring, students are beginning to integrate into university life, summer research went forward, and students are making progress to degree. Some challenges were related to student follow-up, connecting to students in different time zones, connectivity issues and as they relate to grading disputes, compressed course timings have created significant overlap issues, and academic integrity cases spiked in the spring.

Associate Dean Finn reminded the faculty to use the midterm advisory system to report students who were habitually absent or experienced difficulties and she reminded faculty of the registration for the upcoming practicum for winter teaching,

Associate Dean Finn reminded the faculty that winter quarter will begin a week late and Reading Week is canceled though faculty can feel free to use the last week of the term creatively. Instructors were asked to remember that grades count for fall quarter.

IV. Dean’s Updates

There being no further updates, Dean Randolph thanked the faculty in attendance and the meeting was adjourned at 5:03 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Quinn Leach, Weinberg College Program Assistant.