An Evaluation of Faculty Senate

Spring 2008

Introduction

Periodically, the Senate Executive Committee (SEC) conducts a formal survey of faculty perceptions of the performance and effectiveness of Faculty Senate. These evaluations provide a "reality check" and a basis for considering changes in direction.

In Spring 2008, over 200 of 636 faculty responded to a 32-item survey (see Appendix A). This represented a response rate of approximately 32%. All seven undergraduate colleges were represented, plus university libraries. Over 50% of the respondents were from the College of Arts & Sciences; nearly 20% were from the College of Education and Human Development (see Figure 1).
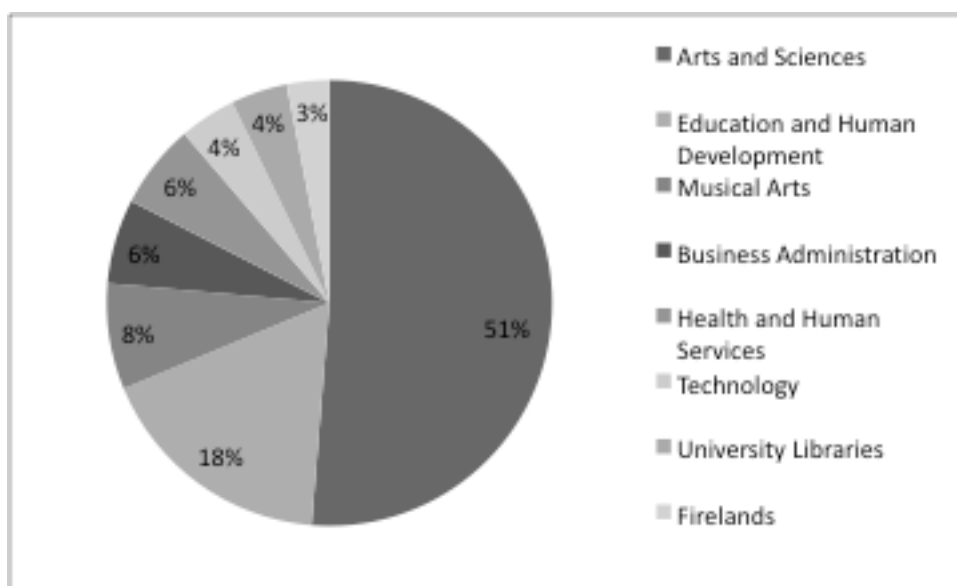

Figure 1. Participation in the Senate Evaluation survey, Spring 2008, by college.

Nearly half of the respondents (47%) were current or former members of Faculty Senate (see Figure 2). This is a higher proportion than in the population of the faculty as a whole.
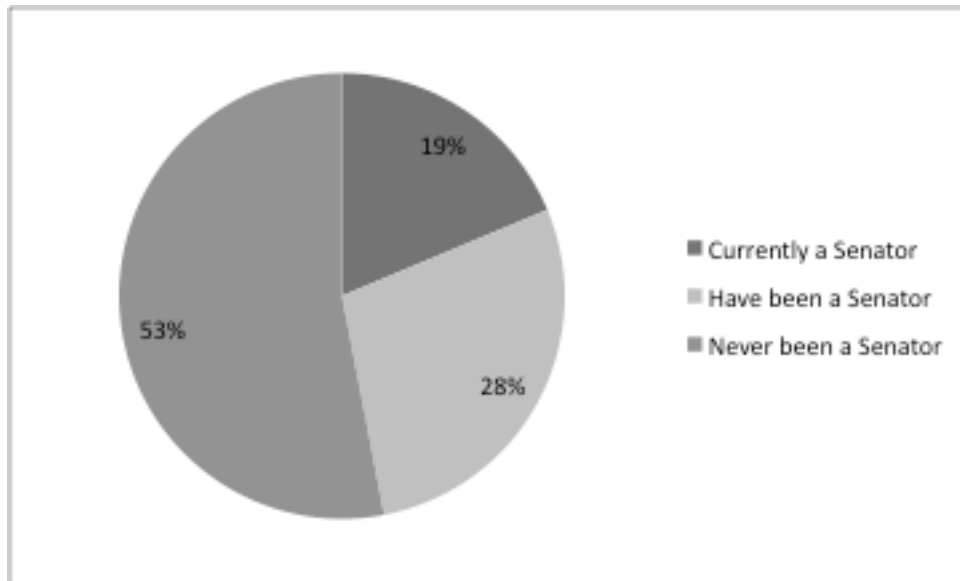

Figure 2. Survey respondents by Senate participation.

This report summarizes the feedback from faculty along 5 major themes:

- Evaluation of the Senate as a Whole;
- Evaluation of the Committees of the Senate;
- Evaluation of Information Sharing;
- Evaluation of the Structure of the Senate; and
- Issues and Priorities

Within these themes, the results of both "selected-response"/"forced-option" (e.g., multiple-choice) items and "constructed response"/"open-ended" (e.g., short answer/essay) items were analyzed and are presented below. (Note: Compilations of responses are available in the Senate Office.)

Note: Because the respondents represented two nearly equal pools of those faculty with and without Senate experience (and those with Senate experience were almost evenly split into those with past experience and those currently serving), it seemed worthwhile to examine item responses in light of Senate experience. A follow-up analysis was done and is described later in this report.

I.   **Evaluation of the Senate as a Whole (Questions 1-10, 22-24)**

Although the Senate is regarded as "very important" to shared governance (38%) (question 3), it's effectiveness is somewhat in doubt (37% chose "neutral" and 29% chose "ineffective", per question #7). The effectiveness can be further understood through analysis of responses to elements of question #24, which were also generally "neutral". Perhaps this reflects the fact that >50% of respondents have never been members of Senate. (Faculty reported using a variety of sources to keep informed about Senate activities, with Senate minutes cited most frequently.)

The following are common themes submitted in response to question #22: **What do you see as the *most positive aspects* of the current Faculty Senate?**

- Voice of the faculty on university issues
- Healthy debate on issues
- Communicate with administration
- Leaders of Senate
- Keeping faculty informed
- Regular opportunities to work with upper administration (shared governance)

The following are common themes submitted in response to question #23: **What do you see as the *least positive aspects* of the current Faculty Senate?**

- No real authority in decision-making; advisory function
- Discussion instead of action
- Decisions not fully informed (not enough time to discuss)
- Domination of discussions by a few senators
- Not all faculty are represented
- Lack of communication with entire campus

The following are common themes submitted in response to question #2: **Ideally, what other functions should be assigned to Faculty Senate?**

- Serve as faculty voice
- Advocates, bargainers, negotiators, protectors, mediators, advisors, ombudsman.
- Collaborate with student affairs division to create seamless learning experience for students.
- Formal advisory role to the VPAA
- Tasks to complete: 1. Wage increases for faculty, 2. Provisions for stopping the tenure clock, 3. Campus-wide standards for merit, promotion, and tenure, 4. Facilitate strategic planning, 5. Evaluate the administration.

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II.   Evaluation of the Committees of the Senate (Question 11)

The eight sub-items of question #11 addressed the effectiveness of the Senate Standing Committees. Generally, respondents were "neutral" about the effectiveness of these committees (and slightly more positive than toward the Senate as a whole). The Committee on Committees received a generally "effective" response (at 42%, per question #11C).

III.   Evaluation of Information Sharing (Questions 12-14)

Generally, respondents felt well informed about the activities of Senate (45%, per question #12), although over 25% declared that they are not well informed. Since nearly half of the respondents were current or former members of Senate, the awareness of senate activities by the faculty overall is in doubt.

IV.   Evaluation of the Structure of the Senate (Questions 15-21, 26-28)

The numbers of Senators and their mode of selection were addressed in questions #15 through #21. The numbers of senators, per college, was generally perceived as adequate, and allocation of seats according to college size was supported. Election of senators by department was supported, although that may be more complicated in smaller colleges.

A minority (12%) of respondents advocated including both classified staff representatives and administrative staff representatives as voting members of the Senate (question #26). They also recommended that representation be "two to three each" (question #27).

Regarding inclusion of non-tenure track faculty (NTTF) as voting members of the Senate (question #28), respondents were divided, with 43.5% in support and 56.5% in opposition.

V.   Issues and Priorities (Questions 25, 29, 30, 4)

A variety of approaches were used to understand respondents' views about near-term and longer-term issues and priorities. In addition to selected-response items that polled a number of known issues, open-ended (constructed-response) questions provided respondents with opportunities to comment on a range of perceptions and suggestions.

- **very important** - faculty salaries; workload; enrollment, recruiting, advising, academic attractiveness of BGSU; relations between faculty and administration; review of administrative offices
- **very unimportant** – athletics (programs, functions, budgets)

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Respondents to the open-ended questions also noted the following as important issues (in no particular order):

- Administrative bloat, administrative decisions, communication with administration
- Budget
- Buildings
- Communication issues (more written information)
- Energy conservation
- Enrollment caps
- Maternity leave policy, domestic partnership benefit
- Morale/climate at BGSU
- Non-tenure track faculty
- Salary and workload issues
- Tenure and merit review process
- Term limits for senators
- Unionization

Question #30 asked respondents to recommend Senate priorities for the next 10 years (in no particular order):

- Administrative issues (elimination of administrators; evaluation of administrators)
- Enrollment issues (caps; admission standards; quality of students; teaching effectiveness; articulation agreements; student/faculty safety; increase number of international students; on-line offering of courses)
- Faculty benefits (domestic partnership; stopping the tenure clock; sensible merit pay)
- Faculty Senate (clarify language of the Charter; true shared governance; better communication with administration)
- Faculty retention issues (salary; facilities; research benefits; faculty load; T&P issues; faculty morale)
- Other ideas (merger between BGSU/UT; faculty union; salary equity across race/ethnicity; repairing facilities & capital improvements)

Questions #3 and #4 asked respondents about the importance of Faculty Senate to shared governance and whether a faculty union might be as or more effective in representing faculty interests:

- 70% of respondents felt that the Faculty Senate is important or very important to shared governance.
- 58% of respondents felt that a faculty union would be as or more effective in representing faculty interests.

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A Finer Cut

As noted earlier, the respondents represented two nearly equal pools of those faculty *with* and those *without* senate experience. And those *with* senate experience were almost evenly split into those with *past experience* and those *currently serving* (see Figure 2). Consequently, it seemed worthwhile (and manageable) to examine item responses in light of senate experience. A follow-up analysis was done to see the effects of these conditions on response patterns.

On nearly every item, the 53% of faculty respondents *without* senate experience chose the "neutral" response. In contrast, those with past or current senate experience were less neutral in their responses. Former senators (about 28% of respondents) tended to be more negative in their responses; those currently serving (about 19% of respondents) were more positive. The overall effect, of course, was that the mean response to most items became "neutral".

The following paragraphs describe those issues on which the views of those with senate experience were clearly not neutral:

Regarding the importance of Faculty Senate to Shared Governance (question 3), responses among those with senate experience were somewhat bi-modal (with 20-30% indicating Very Unimportant or Unimportant), whereas 60-80% indicated Important to Very Important (and non-senators generally concurring).

Regarding the overall effectiveness of Faculty Senate (question 7) and the influence of senate on major policy decisions (question 8), past senators were decidedly negative, whereas current senators were generally neutral.

Regarding the effectiveness of Senate Standing Committees (question 11), the "inside baseball" impressions of current or past senators sometimes revealed important differences. For example, the Senate Executive Committee (SEC) was perceived as generally effective, as was the Amendments and Bylaws Committee (ABC), and the Committee on Committees (ComCom). Currently serving senators were more favorably impressed than past senators by the Committee on Academic Affairs (CAA) and by the Faculty Welfare Committee (FWC).

Regarding how well informed respondents claimed to be about senate activities (question 12), not surprisingly 85% of current senators claimed to be informed or well informed. Past senators claimed to be nearly as well informed, although nearly 30% claimed to be less well informed. In this regard, the minutes of Senate, SEC, and other meetings were more heavily used by past senators (70%) and nearly as heavily used by those without senate experience (65%). But nearly 15% of those without senate experience claimed that they don't learn about senate activities (but nonetheless, responded to the survey).

On the effectiveness of senate regarding selected items of formal business (question 24), most respondents were neutral, with two exceptions. Current senators felt that senate actions pertaining to non-tenure track faculty (NTTF) and open forums were more effective than neutral.

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Regarding issues for future senate consideration (question 25), most topics were considered important or very important by all respondents (with the exception of "ethics policy and ethics officer" and "sanctions policy", for which the responses were largely neutral). However, *current* senators tended to rate some issues as more important for future consideration: "administrative acceptance of FPCC decisions"; "athletics (programs, functions, budgets)"; "conservation of energy"; "ethics policy and ethics officer"; "financial exigency and academic programs"; "flow of information from committees to faculty"; "FMS"; "maintenance of buildings"; "review of administrative offices"; and "sanctions policy".

Regarding representation on senate by Non-Tenure Track Faculty (NTTF) (question 28 in yes-no format), over 50% of *current* senators felt that NTTF should be represented. Conversely, over 60% of past senators felt they should not (as did nearly 60% of those who had never served on senate).

Conclusions

This survey of faculty perceptions about the performance and effectiveness of Faculty Senate has generated data that should be useful for the Senate Executive Committee and for the Senate as a whole. Although many of the ratings on items were "neutral", the analysis based on senate participation and the observations expressed by respondents clarified the meanings of those ratings. Few were contradictory.

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