

Laurence S. Creider

Two years with a tee-ball bat

The librarian as faculty senate chair

Spending two years as a chair of a university faculty senate was not something I had ever considered, let alone planned for, in my career as an academic librarian.¹ Still, I was not having a dream or nightmare, and some of my experiences might be helpful to other librarians involved or thinking about getting involved in university shared governance.

After 16 years as a cataloger and later department head at a large research university where librarians did not have faculty status, I found myself on the tenure-track at a land-grant university in the Southwest. When I looked at my career as a whole, I felt that I needed university service, so I agreed to run for the library seat on the faculty senate. What I found was a fascinating, albeit quirky, body that had a defined role in the governance of the university.

During my first year on the Senate, I served on a committee that reviewed the first combined policy manual for the university. I volunteered for committees with tasks like developing a conflict of interest policy and a post-tenure review policy. I learned an immense amount about my colleagues in the other colleges and community college campuses and developed respect for many of them. Unfortunately, I also discovered that I have an ability to work well on committees, to interpret policy, and to work for consensus. In my fourth year on the Senate, I was elected chair to succeed a very well-liked and excellent chair who decided not to run for a second term.

The fun started even before my term did. At the last Senate meeting before I took office, I was handed the official Senate gavel, a

wooden T-Ball bat! Over the next two years I learned to appreciate its appropriateness as a reminder that order could be hard to achieve and that university politics shares much in common with playground disputes. During the summer, I began to be introduced to various administrators with whom I would be dealing, and I discovered that I had become a member of more committees than I thought existed. Since my term started the day after the end of the spring semester, I had the summer to participate in most of the committees and get a feel for their roles and functioning. Rather than recounting details of specific battles fought and won or lost, I think those who might find themselves in my position would be better served by some more general reflections.

As a librarian you come from a different perspective than most teaching faculty, a fact that has its advantages and disadvantages. You know better than almost anyone else how to dig out information about policies, procedures, and how the system works (and doesn't), and we all know that information is power. Your service orientation gives you the ability to act impartially and work for the good of the university, not just the good of you and your library. Any lack of teaching experience can be offset by your knowledge of how faculty work fits into the broader picture of student success and the university's mission. You are probably more equipped to handle diverse needs and conflicting perspec-

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tives than someone who has spent his or her career within the confines of one discipline. My background as a librarian, and specifically as a cataloger involved in developing bibliographic standards for rare materials, was invaluable in helping me to suggest policy improvements and in helping to shape and get approved a substantial revision of the university promotion and tenure policy.

Before you get started

- **Ask yourself what you want to accomplish in your term.** There are definite limits on how much you can get done, and I would recommend one major and a few minor goals. Your goals have to fit in with those of others, such as new academic programs, new administrative priorities, and campus politics. For example, my predecessor and I had to develop a post-tenure review policy because an administrator decided that a decision made eight years before was invalid. The result was a committee and considerable legislative time and energy that could have been devoted to something else.

- **Read your governing document(s) very carefully.** For example, I was all set to approve the schedule for the first year's senate meetings when I realized that our Committee on Committees has that responsibility. Issues will come up in the course of debate (Can the Senate legislate on a given matter or can it express its opinion in a resolution?) that will depend on your knowledge of the senate constitution and bylaws. This knowledge will also be very useful when you talk to faculty and administrators about what the senate can or cannot do and counseling them on topics, such as the procedure to get a new degree approved. The vice chair and I spent a lot of time taking decisions by university councils and turning them into legislation that would accomplish what was intended.

- **Make yourself a calendar of upcoming deadlines,** such as when your successor needs to be nominated and elected, when reports are due, and when you need to call for nominees to the various boards. I let deadlines slip for electing members of our

appeals boards and the budget committee, and it took the better part of a year to unsnarl the ensuing tangles.

- **Set aside filing space, lots of filing space.** The committees you are on will generate considerable paper and reports, and you will occasionally need access to these to answer questions. You will also need copies of reports issued by higher education bodies on issues, such as student retention, tenure, academic freedom, so that you can act as a faculty voice in debates on administrative and faculty initiatives and understand their larger context. Your information skills will help you find additional information on topics. Of course, if you prefer to keep digital copies, you will need fewer file folders and a thumb drive.

When it comes to meetings

- **Learn to manage debate.** While the faculty senate chair sits on faculty and administrative committees, the position is fundamentally that of the chair of a legislative body. No matter how gifted the senators are, ultimately you are herding cats who may dash off in several directions with no advance notice. Our faculty senate generally has the final chance to amend legislation before it goes to the president and regents, and the committee markup and floor discussion are vital to making fair and effective policy.

- **Learn as much as you can about parliamentary procedure.** Since senates are thankfully free of party discipline, you have neither rewards nor discipline to encourage cooperation. Therefore, your rhetorical skills are crucial to making good legislation. The persuasive abilities of senators will both help and hinder the work of the senate. You will have a few members who hog the stage or who cannot compromise on a point. By giving them some time, eventually the larger group will support your moves to work around them without stifling them. One can (re)gain control of a discussion that has degenerated into a dialogue by insisting that remarks be addressed to the chair, or by asking for specific amendments, the bill

should include this or not say this, rather than issuing vague statements. Use the phrase "You are out of order" as seldom as possible. You do not want to be perceived as being arbitrary or stirring opposition.

Try to avoid emergency legislation.

During my first summer, I had two lengthy conversations with our president, who was seriously annoyed by a piece of emergency legislation (bills that did not go through the normal committee process) that removed the graduate dean from the promotion and tenure process. That fall I stated that emergency legislation would not be considered at the senate's last meeting regardless of whether it was from the administration or from faculty. The result was better legislative activity concerning several bills because the issues involved were more adequately discussed.

Much the same can be said of resolutions. Some are quite simple statements of sympathy or congratulations, pose no problems, and may bypass the committee process. Some may refer to contemporary political issues outside the university, and how you handle them depends on the traditions of your campus and your preferences.

Outside the senate and inside the university

Don't go looking for confrontations with your administration; plenty will develop on their own (see preceding section). If you want the senate and yourself to be play a role in shared governance, you must avoid creating the impression that you are most concerned with protecting the privileges of tenured faculty rather than the welfare of the university as a whole.

Do work for behind-the-scenes solutions when possible. If you provide administrators with a graceful way out of an unwise decision, a smart administrator will take it.

Don't assume that administrators lie awake at night thinking about how they can make life more difficult for you or how to undermine shared governance. You are not the center of their world or their

concerns, just as they are not the center of your world. They frequently want to get things done quickly (administrators generally don't stay in one position as long as faculty members) and sometimes view faculty as roadblocks. Don't take this personally. Such tensions have existed for as long as there have been faculty and administrators. A creative president will push boundaries and may need to be reminded of them or queried about them. Your senators will provide all the suspicion required, and they will have access to information that you do not. Remind the administrators about shared governance when necessary, make positive suggestions, and use any appeals process available when required.

The real secret

Ultimately, your only power comes from the respect you are given for your integrity, fairness, commitment to the university's welfare, and knowledge of governance processes. For that reason

Try to keep your disagreements as much as possible to policy and principles. As long as you have the moral high ground, you have an arguing point against the most arbitrary administration and a basis for discussion with reasonable ones. Do not allow others to take advantage of you or bully you because of your professional values of service and respect for different viewpoints.

Remember that the matters you deal with are rarely questions of absolute right or wrong. If you wait for a perfect solution, you will get little done. Most of the time the best decision is one that gives stakeholders something and nobody everything. This means accepting some things that you find distasteful. Keep in mind that very few people die because of the decisions of a faculty senate.

Last things

If there is an association of faculty senate presidents or chairs for your region, state, or university system, participate in it. In the New
(continues on page 505)

(“Reviews” continues from page 497)

There is excellent information available in abundance at the Kiplinger’s Personal Finance Web site. The articles are well-written and readable, the information is current, and the site is constantly updated. However,

the blinking ads, polls, quizzes, and links to merchandise for purchase are major distractions and could cause potential users to give up before they satisfy their information needs. *Maureen James Barnes, University of Arkansas-Little Rock, mejames@ualr.edu* 