Senate Response to Memo of Expectation [DRAFT]

On December 5, 2017, Vice Provost Wolff introduced a copy of a draft memo entitled "Expectations for Teaching and Library Faculty" to the EOU Faculty Senate. The memo, addressed to "Deans of the Colleges" from Provost Witte, was dated November 15, 2017. The draft document is a highly modified version of memo that was historically issued by the Division of Distance Education to adjunct and online faculty working off campus and outside the bargaining unit. Only in July 2016 was that DDE memo issued more widely to College of Arts and Sciences faculty by Interim Dean Braker. It does not appear ever to have been reviewed by shared governance bodies responsible for developing and reviewing academic policy.

The same day that the July 2016 version of the memo was issued (7/23/16), the Faculty Senate president notified Interim Dean Braker by email that the memo raised a number of concerns about academic freedom. The Senate sought clarification on the memo's history. Dr. Braker responded that "this memorandum has been in use for many years with anyone teaching courses online, including all who teach in summer online courses, and is now being extended to the remaining campus for data collection purposes."[1] She declined the Faculty Senate president's request to meet about the draft memo at that time and suggested that it would be discussed during faculty orientation in fall 2016. Those discussions did not occur.

The November 2017 iteration of the memo breaks from the past "Memo of Expectations" in numerous ways that faculty find even more problematic than last year's version, including mandating "university-wide utilization" of the Canvas learning management system in all on-campus and online classes and prescribing specific ways in which it must be used to conduct courses and communicate with students. Faculty Senate would like to respond to this draft memo in two ways.

First, the Senate wishes to issue strong opposition to the draft memo. It is our view that this draft memo should be rescinded. Any proposed changes to academic policy and/or use of educational technology need to be vetted and approved by faculty through the appropriate shared governance channels.

Second, the Senate would like to articulate specific concerns and highlight the ways that the memo not only infringes upon academic freedom, but threatens to undermine the very goals related to academic quality and student success it ostensibly seeks to achieve.

*   *   *   *

---

[1] Email Communication, Regina Braker to Cori Brewster, July 26, 2016.

Concerns About Academic Freedom

The November 2017 draft memo begins with the claim that by mandating use of a particular software package (Canvas) and a narrow range of pedagogical practices tied to the current version of that software, EOU is committing "to utilizing operational systems that support the profession of teaching" as a means of increasing student success.

EOU faculty are strongly committed to the success of our students, to effectiveness in teaching, and to the success of the institution as a whole. However, these goals will not be achieved by increasing electronic surveillance or limiting faculty members' ability to innovate and design classes according to best practices in their disciplines and their own areas of expertise.

Throughout the memo, there are numerous expectations that directly conflict with basic principles of academic freedom. The American Association of University Professors' *Statement on the Freedom to Teach* provides that,

> the freedom to teach includes the right of the faculty to select the materials, determine the approach to the subject, make the assignments, and assess student academic performance in teaching activities for which faculty members are individually responsible, without having their decisions subject to the veto of a department chair, dean, or other administrative officer.[2]

Additionally, Section V of the Association's attached *Statement on Government of Colleges and Universities* defines the particular role of the faculty in institutional government as follows:

> The faculty has primary responsibility for such fundamental areas as curriculum, subject matter and methods of instruction, research, faculty status, and those aspects of student life which relate to the educational process. On these matters the power of review or final decision lodged in the governing board or delegated by it to the president should be exercised adversely only in exceptional circumstances, and for reasons communicated to the faculty. It is desirable that the faculty should, following such communication, have opportunity for further consideration and further transmittal of its views to the president or board.

These commitments to academic freedom and faculty responsibility for the curriculum are echoed in EOU's collective bargaining agreement with Associated Academic Professionals, in the EOU board statement on delegation of authority, and in the longstanding system of shared governance at EOU that recognizes faculty members' primary role and expertise in developing and reviewing curriculum and academic policy.

AAUP has also discussed the importance of recognizing that "a classroom is not simply a physical space, but any location, real or virtual, in which instruction occurs."[3] Therefore, the protections that apply to academic freedom apply equally in the online environment. As AAUP staff reiterated to EOU faculty in December 2017,

---

[2] https://www.aaup.org/news/statement-freedom-teach
[3] https://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-electronic-communications-2014

The particular authority and primary responsibility of the faculty in the decision-making processes of the academic institution in these areas derive from its special competence in the educational sphere. It follows from this proposition that the faculty should play an active and meaningful role in the development as well as in the revision of institutional policy in those areas in which the faculty has primary responsibility.

It stands to reason that determinations regarding the use of learning management software should be included under the faculty's primary responsibility. Therefore, the faculty "should play an active and meaningful role in the development," and its objections heeded.

Or, to put it another way, as Jonathan Poritz and Jonathan Rees write in *Education is Not an App* (2016), "Caring, knowledgeable faculty members possessing academic freedoms have long been able to create engaging, intellectually rigorous classes. Adding technology to these classes—or even rebuilding them entirely with technology or online—does not change that ability, so long as the technology does not end professors' creative freedom. The way we see to achieve this is to vest the decision-making authority in the faculty, to offer them a rich technological buffet from which to choose, to expect them to educate themselves so as to be able to make informed choices, and to *steer clear of one-size-fits-all solutions imposed for non-academic reasons.*"[4]

Concerns about Specific Claims

Comparing the current draft memo with memos produced in previous years, some language about syllabi, exams, and learning outcomes has been replaced with even more explicit directives on the use of the Canvas learning management system and claims about ostensible benefits to the university and faculty that will result from such use. Whereas in prior years the draft memo was framed primarily as a means of orienting distance faculty to general campus practices and supporting effective teaching, the current iteration places primary emphasis on the university's desire to collect data it believes will help plan "early alert interventions that lead to the continuous improvement of student retention and completion." This data ostensibly includes but is not limited to attendance, grades on assignments, and participation in group work and discussion boards.

While few would dispute the university's interest in better understanding the challenges students face and designing more effective interventions to support and retain them, the data the university is likely to generate through methods prescribed in this memo are unlikely to produce very meaningful information about student performance or yield results that could not be achieved in other more effective and efficient ways.

Moreover, many of the expectations for classroom teaching prescribed in the memo largely in order to generate data through the LMS seriously undercut the foundations of good teaching

---

[4] Jonathan Poritz and Jonathan Rees, *Education is Not an App* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 181. Emphasis added.

and close faculty-student relationships that are a hallmark of EOU. This is a textbook example of the tail wagging the dog. While the university does need to track data on enrollment, withdrawals, retention, etc., it should both acknowledge and respect the notion that data-gathering is secondary to providing a good education. Again, AAUP's "Statement on Online and Distance Education" articulates a fundamental principle we feel is germane:

> As with all other curricular matters, the faculty should have primary responsibility for determining the policies and practices of the institution in regard to distance education. The rules governing distance education and its technologies should be approved by vote of the faculty concerned or of a representative faculty body, officially adopted by the appropriate authorities, and published and distributed to all concerned.[5]

In particular, the suggested benefits to faculty and the university from mandatory use of the LMS, as articulated in the draft memo's opening paragraphs, seem to be based on a series of faulty premises.

Claim 1: The university seems to believe that faculty can *document and manage student engagement and communication through attendance.*

Concern: As any experienced professor knows, attendance is hardly a measure of engagement, nor does attendance correlate to student communication. Certainly one can argue that a student who is not in class cannot participate, but this is a problem professors manage in a variety of ways, most often by making class time essential to understanding material.

Claim 2: Use of the LMS will allow for documentation of student participation in group work.

Concern: Unless group work in on-campus classes is reduced to a two-dimensional online discussion forum, it is unclear how the LMS can track group work. It is equally unclear how active, in-class debate would be accounted for in the LMS, or how such a thing would yield useful data, much less efficiencies.

Claim 3: University-wide utilization of the LMS will end "siloed, ineffective, manual, and often redundant systems" that hinder the university's ability to gather data.

Concern: Several things stand out here. First is the notion that data-gathering is the university's primary mission and that pedagogy should serve that mission. Second, the idea that a hand-graded paper, written feedback, or even a grade book not housed on the LMS is ineffective is patently false. We regularly teach our students the importance of interacting with their texts. They print out articles, write on them, mark passages, and take notes—all in an analog fashion. They receive the same from faculty when we meet with them about their work, or when we underline and highlight problems in their writing. Funneling these types of assessment into the LMS will strip them of many of the very qualities that make them meaningful to students. Third is

---

[5] https://www.aaup.org/report/statement-online-and-distance-education

the notion that the particular affordances of a particular learning management system at a particular moment in time determine what equals effective teaching. There are some things that the current iteration of Canvas does well for some faculty in some disciplines and courses; there are other things it does not do well, or can not do at all. Suggesting (without any evidence provided) that faculty working outside or in addition to a proprietary, out-of-the-box LMS are using "siloed," "ineffective," or simply "redundant" systems threatens to eliminate some of the most effective, innovative, engaging, and evidence-based teaching EOU faculty do.

The next major section of the memo, "Use of Canvas for Operational Management of Courses," also contains a number of requirements that conflict with academic freedom, and which seriously threaten the diversity, flexibility, and effectiveness of pedagogy at EOU. Four examples suffice:

Example 1: The requirement to *have graded assignments administered during the first three weeks* does not take into consideration courses—particularly upper division courses—where extensive reading and research is taking place. This kind of requirement is unrealistic in those courses, simply because not enough learning has taken place by the third week. The response to such a requirement would have to be the "artificial" creation of an assignment that is pedagogically unnecessary and that won't truly give a student a sense of their performance in the course.

Example 2: The requirement that *grades for one assignment must be posted before another assignment comes due* ignores the vast differences in assignments and disciplines. A professor might easily grade a quiz while spending two weeks working through drafts of term papers. Blue book exams (30+) usually take over a week to grade, while other assignments are due in the interim. While we recognize the importance of providing students timely feedback on their work, what that means varies from context to context. Faculty must retain the flexibility to prioritize what to grade in what order and how, not to mention the freedom to develop courses based on a variety of assessment models according to current research and practice in their fields.

Example 3: Requiring that all assignments, exams and activities be *fixed by the first day of the term* is impractical in a real classroom. Some courses move smoothly while others face challenges. A group of students may be especially underprepared and additional assignments need to be added to help bring them along, or due dates may be pushed back to allow for more time to learn. If a course is not working in the way a professor had hoped when designing it, a change is required. Readings may be added or cut, assignments modified or dropped. In every case the students are taken into consideration (and if they are not, the Dean should be notified), so that they aren't asked to buy a completely different book mid-term or their workload tripled without notice. But the expectation that a course will remain static from day one is unrealistic. Indeed, it is a sign of poor pedagogy if a professor does not adjust to the circumstances they face in each, individual classroom.

Example 4: Requiring that *Canvas be used for all communication with students* is not only impractical, threatening to reduce the amount of communication between students and faculty, it

raises additional concerns about privacy, surveillance, and the chilling effect on teaching and learning of administrative intrusion into the virtualized classroom. As the AAUP explains in "Academic Freedom and Electronic Communications," this kind of "monitoring should not be permitted without the explicit and voluntary permission of the instructor involved." To be sure,

> Efforts to protect privacy in electronic communications are an important instrument for ensuring professional autonomy and breathing space for freedom in the classroom and for the freedom to inquire. Although privacy is framed as an individual right, group or associational privacy is also important to academic freedom and to ensuring a culture of trust at an institution.[6]

There are other, more meaningful ways of gathering information on student performance, encouraging faculty-student communication, and supporting student engagement while working to build a healthy institutional culture in which both students and faculty will want to remain.

Conclusion

In sum, the expectations outlined in this memo are hardly anodyne. This document is prescriptive to a degree that would be detrimental to the teaching mission of EOU. We often stress the importance of preparing our students for the complex world they will enter, to gird them with the skills they need in a challenging workforce. To create a homogenized learning ecosystem does them no favors in this regard. It is not only an insult to the majority of faculty who do creative and thoughtful work in the classroom, it underestimates what our students are capable of, and what they need to learn to succeed beyond EOU. Academic "biodiversity"—the possibility that students will encounter and have to navigate different courses with diverse pedagogies—is foundational to developing students who can maneuver in the world they will face when they leave EOU.

---

[6] https://www.aaup.org/report/academic-freedom-and-electronic-communications-2014