



VCU

Faculty Senate

Minutes

Annual Faculty Meeting with President Michael Rao

Tuesday, February 7, 2023

at 4:00 PM

Commonwealth Ballroom A&B, STUDENT COMMONS

<https://tinyurl.com/faculty-senate-vcu>

For complete minutes and related files, see: <http://www.facultysenate.vcu.edu/>

Please email egsherrod@vcu.edu with questions or corrections.

Valerie Robnolt, President

4-4:05 pm

Called the meeting to order and

- Welcomed faculty to the Faculty Senate's annual February meeting with President Rao
- Welcome and thanked President Rao, and
- Acknowledged in-person and virtual attendees.

President Rao's Opening Remarks:

4:05

- Acknowledged numbers of attendees via zoom, and the other ways for convening meetings in this new era with the use of technology.
- This is post-pandemic convening – and can show us how to reach those that cannot be there in person.
- Expressed condolences to the family of Mahrokh Khan, VCU student who was hit by a car at an intersection on campus that morning and tragically succumbed to the wounds.
- Looking at safety plans around pedestrians and vehicle traffic.
- There are resources available at VCU for those who need them in the wake of this tragedy.

How are we meeting the needs of our students and how are those needs changing?

- The success of our students continues to be our mission, and we must adapt to changing needs.
- The Provost and I have met with the University Innovation Alliance group (comprised of some peer institutions) and had very engaging and resourceful conversations around student success measures.
- I've asked members of our leadership team to be here for this conversation.
- Thank you for your feedback on Quest 2028
- Ideas to assist with students' success, retention, and graduation rates.
- We are looking at administrative areas that we improve upon – such as financial aid.
- Looking at student health and other things that we need to address rapidly.
- Also looking, academic advising, and faculty support.
- Looking at reasons why we lose students.

Ideas:

- I would like to get your ideas on what you're seeing and how students' needs are changing, what we can do better.

- Gateway courses – courses that are required - to assist students who struggle with college preparedness and the rigor.
- Faculty give some thought to how we approach what we are teaching.
- Yesterday, the Director of the National US Science Foundation (NSF) was at VCU. Dr. Sethuraman Panchanathan was here for a day, some of you were there and presented your great work and thank you for that.
- We currently don't get a lot of NSF funding, and we get behind our VCU NSF Steering Committee to assist us in submitting more proposals to increase our NSF funding support.

Additional Announcements:

- The Opening of VCU Children's Hospital in a couple of months and an exciting announcement about The Massey Cancer Center. ***But, at this meeting, I want to focus on student success.***

Comments:

- Valerie - The early alert system appears to be working well.
- I do know that students are struggling with mental health issues.

President Rao – how is that playing out, what measures are you looking at?

- Response:
 - o Students who do not identify majors sooner, do not have a support group.
 - o Importance of early alerts and faculty responding timely allows time for the students to shift behavior and seek support.

President Rao:

Are there things in our structure that could lead students toward more anxiety and stress?

- Comment
 - o Students are questioning the access to the mental health resources.
 - o Meredith Weiss - We can direct students to Ram-Strong – provides access to mental health resources.
 - o Faculty comment - We need to do more work on assisting students with skills/guidance in using the resources, accessing these tools.

President – This is a good reminder about the demographics of students. Where do we take that on – at what level – faculty, admin?

- o Faculty comment – Student anxiety and the economic situation of many students – esp. students who need to work while in school. Juggling work and study, finding the courses needed to meet their degree requirements.

President – You did exactly what I was looking for, providing information the based-on student's real-life experiences. This is something we can do better with.

- We should review how we can offer courses designed around the needs of students.
- Can we offer more courses online – which could assist with the concern that Mark discussed.

Financial Aid – Holds on student accounts, which prevent students from registering for courses.

Comment:

- o Faculty comment – How do you know what courses students need, ask the academic advisors.
- o We need to provide more monetary support for advisors.

President – Advisors and their ability to do academic advising successfully, must be a priority for the institution. We may have to do some reallocating of resources – which is not always popular. We need to pay our advisors well, and review how the advising is being done across the board.

Provost – I want to emphasize that compensating our advisors well is a priority and keep in mind the report from CFO Karol Gray about our current budget – which is a reality that we face.

- We are looking at AI to assist our advisors. We are pursuing all of these things together.

Comment:

- o Faculty comment – spoke about concern around the follow-up process in the early-alert system
- o Suggested the faculty meet their online class as group in the beginning to form a sense of community
- o In the Honors College – we have a well-being team that send students reminders about resources such as the Ram-Strong.

President – your comments and ideas are exactly what we want to hear, and we are taking notes. That’s great feedback, Thank you.

Provost – We are trying to map the students’ experiences. Tomikia (LeGrande) is taking notes.

Comment:

- An advisor spoke and said that you can’t separate what we do from mental health and so many other things that we do.
- Financial advisors – have a huge workload – of upwards of one, two thousand and more. They generally leave after one or two years due to burn-out.
- Will the people at the top take a monetary/pay hit to provide more funding for academic and financial advisors.

President – We will look at everything as a possibility including all the resources that we can get to address these important issues.

Comment:

- Faculty comment – we need to look at mental health as a progression.
- I think it would appropriate to incorporate some of these ideas around stress in our courses.
- Discussion of online vs in-person, students feel that their learning is enhanced in a face-to-face engagement.

President – I think the mental health need is the largest I’ve ever seen, and there are a lot of complicated reasons for what we’re seeing, and it seems to be connected to the pandemic. Your other point about online courses, aligns and reinforces my point about the integrity and quality of online courses to meet VCU needs. But we need to offer online for those communities that cannot get to campus. We need to think about expanding access.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - Suggestion, moving to a quarterly or trimester scheduling that reduce the demand on students and term faculty.
- We recently got rid of the 75-minute time blocks and should get rid of courses offered on Friday.
- Third, in a budget reduction, top admin has the luxury to think/discuss their pay increases, which is a luxury that faculty/staff do not have when the decision about their much overdo pay increase was deferred. We must take the budget hit.

President – Thank you, I think it’s a great idea about the daily time-block – which may also allow students time to do internships, I also think your suggestion about shifting the academic schedule is an interesting idea. As for your third point, thank you for saying what you think, I appreciate you speaking up, yet I don’t agree with it.

Provost:

- I am really energized by this discussion, and I hope we can have more of this type of engagement with faculty and staff.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - my students appreciate when I teach the course in both modalities.
- I think that we should approach the students as individuals.
- Have faculty talk about pedagogical processes.
- I am an advisor – and I have seldom experienced admin seek my opinion. And, I don't know why we have not been included in discussions in a meaningful way.

President – That's a great idea. Provost, let's set that up, let's make it happen. This will feed very well with how we can identify some of the priorities of our student needs.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - DFW rates, we collect data, but how can I access and use that information when I need it to engage with the students. It's not my job to learn SQL and Navigate to access data about the students.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - Sociology does not have an academic advisor. I wonder what plans you have to leverage VCU's endowment to address some of the budget issues we're facing.

President – That's a great question. I will allow Jay (Davenport) to address that question.

- Jay - VCU endowment is about 2.6 billion dollars, and it's a different entity, and most of that amount is restricted funds because of the gift agreements the donors created, which does not allow us the flexibility to use those dollars.
- We are building a donor giving campaign to raise money for VCU flex use for the things we have discussed here today.

President – Much of that money is restricted for specific use, and a portion of it is under MCV Medical/Health Sciences. Jay, what is that number?

- Jay, \$850 million is in the MCV Foundation, and other portions of that \$2.6 billion is bonding money to support our growth, i.e., the Children's Hospital.

President – We do have some flexible resources of about 1 million dollars – which is not a lot of money but helps.

Comment:

- Sometimes we confuse students when we talk about the various teaching modalities, esp the hybrid modality.

Provost – We have put out a definition for the Hybrid University is and we need your input.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - the students don't read emails. Can we convert to text?

President Rao - as a parent, I can attest that students are reluctant to read emails.

Tomikia - there is technology available that we are investigating to allow faculty to effectively communicate with students or nudge them along.

President – I think we should figure out a way to offer a single app for students – to streamline the process.

Comment:

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President – Constance is here, and she can speak to that. But I would caution and remind us about the point that was made that we must not lump all students into a singular or micro-based (small sample) experience. We must begin to use the **data** to inform what we do.

Comments:

- In UNIV 111 and 112 there is a concerted effort of all our faculty to gather data/information from students about the student experiences.

Tomikia – last year we created a new position of a Director of First-Year and Second-Year Experience – just for that – and to work across campuses and all the schools and colleges – launching learning communities in your areas.

Comment:

- Faculty comment - however, we move forward that we be mindful about the human connection.

President – that’s a good reflection and that’s what I was talking about at the start of the meeting. The students have options and therefore we must do better to positively impact student success and experiences. My team and I will review the notes and do a follow-up with the suggestions that readily doable. We will look at resources and the data to support our next steps.

Valerie – Thank everyone for attending. There were about 50 people online.