

UMSL Faculty Senate 5-Year Review
External Reviewer Report
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This report is based on the UMSL faculty senate's self-study, review of UMSL's bylaws and Senate Operating Procedures, as well as meetings on January 28, 2022, held via Zoom with representatives from the following groups: 1) Administrators and Deans, 2) Staff and Students, 3) Faculty and Senators, 4) Senate Steering Committee and Former Chairs, 5) Senate Committee Chairs, 6) Chancellor and Provost. UMSL is to be commended for carrying out five-year reviews for all units, including the faculty senate, rather than only academic departments; this is rarely done on other campuses.

Summary findings: Overall, the UMSL faculty senate seems to operate effectively and according to national practice for representative faculty bodies of its type. The senate has developed a good working relationship with the campus administration, and it responded appropriately to the recommendations made in the last five-year review. The creation of the university assembly with staff and student representation is a particularly noteworthy step forward in inclusivity that could serve as a model for other universities. In my opinion, no major structural or operational changes are recommended at this time.

There is always room for improvement, however. Some themes emerged during the interviews that seem to be areas of concern. These included 1) Committee selection and activity, 2) Significance of senate work, 3) Communication, and 4) Staff representation on the assembly. Some of the issues raised with regard to these themes present opportunities for easy fixes; others are deeper issues that are affecting faculty not just at UMSL but across the country. These will require constant monitoring and collaborative effort to continue to move forward.

Theme 1: Committees

During the course of the interviews, there was probably more discussion of committees than of any other topic. The two points most commonly raised were, first, the number and activity of the committees, and second, the process for committee member selection.

Regarding the number and activity of the committees, the self-study indicates that since the last five-year review, the senate merged six committees into three, bringing the total number of faculty senate committees from twenty-three to twenty. Some individuals, notably among the administrators, thought this was still too many and recommended further consolidation or elimination of committees. This view did not seem to be widely shared among the faculty, however.

Committees are the lifeblood of shared governance at universities. They are where the detailed work of the senate is carried out and where the faculty have the best opportunity to provide input and share in decision-making processes. Therefore, they should not be rashly pared down or consolidated without both good reason and a guarantee of continued shared governance when any committee is proposed for elimination or consolidation. Twenty is not an excessive number of committees for a campus of UMSL's size. Missouri S&T has twenty-two standing committees specified in our bylaws, in addition to several other permanent campus committees; UM-Columbia has far more than that. Hence, further committee reductions should not be made simply for the sake of possible efficiency or because of a mere perception that there are too many committees. On the other hand, the senate should always be monitoring which committees are doing effective and important work and which rarely meet or simply receive reports without playing a role in decision making.

The second—and more contentious—issue raised with regard to committees was the process of committee-member selection. The problem, from the perspective of some faculty members, was that the Committee on Committees sometimes ignores the committee preferences of individual faculty members. Someone can express strong interest in a committee year after year without ever being put on the slate of nominees. Faculty who had served on the Committee on Committees countered that they have a difficult task to do in proposing good slates of candidates that also ensure diversity of representation across the faculty. They also indicated that some committees routinely generate great interest while others often do not have enough even to populate them fully based on the initially preferences.

It seems that the main problem here is that the process of forming the proposed committee slates is opaque. Because there is no explanation for why people were not given their top choices, individual faculty members understandably believe that “it’s all political.” There are no easy solutions to this problem. At S&T, we generally hold open elections, often with several nominees (rather than a proposed slate) for each committee, and senators vote on them. This has the benefit of not appearing political or “rigged”; it has the disadvantage of committee elections essentially being popularity contests, with little attention paid to ensuring diverse representation (except when specified by the rules of committee composition). It also makes for a long senate meeting on election day (we use clickers for senators to vote, which speeds things up a bit).

Perhaps the solution lies somewhere in the middle, where the Committee on Committees suggests a slate for half the committee, to ensure diverse representation, while the senate holds open elections for the other half. In a model like this, the Committee on Committees would publish its recommended slate of candidates ahead of time, and anyone who is not on it can add their names to the pool ahead of time for the remaining at-large slots. This is merely one suggestion; there are likely other, better solutions. But the current practice does seem to be problematic.

Theme 1 Recommendations:

1. *Continually monitor committee structure to ensure that existing committees are functional, useful, and active in shared governance.*
2. *Create a more transparent process for the election of committee members.*

Theme 2: Significance of Senate Work

In recent decades, across the country and within the UM system, there has been a steady shift in power at universities towards administration and away from the faculty. Faculty at UMSL have noticed this, with some long-time faculty members commenting that the faculty used to have greater input on campus issues than they do now. Some faculty members expressed the view that few issues of importance are discussed at faculty senate meetings and that there is little debate. Several faculty members (and staff) noted that morale has been low in recent years, at least in part because of the perception of the diminished role of the faculty in decision-making. By contrast, the self-report, senate chairs, and steering committee members were more positive about the work of the senate, emphasizing the good working relationship with the administration and the codification of the “good-faith” relationship between the senate and administration. Administrators were almost uniformly positive about the work of the senate.

Most striking here is the disjuncture between the perceptions of the faculty and senators, on the one hand, and the administrators and steering committee, on the other. To some extent, this is to be expected; faculty who do not have frequent contact with administrators are generally more likely to view them with suspicion. But the degree to which this is the case at UMSL is surprising. A faculty senate’s relationship with administration always exists somewhere along a continuum from adversarial, on one end, to cooperative, on the other. At S&T, we probably err too far to the adversarial end; UMSL seems to err in the opposite direction. To be clear, it is good to have a constructive relationship between the faculty senate and the administration; UMSL’s faculty senate leaders have worked hard in recent years to maintain and improve that relationship, and they should be commended for that. But it is also the role of the senate to push back against the administration when faculty rights and privileges are threatened and when faculty concerns are not being heard. I should emphasize that no faculty member we interviewed complained that the current or recent senate leadership was failing to represent faculty concerns. Nevertheless, the clear frustrations of the faculty combined with the almost total absence of complaints from administrators about the senate, suggest that something is slightly “off” at UMSL.

It is difficult to pinpoint what that “something” is, but there are some avenues worth exploring. First, you could explore ways to make senate meetings more deliberative. There will always be a certain amount of “rubber-stamping” at senate meetings (this was one complaint voiced); in fact,

if the committees are doing their work well, that should be expected and appreciated. The non-committee portions of the meetings, however, could be occasions for feedback and discussion, rather than “information dumps.” Consider applying the principle “Don’t call a meeting when an email will do.” For example, you could have the chancellor and senate chair pre-circulate written reports, so that less senate meeting time would be spent passively hearing and more time actively discussing key issues on campus—think more UK Prime Minister’s Question time, less State-of-the-Union address. Or you might ask the chancellor always to come to meetings with at least one major issue she wants faculty input on.

Second, it strikes me as odd that for the past four years, UMSL’s senate chair has also been a department chair.¹ Especially after the UM Curators approved the 2019 revision to CRR 20.110 on department chairs, a UM system department chair is conceptually more administrator than faculty. At S&T we discourage—and will soon prohibit—department chairs from serving as faculty senators, much less as the senate president, due to what is seen on our campus as an inherent conflict of interest in having someone with a 50% administrative workload serve as a representative of the faculty. It is worth considering whether it is appropriate at UMSL to have department chairs serve as senate chairs and/or members of the steering committee. Restricting eligibility to regular faculty and can also serve as a useful avenue for the development of future campus leaders.

Theme 2 Recommendations:

1. *Find ways for senate meetings to include more active discussion and debate.*
2. *Identify suitable and unsuitable roles on the senate and committees for faculty members with substantial administrative workloads.*

Theme 3: Communication

Effective communication lies at the heart of any good relationship, and it is all the more important in an institution with as many constituent parts as a university. UMSL’s faculty senate recently established the Senate Snapshot to convey to faculty and staff key points made at senate meetings. Several people in the interviews sang the praises of the Senate Snapshot, but several also said that it does not get sent to everyone who would be interested in seeing it. Hardly any of the staff members we talked to reported receiving it from their supervisors. The current practice is to send it to senators, deans, and department chairs. Steering committee members indicated that the limited distribution is intended both to empower senators to act in a tangible way as their unit’s representatives and to avoid flooding faculty email inboxes. Sending anything to all faculty and/or employees is described as “hitting the scary button.”

¹ I want to emphasize that no one made one word of complaint about either Alice Hall or Jon McGinnis, and in my own interactions with them at IFC, I have never seen them do anything but zealously represent the faculty. My comments here are based on principle, with individual personalities taken out of the equation.

Other communication issues that were raised included informing faculty and staff of upcoming meetings and agendas, and the avenues for hearing faculty concerns. In response to the last 5-year review an ad hoc committee on faculty concerns was put together but was disbanded, and a faculty senate suggestion box was implemented instead, although it does not seem to get much use.

There are some easy fixes here. First, do not be (too) scared of the “scary button.” It’s there for a reason. Use it. While the goal of empowering senators by having them send out the Senate Snapshot is admirable, it doesn’t seem to be working. The Snapshot itself is a good thing; send it to everyone. With regard to senate meeting attendance, in a post-interview email, one senator made the excellent suggestion of sending Outlook meeting invitations to the senators for all the senate/assembly meetings. We do this at S&T, and it is an easy and effective way to make sure senators have the meetings on their calendars. Hearing faculty concerns is a more difficult issue, but I am not sure it is a pressing issue. If an issue is important enough, faculty members find ways to convey it to those who need to hear it. The key thing here is for the person who receives the complaint/concern to share it with those who need to hear it.

Theme 3 recommendations:

1. *Send the Senate Snapshot to everyone (all campus faculty and staff).*
2. *Send senate agendas to all faculty and assembly agendas to all faculty and staff.*
3. *Send Outlook invitations to senators and assembly representatives for meeting dates.*

Theme 4: Staff Representation on the Assembly

One of the largest interview meetings we attended was the one with staff and students. The problem was that there were no (hardly any) students. At the same time, students currently have four times as many seats as staff on the university assembly. As mentioned in the opening summary, UMSL’s university assembly was a positive step forward in inclusivity. That said, if UMSL is going to have a body that claims to represent the university as a whole, it needs to be more truly representative. The interview attendance and comments from staff members made it clear that staff would like to have more opportunities for their voices to be heard. Staff supervisors should also be instructed to allow staff to take time away from their regular duties in order to serve as representatives on committee and the university assembly.

Theme 4 Recommendation:

1. *Increase staff representation on the university assembly.*
2. *Ensure that staff are not penalized for taking time to serve on committees and the assembly.*