

Minutes*

**Senate Research Committee
Monday, February 24, 2002
1:15 - 3:00
238A Morrill Hall**

- Present: Gary Balas (chair), Melissa Anderson, Victor Bloomfield, Kathleen Conklin, Sharon Danes, Sabine Fritz, Steve Gantt, Yev Garif, James Luby, James Orf, Thomas Schumacher, Charles Spetland, Barbara VanDrasek, Michael Volna
- Absent: Gerry Baldrige, James Cotter, Robin Dittman, David Hamilton, Lawrence Jacobs, Paul Johnson, Katherine Klink, Phillip Larsen, Scott McConnell, Sharon Neet, Mark Paller, Ted Powell, Virginia Seybold, Charles Stech, Mehul Vora
- Guests: Vice President Sandra Gardebring, Amy Phenix (University Relations); Edward Wink (Sponsored Projects Administration)
- Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) publicity for research; (2) Institutional Review Board survey; (3) other matters]

1. Publicity for Research

Professor Balas convened the meeting at 1:15 and welcomed Vice President Gardebring and Ms. Phenix to the meeting to discuss publicity for research.

Ms. Gardebring began by noting that there had been some reports of faculty dissatisfaction with the news coverage about research at the University. She said she would explain what her office does and that she would welcome ideas. She represents a service unit, she said, and they would like to get stories out about University research.

Between her office and the parallel office in the Academic Health Center, they issue about 330 press releases per year, about 40% of which are related to research—which is the single biggest category of releases. They obtain information from the faculty; University News Service staff are assigned to beats; they cover certain units and talk to faculty. They can only cover what they know about, she said, to generate press releases.

In terms of coverage of the University, only about 15% is related to research; there is not as much media interest in research. Nationally, stories about the University are almost all about research, but about 85% of local stories (Twin Cities, Minnesota, and surrounding areas) are not related to research. Ms. Phenix said that Greater Minnesota does very little of its own reporting; they rely on news services and metropolitan papers and typically do not take University press releases.

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They are looking more and more at electronic publication, Ms. Gardebring said; they mail news people can use to about 60,000 people, most of which is related to research. This is valuable because it provides a way to translate research to people. They want to find better ways to provide news about research. If the faculty are dissatisfied, they will push hard on research stories. At the same time, the stories must be appealing to the media—and some things the media are not interested in.

Dean Bloomfield said he has notice more good stories about the University, which is a positive change. Ms. Gardebring had commented that college communication efforts have grown; most of that is alumni relations, he said, but the people in the colleges may know about stories that should be published. University Relations, however, has the press connections; is there a way to get the two units together so they work together? They have very good relationships with the communication staff in the colleges, Ms. Phenix said; University Relations distributes their press releases and pitches their stories. They are the first source to identify faculty experts who are doing. The college offices also express frustration that they do not know what is going on in their units.

Do some colleges do a better job of publicizing research, Professor Balas asked? They do, Ms. Gardebring affirmed. It is disturbing to think that people in the colleges do not know what is going on, Professor Balas commented; that is their job. Faculty have a lot of great stories but usually talk to their colleagues and at professional meetings. Deans and department heads could help, Ms. Phenix said, by urging the faculty to call the News Service when they have stories. But she pointed out that communications offices in colleges are usually one-person shops and only a small amount of the individual's job is to work on media relations—which is fine, she said, because the News Service can help them.

The question is often about the internal culture in the college with respect to promoting research and calling the communications director about it. She said they also hear from the faculty that there is no incentive to work with the media; the faculty are rewarded for research and publication. A number of faculty who have been cited in the newspapers, for example, have told her that they get nothing professionally from such publicity—the institution does not reward media work. That comes from the top down, Professor Balas responded; if the dean does not call faculty to commend them on publicity, slap them on the back about it, then faculty will not feel work with the media is worth it. That element of support is missing in some colleges, he suggested. It is important for faculty to receive publicity in local media, Ms. Gardebring, said; Professor Conklin agreed, saying that in a time of tight budgets, it is important that faculty make known the good things that are going on at the University.

If there is a national story, is it easy for the media to get in touch with an expert at the University, Professor Gantt asked? It is, Ms. Gardebring said. They try to anticipate such requests and have lists of experts as well as an expert database. They field about 20-60 inquiries a week, Ms. Phenix told the Committee; sometimes they are challenged to find someone. It is important for the University to build relationships with the media as a credible source of information because the relationships help when the University wants to promote a story. But media use of an expert may result in a quote or comment in the 15th paragraph of a story, she noted, and is not an occasion to push the University's message about research—but it does present the University as a source of expertise about three-four times per day in the local newspapers. It is often difficult to get faculty to comment on a story because they may not see themselves as the expert but rather see others in that role. They did call the aero engineering faculty after the Columbia disaster and found a faculty member who had done his dissertation on re-entry, she related.

That is a great opportunity to follow up on his research, Professor Balas said, about what will make the next generation of space vehicles safer, what has changed, what is state of the art. But he did not see any such follow-up. There was comment on the Wellstone airplane crash but again, there was no follow-up on what the University is doing to make airplanes safer. Such articles could provide perspective. Both Ms. Gardebring and Ms. Phenix agreed. There is much news about tragedies, Professor Balas continued; surely there are people at the University working on building safety whose work would be related to the recent nightclub fires. There are, Ms. Phenix said, and they contacted the Civil Engineering people after the events of 9/11/01.

One problem is that media timelines often do not match scholarly timelines, Ms. Gardebring commented. Media people need to meet deadlines; to be helpful, people at the University must do the same. Her office can help faculty so they are comfortable when the opportunity comes along and can offer guidance on how to deal with and understand the people working in the media.

Another missed opportunity is that the University does not do a good job of providing news about people who have been honored, Professor Balas said, such as Regents' Professors, McKnight Distinguished Professors, etc. There could be stories about how they got to be the top in their field and they impact they have had. Are there stories that go out and are just not picked up? That is what happens, Ms. Gardebring affirmed; they have tried a lot of ways to get those stories out but they seem not to be of interest to the broader community. Ms. Phenix said she has asked one of her staff members to call all of the McKnight professors about their research in order to try to get a "hook" that might be of interest to the media.

The University did get a nice story about the student who will be the Rhodes Scholar, Ms. Gardebring observed, which helps recognize that this is a first-rate institution. Stories such as this help create a highly-favorable impression of the University. Mr. Schumacher said that writing a story on something other than crime or public policy is difficult; the subject matter is often not accessible. If the faculty do not make it easy for the reporter to understand, they will not get a good story. The reporter has to be provided the background and how to make it interesting, which will make the article easier to write.

Professor Danes said that colleges need help in motivating faculty. She said she has dealt with media people quite a bit--but they always seem to call when she has a deadline! She said she knows the calls are important but should she put the call ahead of her own deadlines? What motivates her to keep doing that? Media contact IS important, she agreed, but what motivates the faculty? It would help if this Committee and the Faculty Consultative Committee would say, or would ask the administration to say, that there should be incentives for such contacts.

That comes down to colleagues and deans, Professor Balas said. In promotion and tenure, teaching and research are counted, and if they are acceptable one gets promoted. If the University values faculty explaining their research in lay terms, such explanation should be rewarded. Ms. Phenix said she has spoken with Executive Vice President Maziar about this Committee, and the Faculty Consultative Committee, sponsoring media training for faculty; she said her office is open to pushing ideas that the faculty think would be helpful, such as a thank-you note from the President about citation in the media and building such publicity in to the criteria for awards. Dr. VanDrasek cautioned that whatever is done should not take more faculty time; when the New Service knows about something a faculty member is doing, it could prepare a vignette of the work so the faculty do not have to write the story or be left in the hands of a reporter, fearing they will be misquoted or comments taken out of context.

Faculty should not be left in the hands of a reporter unless they are comfortable being so, Ms. Gardebring said. She said she does not talk to the media without being prepared. Her office would be glad to help faculty rehearse. That takes time, Dr. VanDrasek observed.

Professor Orf said he had a reporter at a seminar he was involved in. Often reporters will pick up a controversial issue and forget about the rest. It takes time to learn to interact with the media and keep on the story. He said he did not know if it would be helpful to have seminars for faculty, or if those who are uncomfortable talking to media people should be told they do not have to do so. It would be helpful if University Relations could be a lightning rod.

Their policy is that University Relations people do NOT comment on issues, Ms. Gardebring said, except in rare instances; they know much less than people who are doing work in a field. They want the faculty or administrator who knows the most about the subject, but feel obligated to make the person feel comfortable so the communication goes smoothly. That would be helpful, Professor Danes said; sometimes a reporter will want her to say something that goes against all she believes and she has to tell them to change the direction of their inquiries.

Ms. Gardebring recalled that she was a reporter before she went into law, and said a general beat was not bad, but a reporter assigned to the University, or health care, for example, has a staggering array of issues to deal with. They will often listen to an effort to try to help them get something right, but that takes time. She said she knows that is low on a faculty member's list of priorities and some faculty are good at media relations and some are not.

Professor Balas urged Ms. Gardebring to try to see that more stories about research are written. She noted that the President will say much about research in his inaugural address and how that distinguishes the University from other institutions around the state.

Professor Balas thanked Ms. Gardebring and Ms. Phenix for joining the meeting.

2. Institutional Review Board Survey

[By federal law, the Institutional Review Board, the IRB, must review all research proposals that include the use of human subjects.] Professor Balas recalled that last fall a number of faculty raised questions about IRB procedures, so the Faculty Consultative Committee and this Committee spoke with the Vice President for Research about a joint survey to measure issues researchers feel need to be addressed. Committee members reviewed the draft survey that had been developed by the staff in the Vice President's office.

Committee members made a number of suggestions.

- This is a serious issue for the social sciences; the survey should be reviewed by associate and assistant deans in the social sciences.
- Inquire if it would be beneficial to TALK to someone on the IRB, rather than participate in a mysterious process of submitting proposals, having something found wrong, re-submitting the proposal, and so on.

- Explain what the IRB does and consider using a focus group in addition to the survey.
- It will be helpful to know about the respondent's experiences with the IRB in assessing the responses.
- Allow opportunity to comment on the STRUCTURE as well as the processes.
- Inquire whether interacting with the IRB panel while it is in session considering a proposal would be helpful.

Professor Conklin said she would like a similar survey conducted in the future about those who use animals in research.

It was agreed that any additional comments on the survey would be communicated to Ms. Schumi by the end of the week.

3. Other Matters

Professor Balas noted that the Committee will speak at its next meeting with Mr. Volna, the Controller, about issues related to Sponsored Financial Reporting.

The Committee will speak at some point in the near future with Vice President Hamilton about University-industry contracts.

The Committee will invite Professor Konstan to attend a meeting to discuss the Federal Demonstration Partnership changes coming.

Should there be a subcommittee on IMG? The Faculty Consultative Committee has given the go-ahead if the Committee wishes to appoint one.

ITAR (International Trafficking in Arms Regulations) restrictions are becoming more and more restrictive and should be addressed.

Professor Balas adjourned the meeting at 2:30.

-- Gary Engstrand