The University Senate

FACULTY · STUDENT · P&A · CIVIL SERVICE

UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee (AF&T)
March 28, 2025
Minutes of the Meeting

These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions or actions reported in these minutes reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration or the Board of Regents. The University Senate Office utilized notes taken during the meeting, video recording and transcript of the meeting, and AI to assist in summarizing substantive parts of the meeting transcript to compose these minutes. Minutes are reviewed by the committee before posting.

[In these minutes: Discussion on Academic Freedom and Challenges to Public Communications; Collegiate Personnel Plans and Long-term Appointments Justifications; Committee Business]

PRESENT: Eric Van Wyk (chair), Carolyn Bishoff, Teri Caraway, Bruno Chaouat, Sumanth Gopinath, Rachel Johnson, Nidhi Joshi, Chase Krug, Rebecca Krug, Lee Penn, Madeline Rowe, Clifford Steer, Christophe Wall-Romana, George Weiblen

REGRETS: Margaret Kelly, Michael Kyba, Danya Leebaw, Beth Lewis

ABSENT: None

OTHERS ATTENDING: Ole Gram, associate vice provost, Faculty and Academic Affairs, Keelia Silvis, manager of communications, Center for Antiracism Research for Health Equity, Laurie Cooper Stoll, director, University Senate Office

1. **Call to Order**

Professor Eric Van Wyk, chair, called the meeting to order.

2. Discussion on Academic Freedom and Challenges to Public Communications

Keelia Silvis, manager of communications, Center for Antiracism Research for Health Equity, then gave a presentation to the committee entitled, "20250328_AF&T Presentation." CARHE was founded in 2021 with a $5 million philanthropic gift to advance anti-racist research, education, and community engagement. Initially, CARHE's communication process was straightforward, but on February 4th, a new policy required all DEI-related communications to be reviewed by the Office of General Counsel (OGC). This directive was not communicated to Silvis directly but instead reached her through multiple layers of leadership.

The new review process caused significant delays and complications, turning into what Silvis described as a "work tangle." A single newsletter took over a month to publish after undergoing multiple drafts and extensive external reviews, leading to the removal of key content, including references to policies, research, and marginalized communities. The lack of transparency and guidance created uncertainty and pressure to self-censor, leaving Silvis feeling exhausted and undermined. The final newsletter, stripped of its original substance, failed to provide meaningful resources, instead offering only crisis hotlines and basic governmental contacts.

Silvis attended the March 14th Board of Regents vote on institutional speech and felt anger and frustration over board members ignoring concerns. She described being forcibly removed by police, which added to her distress. George Weiblen expressed admiration for Silvis's willingness to speak out despite institutional silencing. She clarified that her private funding allowed her more freedom than colleagues reliant on federal funding, who feared repercussions. Weiblen shared his own experiences of losing federal funding and is considering rejecting more. He asked if Silvis was willing to go to the media, and while she acknowledged her journalist connections, she remained cautious about the strategic risks.

Silvis described interactions with university leadership as evasive and focused on suppressing concerns rather than addressing them. She worried that acting rashly could lead to retaliation, particularly against Black and Indigenous colleagues. She documented events meticulously but remained uncertain about the best course of action, seeking guidance and support. Van Wyk stated that while the committee could not adjudicate issues, it could write letters, make statements, and pass resolutions. He also mentioned having informal conversations with the Provost and President to relay concerns. Christophe Wall-Romana suggested that the administration should clarify directives to reduce confusion and ensure employees could perform their work effectively.

Carolyn Bishoff questioned the implications of the regents' vote on academic freedom, particularly for research-based essays published under a university-affiliated center. Silvis confirmed that such publications required extensive approvals and that the university restricted the ability of units to make statements, even preventing a statement under Dr. Rachel Hardeman's name unless it was entirely separate from the center's branding.

Silvis expressed frustration over the policy's vague language, particularly regarding what constituted "matters of public interest." She criticized the university's failure to honor commitments made under external funding agreements, including a $5 million contract with Blue Cross Blue Shield. She also discussed the university's history of harm toward communities of color and the importance of anti-racist research that moved away from an exploitative model toward more reciprocal engagement with research participants.

Chase Krug suggested writing a statement but noted the tight timeline given the University Senate meeting is next week. Teri Caraway stated that the university was on weak legal ground and encouraged individuals to continue their work to establish a legal basis for challenging restrictions. Van Wyk voiced frustration over institutional silence and emphasized the need for leadership to take a stand. The discussion concluded with

expressions of support, encouragement for self-care, and an offer to remain accessible for further assistance.

3. **Collegiate Personnel Plans and Long-term Appointments Justifications**

Following a short break, Van Wyk introduced the topic of collegiate personnel plans and shared a new document summarizing individual reviews, which would be included in the final report to the provost's office. Most individual reviews are nearly complete, except for the Carlson School of Management, which still needs a reviewer. He requested volunteers to assist in finalizing the summaries.

Van Wyk explained that committee members should review past reports and combine individual reviews into concise summaries, ideally two pages each. He emphasized the importance of crafting a strong introduction for the report, incorporating feedback and recommendations to improve future processes. He encouraged committee members to consider how to better solicit information from colleges and address concerns about responses. He also touched on the long-term appointments justifications, stating that responses from some colleges were insufficient. While some colleges, such as the Medical School and School of Public Health, provided clear justifications, others, like the College of Pharmacy, offered vague reasoning. He urged members to review the justifications and determine how to proceed, stressing the importance of evaluating responses critically and ensuring they align with tenure code requirements.

Ole Gram acknowledged that the data would be somewhat outdated but noted that its presentation had inherent issues, particularly when employees changed job codes. He suggested that departments be directly asked for the correct data, as they would likely find it easy to provide. Van Wyk agreed, stating that verifying the data would take minimal effort and could be streamlined if previous records were maintained.

Van Wyk also reflected on the committee's role, expressing concern that their responsibility in reviewing these reports was not formally documented. He suggested updating the committee's charge to ensure continuity, even as leadership changed. Cooper Stoll indicated that such changes would require approval.

Bishoff raised concerns about the inconsistent submission of required documents by various colleges and questioned the administration's commitment to collecting them. Gram confirmed that they would follow up with those who had not submitted their reports. Van Wyk supported this effort, emphasizing the need to institutionalize the process to prevent lapses in the future.

Van Wyk also acknowledged that the issue of tracking long-term term faculty appointments was part of broader ongoing efforts, including work by TFAPS and a task force on academic freedom for non-tenure-track faculty. He noted that AF&T had multiple pressing matters, leaving them stretched thin. He encouraged members to review the reports and consider whether a formal report was necessary.

4. **Committee Business**

Van Wyk then provided updates on committee business, beginning with the administrative hiring task force. The task force is behind schedule, with results expected in late April or May. Discussions with FCC and SCFA leadership led to a decision to wait until the task force produces a report before taking further action. Concerns were raised about the administration making major decisions before shared governance can review the findings.

Van Wyk then discussed the report on academic freedom and contingent faculty presented on February 6, noting that some questions remained unanswered. A Google form was shared with senators to collect further inquiries. FCC showed reluctance to bring the recommendations in the report to a Senate vote, citing concerns about the broader climate in higher education and potential misalignment with current trends. However, Van Wyk argued that protections for academic freedom are increasingly necessary, and the strategic planning process should continue despite challenges. He also noted that President Cunningham is proceeding with the administration's strategic planning effort since the President had noted a need to plan for what the university will be in the future, despite current challenges. He suggested that the committee formally request a senate vote on the report to emphasize its importance.

Sumanth Gopinath agreed with the need to move forward and welcomed further discussion on how best to proceed. Bishoff reviewed past TFAPS minutes and expressed uncertainty about the coordination between the two groups, given that the task force proposed long-term structural changes, while TFAPS focused on more immediate, practical improvements within the current system. The discussion touched on the need for both short-term and long-term goals, with an acknowledgment that institutional change takes time.

Clifford Steer further clarified that TFAPS operates under SCFA and highlighted concerns about the lack of communication between TFAPS and the task force. While the task force offers a broad, high-level perspective, TFAPS is more focused on immediate policy implications. There was recognition that their work intersects but remains distinct.

A key point of discussion was how an implementation task force could help bridge the gap between the two groups by ensuring that practical details are considered in executing broader reforms. In the end, a motion was made by Krug, seconded by Christophe Wall-Romana, and approved (10-0) to request that FCC place a vote on the task force report on the agenda for the April 24 meeting.

Van Wyk then discussed the Board of Regents vote regarding institutional speech from two weeks ago, noting uncertainty about next steps but mentioning an update from the Provost expected by April 1st. The update on March 18 indicated the formation of a committee, but shared governance was seemingly excluded from the process. The committee includes Phil Buhlman, Elisia Cohen, Michael Rodriguez, and Janet Schrunk Ericksen. Concerns were raised about shared governance being disregarded, despite previous claims of its importance. Van Wyk criticized a misleading statement in the Brief suggesting broad university input in the decision-making process and requested a correction from the Brief.

The discussion shifted to how the committee should respond. Caraway suggested waiting until April 1st to review the Provost's recommendations, and if they violate academic freedom, the committee should take a stand. She expressed skepticism about the administration's commitment to shared governance, given the lack of consultation. Van Wyk remained optimistic that April 1st might outline plans for collaboration rather than an immediate policy change.

Caraway also stated that the University Senate had formally voted on a draft administrative policy (Procedure for Developing a New Administrative Policy), raising the question of whether the President must follow constitutional procedures to override it, noting Article II of the University Senate Constitution.* Weiblen speculated that the administration might be stalling to appease legislators concerned about university policies. The discussion ended with the acknowledgment that procedural next steps remain unclear, particularly regarding the President's authority to override the Senate's decision.

5. **Adjournment**

Hearing no further business, Van Wyk adjourned the meeting.

Laurie Cooper Stoll

* Article II of the University Senate Constitution states:
The president may suspend action taken by any senate, council, committee, campus assembly, college faculty, or student constituency and ask for a reconsideration of such action. If the president and a senate, council, committee, campus assembly, college faculty, or student constituency do not reach agreement on the action, the matter may be appealed to the regents by the president, or by any senate, council, committee, campus assembly, college faculty, or student constituency.