

TOO MUCH OF A GOOD THING: A REPORT ON THE COMMITTEE SYSTEM

**Faculty Executive Committee
4/3/09**

I. THE PROBLEM

A number of faculty in different venues have expressed concerns about how governance and service work at Skidmore. One of the main issues is that the Faculty Executive Committee routinely has difficulty getting faculty to serve on committees, including those central to the governance system.

Our understanding of these issues is informed by the following sources: FEC's survey on service, Susan Walzer's scholarly research on faculty culture, meetings with Committee of Committees, IPPC, Academic Staff, the VP for Academic Affairs, several ex-members of CAPT from recent years, email communications with the Dean of the Faculty, Department Chairs and Program Directors, and Chairs of all major committees, various conversations with individual faculty, as well as our own observations and deliberations. This work has led us to several preliminary conclusions.

- We reiterate our commitment to a strong system of faculty governance situated in the context of shared, college governance.
- The committee system is out of control. We have more commitments than we can collectively fulfill. The key indication is too many committee spots per faculty member.
- We risk our effectiveness as a governing body at the College because we are spread too thin. Maintaining that effectiveness requires enhancing our efficiency.
- Most of our commitments are productive and valuable, but too much of a good thing is still too much. The recent proliferation of committee work appears to be based on robust strategic planning (e.g., CIGU, FYE, Responsible Citizenship Task Force) and energetic grassroots educational initiatives (e.g., Water Resources Initiative, Environmental Studies, IRB, Health Professions Advisory Committee).
- As in most every institutional endeavor at this time, we must learn to do more with less. The impact of economic scarcity on governance likely means that the utilization of course releases or stipends in service will decrease.
- The nature of bureaucracy is to protect and expand itself. Each committee has a very difficult time imagining a different way of doing things. Any real reform therefore requires a broad institutional commitment, most importantly including the will of the faculty.
- This issue is about structural arrangements related to formal rules of the system as well as cultural values in terms of certain habits that contribute to the overall problem.

II. DATA

A. OVERVIEW OF COMMITTEE WORK

FEC-Eligible Faculty	264
Average Number of Faculty on Sabbatical	17
Average Number of Faculty Available for Committee Work	247
Number of Institutional Committee Spots for Faculty	226

Number of Institutional Committee Spots Vacant	19 ¹
Number of Institutional Committee Spots Occupied	207
Number of Available Faculty per Committee Spot	1.09
Number of Faculty on 1 Committee	71
Number of Faculty on 2 Committees	41
Number of Faculty on 3 Committees	11
Number of Faculty on 4 Committees	4
Number of Faculty on 5 Committees	1
Number of Faculty on at Least One Committee	128
Number of Available Faculty on 0 committees	119 ²

B. INVENTORY OF FACULTY COMMITTEE SPOTS³

<i>Faculty Committees</i>	<i>Faculty Spots</i>
Committee on Appointments, Promotions and Tenure⁴	6
Faculty Executive Committee	6
Committee on Educational Policies and Planning	6
CEPP Subcommittees	
Advisory Committee on Off-Campus Programs	4
Grade Grievance Subcommittee	3
Assessment Steering Committee	4
Dean of Studies Review Committee	6
UWW Working Group	6
Committee on Academic Freedom and Rights	6
Curriculum Committee	6
Curriculum Committee Subcommittees	
Routine Matters Subcommittee	1
Writing Initiative Subcommittee	2
Self-Determined Majors Subcommittee	4
Faculty Development Committee	4
Tenure Review Board	0 ⁵
Tenure Appeal Committee (CAPT+TRB)	9
Honors Forum Council	4
University Without Walls Committee	4
External Master of Arts for Liberal Studies Committee	4
Athletic Council	4
Committee on Academic Standing	3
Faculty Advisory Board	6
Advisory Panel	0 ⁶
Total	98

¹ We believe this number reflects vacancies as well as a few names we could not track down.

² This number may not seem so large if we consider the numerous faculty who have substantive reasons for not serving at any given time. This might include the 24 department chairs, 10 program directors, roughly 20 tenure-track faculty in their first or second year, the various colleagues who have just finished significant institutional committee work and/or are engaged in substantial departmental work, those denied reappointment or tenure, those on maternity leave, personal leave, or phased retirement.

³ This list reflects our documented committee work at the institution during this year. Our premise is that, while many of these committees are not permanent, we tend to have a certain amount of such temporary groups at work at any given moment. This snapshot provides a rough indication of our general level of activity.

⁴ We maintain that the six emboldened committees (CAPT, CEPP, FEC, CAFR, Curriculum Committee, IPPC), the “big six” central governance committees, warrant special attention.

⁵ Tenure Review Board is only a category of Tenure Appeal Committee members.

⁶ Members of Advisory Panel are drawn from the Faculty Advisory Board. Depending on the cases that arise, none or all FAB members may be drawn in to actual committee work. Therefore, members of AP are in some sense a subset of the members of FAB.

All-College Committees

Institutional Policy and Planning Committee	7
IPPC Subcommittees	
Budget and Finance Subcommittee	2
Admissions and Financial Aid Subcommittee	2
Student Affairs Subcommittee	3
Committee Intercultural and Global Understanding	3
Bias Response Group	1
Campus Environment Committee	3
Integrity Board	2
Board of Appeals	2
Honor Code Commission	1
Information Resource Council	3
Institutional Review Board	4
Institutional Animal Care & Use Committee	4
Safety in Workplace Committee	3
Total	40

Advisory Committees

Engineering Advisory Committee	4
Environmental Studies Steering Committee	9
Health Professions Advisory Committee	7
Neuroscience Steering Committee	4
Women's Studies Advisory Board	3
Fulbright Advisor	1
Phi Beta Kappa Visiting Scholar Committee	6
Total	34

Search and Review Committees

Dean of Admissions Review Committee	2
Director of Arts Administration Search Committee	7
Chaplain Search Committee	1
Total	10

Prize Committees

Palamountain Prose Award Committee	4
Periclean Honor Society Executive Committee	5
Peace for Justice Prize Committee	1
Porter Prize Committee	10
Total	20

FYE Committees

Living Learning Group	2
Candace Carlucci Backus First-Year Prize Committee	2
Teagle Review Committee	3
New Faculty Seminar Program	7
Total	10

Other Committees and Task Forces

Center Study Group (Teaching and Learning)	3
Responsible Citizenship Task Force	5
Sustainable Food Initiative Lead Team	1
Martin Luther King Jr. Planning Committee	1
Water Resources Initiative	4
Other Miscellaneous Committees ⁷	?

⁷ We have learned that there are numerous additional committees attending to various kinds of college business, many of which never become known to the campus community. This largely invisible work often involves the development of grants,

Total 14

Overlapping Membership

(Committee chairs/members who serve on other committees)

CEPP Chair serves on IRC, IPPC, and CC Writing Subcommittee

CIGU Chair serves on IPPC

Campus Environment Committee Chair serves on IPPC

Tenure Appeal Committee consists of TRB and CAPT

Two members of FAB serve on AP

Three members of IPPC sit on FEC

Grand Total 226

C. DEPARTMENT AND PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Countless forms of service are required in departments and programs every day, some of which takes place in the context of formal committees, especially in large departments, and much of which does not, especially in small departments. This service includes work related to curriculum, personnel, strategic initiatives, advising, budgets, infrastructure, capstones, student prizes, faculty development, admissions, alumni relations, and so on. This work surely relates to two items mentioned above we do not fully understand: the 119 faculty members who are not serving on an institutional committee and the numerous “Other Miscellaneous Committees,” which are often invisible to colleagues not directly involved.

III. SOLUTIONS

A. A STRUCTURAL SHIFT

We hope the faculty will consider altering several structural conditions along the following lines.

1. Formally emphasize service on the “big six” central governance committees in new Faculty Handbook language.
2. Revise the Annual Report Summary of Activities form of faculty so as to more carefully distinguish different kinds of service, including work on the central governance committees.
3. Reduce the overall number of faculty spots on committees by approximately 30 percent (and where appropriate those of other stakeholders).

B. A CULTURAL SHIFT

We also hope the faculty will rethink several cultural habits and adopt the following new working principles of governance.

1. Be lean. All things being equal, the smaller a committee the better. It is easier to plan meetings and make decisions. We must balance this goal with appropriate inclusiveness. But we have probably erred too much on the side of inclusion in recent years. (IPPC with 20 members, the new standing subcommittee of IPPC, CIGU with 15, and the new Task Force on Responsible Citizenship with 12 come to mind.)
2. Emphasize consultation more and representation less. Not every committee needs to have multiple representatives from across college divisions, academic departments or even different pools of expertise.

curriculum, infrastructure and so on. We believe that this category, which appears to be growing as a result of strategic planning, entails significant labor not captured in any formal list of committees.

Different colleagues could be consulted productively in the context of more focused, limited timeframes, thus saving their time that would not have to be spent in all the body's meetings and keeping the overall number of each committee down.

3. Attend carefully to the relative weight of faculty voices on any committee compared to that of other constituencies. We should add or subtract individuals representing different stakeholders with consideration for the right balance in terms of the main goals of the committee in question.
4. Serve and protect the central governance committees in special ways. We must make sure that the faculty's commitment to IPPC, FEC, CAPT, CEPP, CAFR and Curriculum Committee is always robust.
5. Use ad hoc committees when a particular challenge requires experts focused on a short-term project. Standing committees will be in a better position to attend to their normal operations when such ad hoc committees are utilized.
6. Direct the results of ad hoc committees' efforts through standing committees in the governance system. Important decisions based on ad hoc committees' work should be avoided without substantive consideration within appropriate standing committees.
7. Invite staff and administrators to take on and/or share in work faculty can afford to surrender for which the relevant personnel are qualified.
8. Require every committee to regularly assess whether it is engaged in worthwhile work. We need to be vigilant about eradicating wasteful habits. And there is no resource we can afford to waste less than our precious time.
9. As much as possible, avoid scheduling committee meetings during the winter or summer breaks. There is growing creep in to large blocks of time previously protected for other activities.
10. Pay special attention to how often and when meetings are held in general. Utilize efficient means of communication (e.g., email) as often as possible without undermining substantive deliberation.
11. Foster awareness among colleagues about the importance of the faculty's active ownership of and thoughtful participation in college governance.