

Minutes from the April 30th Special Called Meeting of the Faculty Senate

A special meeting of the Faculty Senate was meeting called on April 30, 2020 to meet with President McPhee regarding the university's response to the COVID-19 pandemic and plans for next year. The meeting was conducted virtually via Zoom.

Attendance

Present: Michael Arndt, Sanjay Asthana, Sal Barbosa, Nita Brooks, Larry Burriss, Nancy Caukin, Chong Chen, Laura Cochrane, Rick Cottle, Song Cui, Trevor de Clercq, Andrew Dix, Rudy Dunlap, Latoya Eaves, Stuart Fowler, Justin Gardner, Bob Gordon, Shannon Harmon, Jenna Gray-Hildenbrand, Pippa Holloway, Michael Hein, Christina Hiers, Seth Jones, Rachel Kirk, Paul Kline, Marcus Knight, Darren Levin, Melissa Lobegeier, Alfred Lutz, Preston MacDougall, Dan Morrell, Pamela Morris, John Mullane, Susan Myers-Shirk, Kari Neely, Deana Raffo, Joan Raines, Patrick Richey, Brian Robertson, Garrett Salmon, Stephen Salter, Scott Seipel, Mary Ellen Sloane, Raj Srivastava, Zhen Wang, Dennis Walsh, Elizabeth Wright, Andrew Wyatt

Excused:

Absent: Rebecca Fischer, Margaret Fontanesi-Seime, Alfred Lutz, Brian Parsons, Nat Smith

Faculty Senate President Justin Gardner called the meeting to order at 3:00pm. He asked President McPhee to share what is going on with the university during these uncertain times. He also shared that it is typical for McPhee to talk with the Senate in the spring during ordinary times and reminded everyone that the Senate's last meeting is on Monday.

President McPhee thanked everyone for joining the meeting. He shared that he had been meeting regularly with the Steering Committee and that he has continued to be in his office on campus. His focus today was to provide the Senate with an update on how MTSU has been handling the COVID-19 pandemic. He said that he hoped that everyone had kept up with the communications coming from his office to stay informed about where we are, decisions they are making, and challenges they are facing. He decided to err on too much information rather than not enough.

McPhee said that this has been a challenging time at the university. He commended all employees, including faculty, for being able to address daily, fluid situations with as little disruption as possible. He has had many meetings with vice presidents, the provost, faculty senate president, and the emergency management council in an effort to keep ahead of issues in this challenging environment.

He said that the determining factor in his decision-making was information from federal, state, and local public health officials. He emphasized that state and local information was particularly important in making decisions and because of MTSU's measured actions, and not knee-jerk reactions, they were able to make better decisions for MTSU for the spring semester.

Only 3 students living on campus have tested positive for the virus. MTSU has had a total of 12 cases overall. Compared with other universities, these numbers are very small.

McPhee said that his first communication regarding the coronavirus was January 28. An ensemble of musicians from Wuhan China was scheduled to perform. He canceled this event, then shortly after, canceled other events. When students were on spring break, the decision was made to close campus and then extend the break to give faculty time to make adjustments for remote learning.

MTSU has 500 students living on campus for various reasons (e.g. homeless, international students). During the past 6 weeks, the Health Center has been seeing a daily average of 4 students.

On March 23rd MTSU switched to remote/online learning. MTSU was offering approximately 3500 classes – 500 were already online, which means that 3000 classes were transitioned to remote/online learning. McPhee said that considering the size of our institution and size of our student population, the process went “exceptionally well.” A partnership with a wireless company allowed us to provide loans for laptop computers and hotspots for over 700 students. McPhee recognized that the transition also involved difficulties for staff and faculty and that faculty were having to use their own funds to upgrade their home computers, get additional data on their internet/wireless plans, etc. and stated that he appreciated the faculty taking this on.

95% of MTSU employees are working from home. Remote teaching has been extended to the summer.

MTSU is in the process of conducting a student survey. It started a week ago and will go through May 7 and has received 2,400 responses so far. Students were asked about issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic including financial impact, academic future, and ability to succeed in an online learning environment.

- 64% indicated that they were concerned about their ability to succeed
- 75% indicated they were very or moderately satisfied, or neutral, with the faculty/staff timely response to the crisis
- 70% strongly agreed/agreed that faculty were understanding
- 73% strongly agreed/agreed that faculty acknowledge the disruption
- 65% were very or moderately satisfied with having an adequate opportunity to interact with faculty
- 76% indicated they strongly agreed/agreed that faculty did their best in adjusting to the new realities of the semester
- 80% strongly agreed/agreed that that pass/fail option was fair
- 82% strongly agreed/agreed that the university continued to promote teaching and learning through the emergency

Students had an opportunity to make comments on all of the questions. For students who were not happy, the patterns that emerged were that there were problems communicating with faculty, no responses to emails, frustrations regarding adequate notice for changed assignments/deadlines, difficulty connecting with advisors, and faculty not using D2L.

McPhee said that overall, he thought the responses were impressive and that it reflects the good job the faculty have done. He will share the data with the faculty once the survey closes and all responses are in.

MTSU has two sources of revenue – state appropriations and tuition. How well MTSU does with responding to difficult situations with students (and parents) determines the vitality of the institution. The economic fallout – lost jobs, unemployment, loss of revenue for state (sales tax) - is

enormous. McPhee anticipates that there will be major university budget implications and impacts as a result of the virus. Therefore, we need to do everything to provide a quality education that will allow our students and their parents to have faith and confidence in the institution so that they will return.

The national landscape for higher education is to expect a 15-25% drop in enrollment. We've had a recession before, but the difference between this and the 2008-09 recession when people lost their jobs, is that they tried to upgrade their skills by furthering their education. MTSU's enrollment increased. However, many of our students work in the service industry to support their education and have not been working for the past 6 weeks. In addition, students and parents are asking "is it safe to go back" to return to campus when the virus is still present. Parents are still trying to decide if their rising freshman should go to college or take a gap year. McPhee has been talking with his executive team about the potential financial impact.

McPhee has put together a task force to look for innovative ways to deal with the post-COVID educational setting. The task force includes faculty. McPhee stated that when we reopen, we will not be "back to normal," or "business as usual." We need to be able to shape the new normal and be sure we are in a position to keep the university moving. We have gone through a lot of crises in the past, and said he is confident that MTSU will make good decisions and be innovative to weather the storm.

McPhee said that a key decision that needs to be made is if we continue remote teaching and learning or find ways to bring students/faculty on campus. He stated that he is leaning very strongly toward bringing the students back to campus this fall, making sure to attend to the necessary precautions to protect the health/safety of students/employees. There will have to be adequate testing, contact tracing, and sanitizing the campus in order to minimize impact.

McPhee said that we probably won't be able to offer large classes. He asked the task force to look at various scenarios – on campus, hybrid, remote. McPhee said that he is close to making a decision and wants to plan on bringing students back to campus in some form. McPhee said that he feels that he needs to make the decision soon because he is hearing from parents and students that they do not want to be in limbo. They have to make decisions about leasing apartments and on-campus housing. The majority of parents have said that if we do not have in-person classes, their student will take a year off. McPhee said that we need to plan for the positive, but if we get to the point where the country has to shut down again, we will need to be prepared to deal with that scenario.

McPhee opened the floor for questions. He asked for feedback about the decision to reopen, and when to bring employees back to campus. We are still on a "stay at home order" by the governor. Some businesses have been given approval to open in a measured way. McPhee stated that his last communication to campus was that working remotely would continue until May 10. His sense is that we will need to extend this another 2 weeks.

Q: Is there COVID-19 testing capacity on campus? A: McPhee was on a call yesterday with key federal officials and they are telling him that by August, the federal government will have enough tests for institutions to do mass testing. Our plan would be to have enough testing and appropriate health and safety protocol in place for students and employees including sanitizing supplies, quarantining, distancing, and PPEs (personal protection equipment). However, there is no 100% guaranteed safe environment. We will make sure we do everything reasonable and employ best practices to give students and parents some degree of comfort that the university is taking safety and health seriously.

Q: Will student survey feedback be conveyed to departments? A: The survey did not do cross-evaluation because of the quick turnaround that was needed. They will not have information at the department or program level. They are working with deans and chairs to help them get some sense of how their students responded to their programs. But the survey was not intended to be evaluative measure for departments, programs, or faculty.

Q: Will MTSU get help from the state to supply disinfectant, gloves, masks, etc.? A: Right now, the state has not indicated there will be efforts in that area. The CARES Act – congress stimulus funding – allows each university to receive an allocation based on Pell-eligible student numbers. MTSU received one of the largest allocations - \$18M. There are some specific guidelines for accepting the funding – 50% must go directly to students who have been disenfranchised. MTSU will begin to distribute funds to students next week – not every student will get money, depends on Pell eligibility. The other 50% goes toward reimbursement for expenses incurred as result as pandemic (ex. student housing reimbursements) and is about \$4-5M right now. MTSU has highest number of Pell eligible students in the state, so we may be getting most of the state funding. We hope to have the necessary equipment and supplies because of that funding. The majority of our students work in retail and restaurants, are out of work and do not currently have an income. MTSU's student workers have continued to be paid.

Q: If there is an absence of sports, how will this impact the university? A: This will be determined by the NCAA guidelines, our conference, and professional sports. The risk factor goes up significantly with large number of fans. This is currently an unknown and we will have to see what the NCAA and conference says.

Q: Will we have smaller class size for social distancing? A: Absolutely, this is part of the scenarios McPhee is asking the committee to look at. We need to be prepared for this and McPhee has asked the provost to do an inventory of large/medium/small size classes. Depending on where we are with virus, we might be able move classes to bigger rooms. McPhee said that the administration will be working very smartly over the next several months to cover all of these eventualities.

Q: Do you foresee adding additional classes in the evening? A: This is a possibility and the committee has been charged with being creative for a number of scenarios and models. There is even a possibility that we may start a little later in the fall.

Q: What about research and travel for faculty? A: The Dean of the Graduate School and the VP of Research will have a subcommittee looking at this. McPhee said that if at all possible, he wants faculty to be able to continue research if we can provide safety, security, and support. We'll try to find a way within guidelines to not put anyone at risk and to keep as much research activity going on as possible.

Q: Can we have smaller groups of students work together within a class? A: Yes, as you have ideas and suggestions, send to Justin or the provost. McPhee said he has given the task force until May 25 to bring recommendations to him so that we can begin planning.

Q: Is MTSU thinking of an option to have athletic, theatre, music events without a crowd? And, will media program participation be an option for filming? A: Yes, and there is discussion of athletic games and other events going on without fans.

Q: Will there be potential position cuts to account for shortfalls? A: While the task force is not looking at this, it is something that the administration has to give consideration to and plan for. McPhee said that he hopes it doesn't come to that, but we will likely be dealing with serious budget issues from the state and it will take 2-3 years for the state to get back to its pre-COVID economic level. McPhee said that while the state is flush with money and reserves, or "rainy day fund," with billions of dollars, he would not bank on the state bailing us out. MTSU will plan for all eventualities. This could mean a reduction in personnel, but no plans have been made yet.

Gardner closed the meeting by thanking McPhee. McPhee closed by saying he wants to keep faculty engaged and informed and that he is open for feedback about his communications. McPhee expressed his appreciation to faculty and that he is pleased that the majority of our students agree that the faculty have done good work.

The meeting was adjourned at 4:22pm.

Respectfully submitted by Deana Raffo, Recording Secretary