April 19, 2019

Dear Derek,

Thanks very much for the response document from Faculty Senate, dated March 6, which you sent to me on the Senate’s behalf. I appreciate the thoughtfulness with which this document was prepared, and most especially the opportunity of consulting directly with faculty members at the Senate’s March 4 meeting. The time afforded me was most gracious, and I learned a great deal. In the following paragraphs, I will endeavor to address the document’s summative points to the best of my ability following the general order of their presentation.

As you know, I invited the faculty’s collaboration in a joint task force on course caps protocols at the beginning of the Fall 2018 semester. In response to that invitation, the Faculty Senate voted at its September 10 meeting to request that you and I seek the counsel of the Student Senate concerning its views on class sizes. You and I solicited that counsel at the Student Senate’s October 10 meeting, and this avenue of student insight did indeed prove instructive. At that time, once again invited faculty contribution to a joint taskforce on the issue. At its December 3 meeting, the Faculty Senate offered the alternative of forming a representative work group with the aim of developing procedures for addressing administrative proposals to raise course caps. On December 4, while explaining that such a work group, as conceived, would improperly abdicate management rights to set course caps, I reiterated my desire to create a joint task force with the aim of establishing protocols for setting and raising caps on a comprehensive basis. I also noted that, once the protocols were established, creation of a joint work group on consultation processes would be appropriate. At our individual meeting on December 10, you informed me that the faculty did not wish to participate in the joint taskforce on course caps protocols that I had proposed. With respect for the faculty’s wishes, we agreed that an administrative team would create a draft protocols document and share it with BSUFA leadership through the meet-and-confer process. On January 31, I sent you the product of the administrative team’s work, began soliciting faculty input at the February 6 BSUFA meet-and-confer, and offered to discuss the document at a future meeting of the Faculty Senate. The Senate’s kind invitation to its March 4 meeting came in response to that offer, and I am most grateful for having been afforded the opportunity to engage in this productive dialogue.

Informed by my memory of our March 4 conversation, I see no disagreement at all in the Senate’s “Overall Position” beyond its opposition to the course caps document. I share its belief that relationships developed in the classroom are critical to student learning and success,” and that “course cap determination should ultimately be based on what is best for student learning and success.” To that end, the draft document’s rationale articulates the issues that it seeks to address: inconsistency of course caps, unnecessary and inexplicable disparities created by such inconsistencies, negative impact on students seeking timely progress toward their degrees, hindrances to recruiting created by waitlists for courses whose caps appear arbitrarily low, and the overly cumbersome current process for raising course caps through case-by-case negotiation. The profound disparities between caps are clearly evident in each semester’s comprehensive course schedule, which is readily available on the BSU website. Our waitlists are substantial and are published on a regular basis. While the Senate is exactly right in noting the potential impact of class size on student learning, students cannot realize any of the outcomes in classes that do not provide them the opportunity of enrollment. I recognize the value of faculty instinct, informed by experience and disciplinary expertise, in setting course caps. Such instinct and experience are doubly important when supported by outcomes-based assessment of student learning. The notion that the protocols document reflects hidden administrative agendas and desires to punish departments for some unnamed offense is unfortunate, especially given its complete disconnect from reality. I regret whatever role I played in fostering this kind of unnecessary anxiety.

While establishing comprehensive minimums for course caps, the draft document retains the expectation that departments will propose caps and invites petition for exemption from cap minimums. Noting the Senate’s concern about an improper role for Enrollment Management and the Registrar in raising course caps, allow me to clarify that Academic Affairs will retain full authority over such decisions. I apologize for this miscommunication.
As for the Senate’s request that forward movement on course caps protocols be delayed until the 2020-21 academic year, I cannot agree to this proposal. The caps initiative began in earnest last fall, with multiple invitations for faculty collaboration at the front end of the effort. Initiating a year’s moratorium despite extensive work on the administrative side would be irresponsible on my part. Recalling what I consider a more prudent suggestion offered at the March 4 Senate meeting, however, I am willing to implement the protocols through an incremental approach that will be described in their next iteration. The Senate’s suggestions that student-to-faculty ratios and DFW rates be tracked and published yearly seem most wise. Assessment of student learning that reflects best practices in the field will prove even more important in determining the impact of course caps and making adjustments in light of this evidence. The Provost’s office will offer its full support to that end in both professional development and analytical assistance.

I appreciate the Senate’s request for more information on how partnership between the Academic Deans’ Council and the faculty will be structured. The two-representatives-from-each-college concept articulated by the Faculty Senate last December seems a reasonable approach. The Academic Deans’ Council consists of five members, so the numbers would balance relatively well. As Provost, I anticipate that a group so constituted will produce actionable recommendations on criteria for unusually writing and/or speaking intensive courses as well as protocols for assigning classrooms accommodating forty. Should the faculty prefer responding to the product of an administrative process similar to that which generated the course caps draft, I will accept whichever of these approaches you elect to follow.

I concur with the Senate’s suggestion that I made unwise choices of language in regard to the issue of faculty not proposing course caps below historical levels. Although identified as an expectation rather than a directive, the sentence is indeed unduly strong. Departments did appear to understand their proper intent, however, as they proposed lower than historical caps for many sections. To clarify, faculty may freely propose caps and advocate for them, as was anticipated in the “Processes” section of the draft document.

I have read Horning’s article on multiple occasions over the years and particularly enjoy its tongue-in-cheek title. I fault neither this article nor the MLA guidelines you have referenced for their failure to reflect current best practices in learning assessment, given that both are more than a quarter-century old. I support the general observation that class size may impact student learning, which is why the optimum course caps in the February 6 draft do not exceed forty. I played no role in setting historical caps above forty, however, and thus wish to gather meaningful assessment data before deciding on whether and to what extent such caps should be lowered. Absent historical patterns to the contrary, the draft does, in fact, establish maximums as the extent of the “doable” range. I appreciate Chemistry’s note about safety as a critical factor in setting caps and will add that consideration to the list of examples where established minimums don’t apply. As noted in our conversation of March 4, I expect to collaborate with faculty in assessing the impact of both “optimum” and “doable” course caps on student learning outcomes and will make any adjustments suggested by the evidence.

I very much appreciate the Faculty Senate’s representative input as well as the individual comments that follow. As I hope you will find evident in the draft’s revision, both have proved invaluable. Although responses to the latter through this present medium seem beyond its purpose, I would be most happy to discuss in a less formal venue the many meaningful ideas offered by individuals and departments. Curricular design and pedagogy, like all academic pursuits, function best in fluid rather than static environments. Recognizing the importance of experimentation, assessment, and refinement to the effective navigation of such environments, I look forward to and will continue to solicit the faculty’s partnership in our shared work of fostering student success. While cognizant and respectful of the areas where we still disagree, I note with considerable encouragement our profound level of agreement on the foundational principles that guide us. Thanks, again, for the privilege of engaging in this dialogue.

All best wishes,

[Signature]

Tony