**Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes**

**September 1, 2021**

**4:00-6:00 pm**

Attending senators: Taylor Acee, Stacey Bender, Dale Blasingame, Rachel Davenport, Peter Dedek, Jennifer Jensen, Lynn Ledbetter, Ben Martin, Roque Mendez, Danette Myers, Andrew Ojede, Michael Supancic, Nicole Wesley

Attending guests: Sarah Angulo, Ashley Arnio, Jesse Backstrom, Kelsey Banton, Amy Benton, Janet Bezner, Lesli Biediger-Friedman, Nicholas Bishop, Natalie Blackman, Gene Bourgeois (Provost), Emilio Carranco (TXST Chief Medical Officer), Daniel Carter, Carolyn Chang, Timia Cobb (University Star), Leia Downs, Julie Eckert, Valarie Fleming, Kym Fox, Candace Hastings, Katy Head, Regina Jillapalli, Cassandra Johnson, Jennifer Lamm, Michelle Lane, Irma Levrie, Karen Lewis, Erica Nason, Judy Oskam, Joaquin Palacios, Mark Paz, Ramona Salcedo Price, Samuel Pugh, Justin Randolph, Anadelia Romo, Aimee Roundtree, Arlene Salazar, Christine Sellers, Karen Sigler, Susanne Sternthal, Debbie Thorne, Hannah Thornton, Denise Trauth (President), Renee Wendel, Nancy Wilson, Jie Zhu

The meeting was called to order at 3:59 p.m.

**President’s Academic Advisory Group**

President Trauth began by saying this is a difficult time for everyone – and everyone brings their own individual issues and concerns to the beginning of the semester. The work we’re doing at this university is tough work. The president invited Dr. Carranco to today’s PAAG meeting for COVID updates and context.

The pandemic is changing, according to Dr. Carranco. We’re seeing new challenges. Older populations were more affected by the initial version of the virus. Now, we have a vaccine, and the older population is more protected. What we’re seeing now is that infections are happening in younger people. Age 50 is where the most serious consequences begin to appear. Younger people are not as affected by infection. Half of one percent who die from COVID are 18-29. They tolerate the infection better and are less likely to have a serious outcome. Dr. Carranco realized many faculty are concerned about their own risk. Vaccines have been available for months now – and they’re proven to be very effective, even against the Delta variant. Vaccinated people see less symptoms or no symptoms and are less contagious. The combo of vaccination and mask wearing is very effective. Dr. Carranco said he shares concerns of so many people being unmasked. That raises their risk and the risk of others who are unmasked. Being vaccinated and masked provides good protection. Positivity rates are lower on campus, according to Dr. Carranco, than surrounding communities. He believes that’s because many on campus are following safety protocols.

We have seen an increase in cases at the beginning of the semester. Dr. Carranco said the biggest concern is how to stop the spread on campus. Masks play a big role in that. He is concerned about the number of cases they’ve seen this week and will keep a very close eye on data the next two weeks. The hope is there will be a steady, slow decline in cases from the start of the semester. If there is something different, that begins a bigger sense of concern and may play a role in changing gears with mode of instruction.

Contact tracing has changed because it had to change. It couldn’t keep up with the cases. This isn’t a problem unique to Texas State. Dr. Carranco said they needed to adjust the timeliness of notifications and get them out faster. An automated system was developed that will immediately send notifications to professors and students in a class where someone tested positive and reported to Bobcat Trace. They want everyone to take protective measures like monitoring for symptoms, mask wearing and testing. They are already considering enhancements – many based on suggestions from faculty. Faculty will soon be notified of the identity of the positive case to help identify close contacts. Faculty have also wanted to be able to share when they are informed of a positive case by a student, along with any relevant close contact information – so the Bobcat Trace team is looking into a way for faculty to input that data into the system so close contacts can be notified. There are nine part-time contact tracers. Four more are currently being trained. They’re looking to hire six more (two part-time and four full-time). The contact tracers will be focused on looking for clusters of infections in places like residence halls, classrooms, etc. A cluster means a link between positive cases – not just that a certain number of students in a class tested positive. Clusters could lead to disruption of services, which could lead to adjustments.

A senator asked about the Flowers Curative testing center temporarily shutting down early in the week because of lack of tests. Dr. Carranco said 3,000 tests were performed last week, which is twice as much as ever before. Curative ran out of tests and notified Dr. Carranco on Monday. They received more tests Tuesday morning and began testing again. Testing slots fill up quickly, so that’s why the university is trying to get a second testing location on campus. There are also other testing locations surrounding campus in the San Marcos community. In addition, President Trauth announced that testing and vaccinations will begin as soon as Tuesday on the Round Rock campus.

A senator asked for clarification on how to determine clusters, asking for a statistical approach instead. Dr. Carranco said contact tracers are trained to follow specific protocols. They are taught to look for patterns. If multiple cases occur in close proximity in a short period of time, that is a red flag to be investigated. On the surface, things appear to be one way – but, upon investigating, the situation turned out to be different. Dr. Carranco said the Cabinet has shown a willingness to adjust strategy based on data.

Provost Bourgeois reminded faculty they have flexibility to take a class virtual, while staying within the guidelines of the original mode of instruction. Department chairs/directors should be consulted to help make a decision to change modality. As for when the university would totally switch to virtual, there are many factors that would go into a decision like that, including clusters and disruption of service.

A senator raised concerns about the immediate notifications from Bobcat Trace that were delivered during his class, which created chaos in class. The senator also said the university should have been more proactive in providing more testing for a campus of our size. On the first topic, Dr. Carranco said there was a want for information as quickly as possible if there was a positive case. He said they will look at options to see if there’s a better way to deliver notifications. On the second topic, Dr. Carranco said they’ve been trying to get this second location for several weeks. There have been factors that have prevented it from happening just yet. Last year, we had two sites – but Curative took one away. Dr. Carranco did agree efforts to add a second site could have been started sooner. President Trauth also said things looked very different regarding COVID in mid-July – and then Delta came along. The senator said planning should be proactive for worst-case scenario instead of reactive.

A senator raised several concerns. First, he shared comments from faculty who talked about decreasing numbers of students wearing masks in class. Dr. Carranco said he shares the frustration of students not wearing masks. It’s why the tone changed in his email right before the semester started. How and what students do plays a big role in whether we stay open. Dr. Carranco said some of our students have made their choice – to not vaccinate, not wear masks and to put themselves and others at risk. Our communication and encouragement will continue. Ultimately, Dr. Carranco said our students need to know that what they do matters, and he’s hoping it will result in a change of behavior. Provost Bourgeois shared a conversation with a dean about faculty sharing stories in the classroom about the importance of masks and vaccination with effectiveness. Student Affairs is also working with student orgs to wear masks in class and model this behavior for other students. The senator asked how executive orders hamper our efforts. The President said we, along with all 36 public universities in Texas, are state agencies. We cannot mandate vaccinates or masks under the governor’s order. President Trauth acknowledged some would like us to break the law, but the university is not going to do that. She said what we can do is as much role modeling as possible for our students. On Tuesday, the university is rolling out an incentivization program to encourage students, faculty and staff to get vaccinated. Those who have already been vaccinated will also be eligible. The university has signage across campus with strong language to encourage healthy habits like wearing masks – things we can do under the governor’s order.

A senator asked about concerns from faculty who have children at home who cannot get vaccinated. President Trauth said the first line of protection is yourself – and booster shots have started at the Student Health Center. Wearing a mask is the second line of protection to avoid taking home. Provost Bourgeois reiterated the 15% online leeway professors have for in-person classes. A conversation with their chair/director is the best idea for full consideration of options.

A senator asked what happens if a faculty member or a member of their family gets infected. Provost Bourgeois said this is like other situations of extended absences. Faculty can temporarily move to Zoom or Teams. If they are seriously ill, conversations first need to happen with the chair or director.

A senator asked if the university had done any predictive modeling to get an idea of what rates of spread would look like on campus over the next few weeks given students’ current behaviors. Dr. Carranco said there are many models and no way to determine which one is correct or to predict human behavior, but they watch data daily. The senator also asked why the burden of stopping the spread is being put on the shoulders of faculty. Bourgeois said the 85%/15% modality guidelines provide flexibility for faculty.

A senator asked about the disconnect between faculty and administrators, saying many faculty feel like they don’t play into the risk assessment or decision making. Letters were sent to the president and provost on August 11th without much response, and there was no response to a faculty petition with more than 500 signatures. What’s being done to get the relationship back on track? President Trauth said her opinion has always been that faculty are the center of a university. She realizes that this is the most challenging time most of us have ever experienced. President Trauth said she listens to faculty – and the flexibility with teaching modality shows they listen – but faculty don’t speak with one voice. Faculty are in many different places - and coming to one conclusion doesn’t work. President Trauth said we must keep the university operating, and COVID is not going to go away soon. She said we must figure out how to keep Texas State University operating while recognizing COVID is going to be around for a long time. ￼President Trauth said she believes many of the issues from faculty come down to asking the executive order to be broken. She said the university will not break the law. Provost Bourgeois added that many changes or decisions that have been made have been made based on feedback from the university community.

**TEAMS Group**

Valerie Anderson raised a suggestion from a senator to move Senate business like document revisions, chat, etc. to Microsoft Teams. A decision was made to test this with a soft launch.

**Commencement – Sign-Up for Mace Bearers**

Mace bearers lead the procession at commencement. A senator usually acts as mace bearer for their college’s commencement. A senator shared their hope that no one would volunteer for commencement based on COVID concerns. Another senator said a vote should be taken if that’s going to be the case. Senators were advised to think about it, and a decision will be made later.

**Chair/Dean Summative Reviews**

Senators are asked to be a non-voting, impartial participant in the reviews of chairs and deans. The director and a substitute may need to be named. The role of the senator is to solicit feedback from faculty as a neutral observer. In the case of a dean summative review, the senator will chair the review process and get feedback from staff, faculty, donors, etc. They put together a document that goes forward to the provost. Senators should not sign up for their own colleges. Sign-ups will be handled through Teams.

**Policy Reviews**

Four senators volunteered to review university policies.

* UPPS 05.02.02 Texas State Purchasing Policy, due September 8 (Senator Ojede)
* AA/PPS 04.03.01 Academic Affairs Computing Priority Committee, due September 9 (Senator Jensen)
* AA/PPS 01.02.31 Council of Chairs, due September 17 (Senator Davenport)
* AA/PPS 01.02.32 Academic Affairs Budget Committee, due September 20 (Senator Acee)

Minutes for the August 25th meeting were approved.

**PAAG Debrief**

A senator raised the concern that Bobcat Trace could not keep up with the amount of COVID cases on campus and has been outsourced to faculty. Another senator noted two small concessions: One, regarding incentives. Two, allowing faculty to talk to chairs/directors if they need to exceed the 15% remote cap for in-person courses. The senator suggested the Senate continue to press the provost to bring this up with deans. A senator reiterated concerns over a lack of prediction models with COVID and lack of statistical methods for moving to remote learning.

**Assistant Provost Hiring Committee**

The Senate chair was asked to have the Senate identify someone to serve on the search committee for an Assistant Provost. Senator Blasingame will serve as Senate representative.

Meeting adjourned at 6:28 p.m.