

Faculty Report to the Radford University Board of Visitors

Report prepared by Faculty Senate President, Dr. Laura Jacobsen
September 14, 2012

It is my honor and privilege to be here today in service to the Radford University Board of Visitors. I am honored to serve as the President of the Radford University Faculty Senate, and I take very seriously my role here today in communicating with all of you in ways that are honest, positive, and hopefully productive for all of us. I see my leadership role as one that is to help foster changes that bring us closer together as a well-functioning campus community.

Yesterday, I presented to the Academic Affairs Committee on several of the diverse and exciting projects being addressed in that division. I brought copies of that report to distribute to all of you and hope you will take the time to read it, however, I see no need to provide those same details here again. With respect to that report, I will leave you with the simple perspective that the overall state of our Academic Affairs at Radford University is strong. Dr. Joe Scartelli led us artfully—no pun intended to the Dean of Visual and Performing Arts—through difficult times to help us re-establish ourselves as *one* community, and Provost Sam Minner has demonstrated outstanding, honest, transparent, and productive leadership during his first year. I reiterate from yesterday's Academic Affairs meeting that Provost Minner has been very involved with our faculty, our Faculty Senate, and our Faculty Senate Executive Council; and the entire Academic Affairs Leadership Team, under Provost Minner's leadership, has been extremely welcoming and collaboratively-spirited in inviting and also being highly responsive to my participation with them in their weekly meetings as a faculty representative since May. This will continue through the coming year. Simply put, I am impressed. I also reiterate that more recently, the Faculty Senate Executive Council also advocated having faculty participation on the President's Cabinet, and beginning with the August 9 meeting, the President graciously invited me to serve on the Cabinet as Faculty Senate President. The faculty are very pleased with and encouraged by with this decision, as it reflects a commendable innovation in leadership that can hopefully help to build stronger relationships and improved communications between our faculty and upper administration. It is truly an honor to serve in that role as well.

All of us in this room—every one of us, love and share a common commitment to Radford University's future. I am so often impressed with the things I hear that many of you are doing for our institution, and I thank you. Moving forward to today's focus, I would like to speak with all of you regarding ways to strengthen our own communications and relationships between the faculty and Board of Visitors, with many of the recommendations being informed by reporting from the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges. The challenge we face together has nothing to do with our spirit and intentions as individuals, but primarily with our self-organization and processes for building collaborative relationships.

The Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges is the only national association that serves the interests and needs of academic governing boards, boards of institutionally related foundations, and campus CEOs and other senior-level campus administrators on issues related to higher education governance and leadership. Its mission is to strengthen, protect, and advocate on behalf of citizen trusteeship that supports and advances higher education.

In its 2009 report on “Faculty, Governing Boards, and Institutional Governance,” the Association of Governing Boards indicated that, “how boards, presidents, and faculty contribute to and engage one another in institutional governance speaks to the health of a particular college or university as well as to the broader principles of autonomy, self-regulation, and accountability of higher education” (Schwartz, Skinner, & Bowen, p. 3).

We see the clear evidence of the importance of healthy, collaborative, consultative, and transparent relationships between these constituencies when we consider, for example, the drama that unfolded on the UVA campus this summer. As Rector Dragas herself admitted afterward, a key factor to the emotionally and negatively charged climate was a breach of trust of the institution. We faced some of our own very similar and significant struggles at Radford University in 2009, and my hope is that we demonstrate that we learned from that experience by taking important steps that might make us leaders and role models for other colleges and universities in our governance.

In general, universities’ governance is threatened when Board members and faculty either do not communicate at all or communicate only through back channels that ultimately undermine the institution and weaken its governance. Moving forward, the President’s leadership will be an important factor in helping us as we establish new and productive relationships between our faculty and Board.

The Association for Governing Boards (2009) referred to the President as the “Nexus of Communication” and suggested based on its research with participants at 417 different institutions: The president was mentioned in this research as the person most responsible for determining the quality of interaction between the board and faculty, and the main means for communicating information to the faculty, board, and campus community. In small institutions and large ones, those with a history of conflict, lethargy, or success, whether governance worked well or not was seen to rely in large measure on the president. (p. 14)
The report continued, “The quality of interaction—communication, understanding, and work accomplished—is dependent upon the president” (p. 17).

The Board has often asked the faculty at previous meetings what can be done to help improve relations and strengthen our governance. Here are several ideas from the Faculty Senate Executive Council for your consideration, which collectively might be very beneficial to our institution. Toward these ends, **a primary initial request for consideration of President Kyle is to help promote these new avenues for sustained, meaningful interactions between the Board of Visitors and faculty, and to also consider developing additional meaningful ways herself to engage with the faculty.**

- A first idea for your consideration is that the next Board of Visitors retreat be a **retreat with the faculty**, such as with the Faculty Senate Executive Council or with the Faculty Senate at large. This could possibly be a meeting facilitated by a consultant from the Association of Governing Boards, or it could be a working meeting to address ways to build open, meaningful, formal mechanisms for communication and relationship building between the Board and faculty.
- Second, it may be beneficial for the Board to consider **inviting one or more faculty members who are appointed by the Faculty Senate Executive Council to serve as members on each Board committee** and participate with an option to present in committee meetings. Faculty membership on Board committees already occurs in 56% of institutions (Schwartz, Skinner, & Bowen, 2009). Debacles such as those at UVA can be avoided with enhanced communications at the ground level.

- As a third idea, we propose the **creation of a new Board of Visitors Communications Committee**, parallel to existing Board committees, including faculty, staff, and student representation and focused on (1) improving and maintaining communication between the Board, President, and faculty as well as with students and staff and perhaps also on (2) discussing key campus issues or initiatives with faculty, students, or staff—such as by visiting campus one or more additional times annually to work closely with the Faculty Senate Executive Council or other constituent groups. This provides faculty and interested Board members with opportunities to learn with and from one another, to mutually listen to and learn from each other’s perspectives, and to potentially generate new ideas collectively to strengthen our campus community or promote positive change. Board members willing to and interested in making presentations in classes would also be invited to do so. This committee could also convene during Board meetings and report to the Board just as the other committees already do. At present, 14% of institutions have such a committee, but given RU’s history, it seems we could benefit from becoming a leader in these efforts.
- Fourth, we propose that the Board consider designating that the **President of the Faculty Senate or her/his designee automatically serve as the non-voting advisory representative to the Board**, whereas currently the Board selects a faculty representative from a list of three faculty members submitted by the Faculty Senate. Our Faculty Senate Executive Council feels strongly on this matter because this is a symbolic but powerful gesture on the part of the Board to defer to and show a spirit of collegiality with the faculty-elected leadership for this important role. There is no one better informed about the collective voice of the faculty than the Faculty Senate President. We hear the suggestion that the Board might be able to move its decision to an earlier date, however, such a suggestion does not get to the heart of the matter of trust and respect that we all crave. I think all of you crave it as well. The Board benefits, and we all collectively benefit, when we demonstrate confidence in one another. As an additional advantage, this would greatly simplify what is now a multi-step process that has taken over three months.

In relation to the issue of faculty representation to the Board, President Kyle indicated that the Board wanted to receive three names because they like to get to know different faculty members and to not have the same faculty member serve on the Board for two years in a row, if that individual served consecutive terms as Senate President. Radford faculty very much agree with the suggestion that increased opportunities for Board members and faculty to get to know one another better are necessary, although not in the context of Board appointments. With steps such as those above, communications are sure to improve. To address the President’s concern, we have a different proposal, which the President has also already encouraged:

- We would like to invite the Board to **set aside time at its next meeting in November for a social event for faculty and staff to get to know our Board members**. The event would be co-sponsored by the Faculty Senate, AP Faculty Senate, and Staff Senate and hopefully funded by administration. The Presidents of each of these bodies, including myself, have discussed our interest in planning such a function, and if we learn of the Board’s interest in participating and preferred timing for the event, we will be delighted to take next steps to pull together such an event. Please discuss this matter and let President Kyle know if you would like us to proceed.

One of the most significant undertakings among faculty, AP faculty, staff, and students alike in the coming year will be to work toward a process of internal governance reform. Improvement of faculty-board relationships is one key aspect to such reform, but the reform process is actually much more expansive than this and also a very exciting endeavor that we pursue as a campus community. However, we cannot be successful at this without your help, so I continue by briefly summarizing the process and what we would like to request from all of you as Board members.

Internal Governance at a university is the formal structure and framework for governance, with the inclusion of the Board of Visitors, President, the President's Cabinet, the Student Government Association, the Faculty Senate, the AP Faculty Senate, and the Staff Senate, as well as necessary committees and/or councils. Radford University has a strong commitment to collaborative governance, the willingness to listen to all ideas, to respect competing concerns, to evaluate the merits of many alternatives, and to communicate to help build consensus. Successful collaborative governance allows the university to address complex issues and be adaptable to changing needs.

The process of internal governance reform is a relatively common one for universities, as universities outgrow the governance models that initially guided them. The same is true at Radford University. For example, our current internal governance document makes references to administrative positions that no longer exist and neglects to mention others that do exist. Descriptions of committee memberships are in some cases outdated or confusing to interpret, and the processes and pathways for change are oftentimes unclear or nonexistent. As a result, it is common for proposals to come forward from various committees or Senates and for uncertainty to exist regarding who, or which committee, is the next reviewer in line or what cumbersome steps may be needed for proposals to become policies. Faculty, staff, students, and administrators alike—including the President—believe in the need for internal governance reform that simplifies our organization and processes while also being truly collaborative in nature. We aim to develop an internal governance system that promotes, for all constituencies, a role in shaping policy and a voice in decision making. Our revised system will support timely and responsive action, complex coordination and excellent communication across groups and levels, and appropriate joint planning and implementation.

Toward those ends, we hired a consultant, President Rodney Smolla of Furman University to our internal governance reform process, with Dr. Erin Webster-Garrett leading the effort. In June 2012, President Smolla visited campus and led four focus group sessions and one open forum with our faculty, administrators, and staff to learn more about our institution's governance and to begin to consider possible recommendations for our self-improvement. The focus group sessions and forum were well attended and extremely productive, and President Smolla will be returning for a second visit on October 25-26. During those visits, he will meet with the Faculty Senate, SGA, Staff Senate, AP Senate, and President Kyle, in addition to meeting with the newly constituted Internal Governance Task Force and hosting a town hall meeting.

One key point that President Smolla emphasized more than once during the focus group sessions and in closing remarks at the forum in June was his desire to meet with the Radford University Board of Visitors to talk openly with them about their necessary role in the reform process, if it is to be successful. The faculty and staff strongly agree that such a meeting could be very beneficial and even critical to our efforts to create a new internal governance document. **We ask that the Board of Visitors please set aside time at its February meeting in Richmond for a meeting with President Smolla.** We spoke with President Smolla and are delighted that he is available during that time. The Board's

conversation with him is the most important thing the Board can do at this time in supporting our efforts as we move forward.

Additionally, a second consideration for the Board to consider regarding our internal governance reform process is the possibility of pursuing **professional development for Board members through the Association of Governing Boards**. The AGB offers “Board Education and Consulting Services” such as a full-day Board Education Workshop that may be beneficial (<http://agb.org/form/board-education-and-consulting-services>). Another option may be for Board members to attend the 2013 Workshop for Board Professionals, to be held April 19-21, 2013 in San Francisco (<http://agb.org/events/workshop/2013/2013-workshop-board-professionals>).

Our internal governance task force will be working throughout this academic year to obtain and compile feedback from across university constituency groups and to tentatively draft a written proposal in summer 2013. We then anticipate sharing the draft with the campus community and working on revisions through the fall of 2013. Assuming we come to consensus in the four Senates, we would move the document forward for review by the President’s Cabinet and Board of Visitors. We are excited about the possibilities and look forward to working with the Board in any manner it deems appropriate as we carry out this process.

Thank you very much for your time today, and I look forward to continue working with all of you in productive ways as we move forward together in support of the institution so dear to all of us.

Respectfully submitted,

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Reference:

Schwartz, M., Skinner, R., & Bowen, Z. (2009). *Faculty, governing boards, and institutional governance*. Washington, DC: Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.