

Senate Affairs Committee
Vanderbilt University Senate
Report for Academic Year 2012-2013
Chair: Alex Hurder

Committee members:

Alex Hurder, Chair - Law
Jeffrey Blume - Medicine
Bonnie J. Dow - Arts and Science
Lynn E. Enterline – Arts and Science
Al Powers – Medicine
Sarah Rohde - Medicine
E Michelle Southard Smith - Medicine
William P. Tansey – Medicine
Richard Watters - Nursing
Joseph H. Wehby - Peabody
David Weintraub, - Arts and Science

Committee Charges:

1. Identify existing University Standing Committees with which the Faculty Senate should have standing membership or liaisons, so that the Faculty Senate can be aware of important issues being considered by other university bodies. Explore mechanisms for establishing liaisons and reporting new developments to the Faculty Senate.
2. Maintain relationships between the Faculty Senate and University Staff Organizations, and report on issues that are of mutual concern.
3. Learn about the accreditation process employed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and explore how the accreditation process might be improved to meet the needs of major research universities, such as Vanderbilt.
4. Explore mechanisms by which the Faculty Senate can identify concerns of the faculty, and explore mechanisms by which recommendations made by the Senate can be communicated to faculty.
5. Recommend mechanisms by which the Faculty Senate and the faculty in general can be informed about important issues being considered by the university administration.

Work done:

1. **Identify existing University Standing Committees with which the Faculty Senate should have standing membership or liaisons, so that the Faculty Senate can be**

aware of important issues being considered by other university bodies. Explore mechanisms for establishing liaisons and reporting new developments to the Faculty Senate.

We identified the following University Standing Committees:

Athletics
Calendar
Chemical Safety
Environmental Advisory
Environmental Health and Oversight
Faculty and Staff Benefits
Institutional Animal Care
Officer Education Advisory Committee
Radiation Safety
Religious Affairs
Technology Review
Institutional Biosafety
Traffic and Parking

The Senate Affairs Committee felt that it was not practical to seek standing membership by Senate members on any of the University Standing Committees. There is ordinarily overlap between membership in the Senate and the University Standing Committees based on the interests of individual faculty members. The goal of learning about issues being considered by the standing committees can be accomplished by setting up channels of communication. The Senate Affairs Committee recommends that Senate Executive Committee designate someone to contact the chair of each of the University Standing Committees at the beginning of the academic year, and during the year if necessary, to ask to be informed of issues that the standing committee is likely to deal with during the year. Any member of the Faculty Senate who serves on a standing committee could also be asked to notify the designated contact person of issues before the standing committee that might interest the Faculty Senate. The Senate Affairs Committee is prepared to take on this responsibility if requested.

2. Maintain relationships between the Faculty Senate and University Staff Organizations, and report on issues that are of mutual concern.

Senate Affairs Committee member Michelle Southard-Smith and Senate Vice Chair Judy Aschner met with Anna Thomas, President of the University Staff Advisory Council (USAC), who was organizing the USAC effort to establish a formal breastfeeding policy at VU. The Faculty Senate voted in December to endorse the report, “Breastfeeding Support and Resources for New Mothers,” prepared by USAC in conjunction with the Margaret Cunningham Women’s Center and the Vandy Moms Group. USAC’s primary goals were to bring awareness to the issue, to increase the number of lactation rooms

on campus for nursing mothers, and to gain support of senior administrators. Michelle Southard-Smith and Judy Aschner worked together to communicate to the Senate Executive Committee, Chancellor Nick Zeppos, Vice Chancellor for Health Affairs Jeffrey Balser and Provost Richard McCarty that this is a really important issue that needs their support.

- 3. Learn about the accreditation process employed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS), and explore how the accreditation process might be improved to meet the needs of major research universities, such as Vanderbilt.**

The Accreditation Process

The Senate Affairs Committee met with Timothy McNamara, Vice Provost for Faculty and International Affairs and Professor of Psychology, and Dawn Turton, Assistant Provost for Faculty, on December 5, 2012, to discuss the university's accreditation process.

The Senate Affairs Committee was charged with learning about the accreditation process employed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and exploring how the accreditation process might be improved to meet the needs of major research universities, such as Vanderbilt. Committee members also wanted to find out whether there is a role for Vanderbilt faculty and the Faculty Senate in improving the accreditation process.

Vice Provost McNamara and Assistant Provost Turton gave an extensive report on the accreditation process and provided the committee with a written summary and relevant documents. The following five points summarize the highlights of their presentation:

1. Vanderbilt University as a whole is subject to accreditation by a regional body, SACSCOC, that accredits all degree granting institutions of higher education in its region. Although some individual schools and programs, such as Engineering, Chemistry, the Medical School, the Divinity School, and the Law School, have separate disciplinary accrediting bodies, they are also subject to accreditation by SACSCOC.
2. The regional accreditation is required by the U.S. Department of Education in order to be eligible for student financial aid and inter-university transfer of credits. Loss of accreditation would result in the university being ineligible to award federal aid to its students and to participate in other federally funded programs.
3. There is currently great pressure from the U.S. Department of Education to require outcome assessments as a condition of accreditation. Outcome assessment means some form of testing (not course-based) that confirms that students have made progress prior to granting a degree.

4. Vanderbilt's next accreditation will be in 2017. The last was in 2007. The movement towards outcomes-based assessment has developed over the last 10 years, and there is likely to be an increased federal focus in this area. Vanderbilt is committed to using assessment measures that 1) effectively evaluate student-learning outcomes; 2) are appropriate for its mission as a research institution; and 3) can be used to make improvements to educational programs. These outcomes should be developed and assessed by the faculty of each program who are best qualified to evaluate what students have learned.
5. More people from Vanderbilt should volunteer to be on the accreditation teams. Research-intensive universities are just a small percentage of the 807 institutions accredited by SACSCOC, but the perspective of research universities needs to be represented at every level to prevent burdensome demands for irrelevant and nonproductive data.

The Accreditation Process

Each region has its own accreditation process, and all institutions of higher education in the region are subject to it. We are in the region served by SACSCOC, of which Vanderbilt University was a founding member. SACSCOC accredits the entire university, not individual departments or programs. Some individual schools and programs - such as Engineering, Chemistry, the Medical School, the Divinity School, and the Law School - have separate accrediting bodies, but they are also subject to accreditation by SACSCOC.

For example, the law school is accredited by the American Bar Association (ABA), but only freestanding law schools may use accreditation by this agency to establish eligibility to participate in Title IV federal aid programs.

Institutions overseen by SACSCOC go through the full reaccreditation process every ten years. Vanderbilt's last accreditation was in 2007. All colleges and universities must also be reviewed in the 5th year of their ten-year accreditation period. Thus, data are presented to SACSCOC every 5 years. The ten-year report evaluates the university on 90 principles of accreditation. The interim report addresses 20 of the 90 principles.

The Vanderbilt administration strives to make the process as productive as possible and also to inform the accreditors what the mission of a research university is.

Why should we worry about it? Accreditation is necessary to be eligible for federal financial aid. Vanderbilt's eligibility to participate in federal financial aid programs is based on SACSCOC accreditation, not on any of the other accrediting bodies. Accreditation is also necessary in order for Vanderbilt credits to be recognized by any other accredited university. Inter-university credit recognition is also based solely on regional accreditation. Loss of SACSCOC accreditation would impact Vanderbilt's eligibility to award federal aid and to participate in other federally funded programs.

SACSCOC itself is evaluated by the Department of Education. After the last evaluation, in June 2012, SACSCOC was found to be out of compliance in these areas:

1. Insufficient assessment of student achievement;
2. Inconsistent application of standards relating to general education requirements;
3. Insufficient evidence of substantive change approval.

SACSCOC must demonstrate compliance in these areas by June 2013.

The current U.S. Department of Education administration is not favorable to self-evaluation. The alternative is outside evaluation of programs and student progress.

In 2007 Vanderbilt began to develop more comprehensive assessment plans for its educational programs. Most recently these efforts have been expanded to include the development of rubrics for use by graduate programs. It is anticipated that with the increased federal focus on outcomes assessment, requirements in this area may increase again over the next few years.

The U.S. Department of Education and the regional accreditors look for evidence of : (1) direct measures and (2) indirect measures of student progress. Examples of direct measures of learning include measures of student achievement on specific learning goals (e.g., critical thinking); examples of indirect measures include course grades and admissions rates into graduate programs. The regional accreditors do not prohibit measuring indirect factors, but they also require direct factors. Vanderbilt uses a variety of direct and indirect measures to assess student outcomes and achievement.

To be productive, an assessment process should:

1. Decide what students should be learning in each program
2. Assess whether it has been achieved.
3. Use that data to improve.

All degree programs at Vanderbilt have assessment plans in place to evaluate student outcomes and to make improvements as needed.

Current efforts to revise the accreditation process

There has been some movement to revise the accreditation process. There have been efforts to:

1. Uncouple financial aid from accreditation; and
2. Focus on mission, not region (realignment).

Vanderbilt has endorsed the second one. The reauthorization of the Higher Education Act will probably be the next opportunity to make changes to the overall accreditation process.

In September 2011, the U.S. Department of Education charged the National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity (NACIQI) with providing advice on the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. NACIQI undertook a dialog with the universities about the current system of recognition, accreditation, and student aid eligibility. On May 26, 2011, the Provost of Princeton University, Christopher L. Eisgruber, sent a letter to NACIQI on behalf of Princeton, Vanderbilt, Stanford, Cornell, Duke and the University of Michigan. The letter detailed the high burden in time and money imposed by the accreditation process. It added that, “all this work provides little educational benefit.” It concluded: “a regional system of accreditation, in which geographically-defined agencies try to design standards that apply to vastly different kinds of higher education institutions, no longer serves this country well.”

The administration has signaled that accreditation will be a focus of its higher education policy in the next few years. The 2013 State of the Union briefing paper released by the White House addresses holding colleges accountable for cost, value and quality. It states that the President will call on Congress to incorporate measures of value and affordability into the existing accreditation system or establish a new alternative system of accreditation.

As congressional efforts proceed, it is important that Vanderbilt is part of the discussion. In addition to the advocacy efforts of our federal office, we also participate in efforts led by groups such as the Association of American Universities (AAU). AAU is a group of 62 of the leading research universities. AAU is working with its members to advocate a reduction in the cumulative burden imposed by regulations, as the reporting requirements detract from institutions’ ability to carry out their missions. Changes to the accreditation process are part of this ongoing discussion.

Vanderbilt is also attempting to have an impact on the accrediting agency. Vanderbilt was a founding member of the SACS Liaison Group, which attempts to inform the SACSCOC leadership of the unique role of research universities in higher education. This group includes Duke, Rice, and the University of Virginia, among others. The liaison group has had some early successes. For example, there was a proposal to require measurement of learning outcomes at the individual course level, and the liaison group succeeded in having that removed at the last minute.

The level of assessment has been a topic of discussion in the Liaison Group. The on-site evaluators expect that we will be assessing learning outcomes in every segment every year. No business does that. Businesses do statistical sampling and use statistical models. Random sampling with averaging would be much less burdensome for universities.

The major research universities need to place more people on the accreditation teams. More people from Vanderbilt should be on the review list, so that they will be available to be selected for committees and accreditation teams. If the research universities are represented at every level, the process is more likely to focus on collecting appropriate and productive data.

Faculty members who are willing to consider service on SACSCOC accreditation teams or committees can contact Dawn T. Turton, Assistant Provost for Faculty, at dawn.t.turton@vanderbilt.edu.

- 4. Explore mechanisms by which the Faculty Senate can identify concerns of the faculty, and explore mechanisms by which recommendations made by the Senate can be communicated to faculty.**
- 5. Recommend mechanisms by which the Faculty Senate and the faculty in general can be informed about important issues being considered by the university administration.**

The Senate Affairs Committee decided that the best way to get information to all university faculty was through the MyVU and MyVUMC email services and websites. Committee chair Alex Hurder met with Beth Fortune, Vice Chancellor for Public Affairs, on March 25, 2013, to discuss using MyVU and MyVUMC to facilitate communication between the Faculty Senate and university faculty. Elizabeth Latt, the Assistant Vice Chancellor for News and Communications, and Melanie Moran, the Executive Director for Integrated Communications and Associate Director for News and Communications, also attended the meeting. The meeting resulted in agreement to include a link to the Faculty Senate website in MyVU and MyVUMC at least monthly. The Senate Affairs Committee agreed to see that new topics and agenda items would be posted on the Faculty Senate website and that the editors would be informed when new material is posted. The MyVU editor Kara Furlong will communicate with Andrea Hewitt, Program Coordinator of the Faculty Senate, monthly to review the Senate agenda and items that need to be covered.

Recommendations for next year and beyond:

1. Contact chairs of the University Standing Committees and Senate members who are members of the standing committees at the beginning of the academic year (and during the year if needed) to identify issues before the standing committees that might be of concern to the Senate and the faculty generally. Request a copy of the agenda for each meeting of the standing committees. Encourage each university standing committee to post its agendas on the Internet and to make a

link to its website available to the Senate. These responsibilities can be added to the charges of the Senate Affairs Committee for 2013-2014.

2. The Senate Affairs Committee should assist in modifying the Faculty Senate website so that it becomes a user-friendly source of information about issues coming before the Senate and the University Standing Committees.
3. The Faculty Senate website should include a statement encouraging faculty members to contact their Senators to express concerns about any developing issues.