

Commission on Faculty Affairs
January 31, 2025
10:30 am – 12:00 pm
Burruss 330E and Zoom

Present: J. Lemkul (presiding), R. Fricker (ex officio), R. Gabriele, D. Agud (Faculty Senate), J. Lahne (Faculty Senate), K. Schneiderman (Undergraduate Student Senate), J. Hawdon (Faculty Senate), R. Jin (Faculty Senate), J. McGlothlin (Faculty Senate), L. Learman (Dean), N. Connors (A/P Faculty Senate), V. Buechner-Maxwell (Faculty Senate), R. Gaines (Faculty Senate), E. Lavender-Smith (Faculty Senate), A. Torres (Graduate and Professional Student Senate), K. Benson (Faculty Senate).

Absent with Notice: N/A

Absent: K. Pitts (Dean)

Guests: E. Kim (Faculty Affairs), A. Myers (Policy and Governance), S. Duma (Interim Department Head, Biomedical Engineering & Mechanics), Ben Greenawald (Elements Implementation Team, Data Scientist), R. Miles (Elements Implementation Team, Research Impact Coordinator), E. Mazure (Elements Implementation Team, Research Impact Librarian), G. Pannabecker (Elements Implementation Team, Assistant Dean & Director), B. Lockee (Elements Implementation Team, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs).

J. Lemkul called the meeting to order at 10:32 a.m. A quorum was present (50%+1 of current membership=8).

1. Welcome and Introductions

2. Consent Agenda

- a. **Review and Approval of Agenda.**
- b. **Approval of Minutes from November 1, 2024.**

The consent agenda was adopted without objection.

3. Reports from Senates

- A/P Faculty Senate: Nothing to report.
- Staff Senate: N/A (waiting for new representative).
- Undergraduate Senate: The Senate successfully passed an internal resolution related to student parking.
- Grad/Prof Senate: Aaron Torres was introduced as the new graduate student representative. The Senate had their first reading of a resolution that involved the addition of new senators from remote campuses to CGPSA.
- Faculty Senate: The Senate recently heard a presentation from VT Police and will begin to look at resolutions in the coming week.

4. Unfinished Business

N/A

5. New Business

First Reading of CFA 2024-25I

Resolution to Rename the Department of Biomedical Engineering and Mechanics

J. Lemkul introduced guest S. Duma, the current department head for Biomedical Engineering and Mechanics (BEAM). S. Duma expressed to the committee that Biomedical Engineering has been fully separated from Mechanics, and would like to request a name change to reflect the current state of faculty and students in the department. This request amounts to a simple administrative name change, as there are no alterations to course names or degrees. The CFA expressed universal acceptance of this request, and a first reading will proceed in Senate in the coming week.

Discussion

Consideration of Appeal Related to Faculty Handbook 2.12

J. Lemkul introduced a formal request made by an instructional faculty member who wishes to appeal for a waiver of the policy outlined in Section 2.12 of the Faculty Handbook. The current policy restricts instructional faculty members of the rank of assistant professor or above from pursuing an additional degree at Virginia Tech. J. Lemkul provided additional contextual information about the circumstances related to the instructional faculty member's goals, and their argument for an exception to this policy. The CFA was in agreement to support the present appeal, but have a number of considerations for future CFA reference:

- Clarify the language about what types of assistant professors are included in Section 2.12 of the Faculty Handbook (e.g., tenure-track only).
- Discuss whether policy 2.12 should be limited to instructional faculty only, or if there should be varying classifications for faculty who are eligible or ineligible from future exemptions.
- Although it is to the university's benefit for faculty to get additional education (and this should not be limited by rank), the reason for this policy has stemmed from issues of past conflicts of interests (e.g., spouse becomes department head of department in which the current faculty member wishes to obtain a degree). As such, there should be language about mitigating potential conflicts of interest for these cases, with more specific criteria.
- Should this issue (and any subsequent changes) be memorialized in the Faculty Handbook or other forums? Is there a way to make this case a precedent for future cases?

First Reading of CFA 2024-25C

Resolution to Establish a Discussion Forum Under the Purview of the Faculty Senate

J. Lemkul revived a suggestion that was circulated in Fall 2024 in regard to having a forum to discuss pressing issues in a non-combative, educational manner to the broader campus community. While initially motivated by campus tensions surrounding the Israel/Palestine conflict, it may be within the purview of the Faculty Senate and CFA to host periodic discussion forums on any important issues that may arise in the future for faculty, students, and the community. The purpose would be to exercise academic freedom within Virginia Tech in having a forum to discuss timely issues in a manner that models civility and respect for the community. Ideally, these forums would be hosted by the Faculty Senate, who would also be responsible for selecting the invited guests (likely scholars who represent a diversity of opinions). J. Lemkul has suggested the addition of one line to Article III of the Faculty Senate constitution on this topic, which he invites commission members to add comments, suggestions, and edits to over the

next week. CFA members also suggested using language from the prior task force on academic freedom/freedom of speech to intersect the goals of these two initiatives. J. Lemkul plans to edit the first “whereas” statement to incorporate the recommendation of the task force. L. Learman offered to bring the resolution to the Council of College Deans for feedback, and J. Lemkul welcomed the deans’ input.

First Reading of CFA 2024-25F

Resolution to Amend the Faculty Handbook to Include a Statement on Freedom of Speech and Academic Freedom

J. Lemkul presented CFA 2024-25F for first reading, which includes the addition of language to Chapter 2 of the Faculty Handbook taken directly from the 2022 task force responsible for developing a statement affirming Virginia Tech’s commitments to academic freedom and the constitutional right to free speech. While the statement from the task force used language that was approved by University Legal Counsel, CFA members would like to confirm the source of the right to academic freedom (e.g., the commonwealth, first amendment rights), and whether this right is granted to the institution only, or to individuals that make up the institution. The CFA expressed support for this resolution, and J. Lemkul will draft a preamble accordingly.

Discussion

Elements and Annual Reporting

J. Lemkul introduced guests B. Lockee, R. Miles, G. Pannebecker, B. Greenawald, and E. Mazure. The guests introduced themselves and their current roles as part of the Elements Implementation team. Many faculty members have expressed frustration and difficulty involved in their annual reporting, Elements templates, and efficacy of the reporting process in general. J. Lemkul expressed interest in creating a working group and assigning CFA members to create a survey to tap into faculty opinions regarding Elements. B. Lockee also provided information that Virginia Tech is currently in year three of a five-year contract with Elements, so now would be an appropriate time to discuss current limitations. CFA members raised a number of questions and concerns including, but not limited to, the existence of Elements user studies, the ability of Elements to generate dossiers, concerns over the quality of data/inputs that faculty members enter into Elements, the workload and hours faculty spend manually correcting data, the efficacy of word document outputs as opposed to other formats, why Elements is unable to web-crawl or scrape the internet for more accurate information, the prioritization of STEM information formatting over the humanities and social sciences, the possibility of tailored reports within Elements, and the general demoralization of faculty members involved in this process.

The Elements team addressed a number of these concerns, and made the following comments: there have been informal user studies (e.g., surveys, town hall meetings) over the years to improve the system, but they are currently discussing the implementation of a comprehensive user study with input from college liaisons, there are dossier templates available (e.g., CNRE uses one for P&T), the word document format is typically a college-level decision and FARs exports were preferred this way in the past. The Elements team is also in the process of developing a faculty-centric survey for Elements and EFARs. Overall, the CFA expressed their appreciation of the Elements team and understands the complexity of reporting processes across the University. The CFA offered to interact with the Elements team to help them gather additional data to further support their efforts to improve the efficacy of Elements and faculty activity reporting.

7. Adjournment

There being no further business, a motion was made to adjourn the meeting at 12:01 pm.