

The Academic Senate  
President's Report

Santa Rosa Junior College  
May 20, 2020

**Fair thee well**

With today's meeting I conclude four years as President of the Academic Senate. As it happens, the four-member Executive Committee will remain the same into next year, but with a change of roles. Julie will now be president and I will take an advisory role as past president to serve wherever and however it may please her. I will be present to render knowledge, insight and wisdom, such as I have, that I have learned over the last 4 years as president along with the four years before that as Vice President of the Senate.

These have been four tumultuous years. This institution has been driven into one crisis after another by the election of Donald John Trump, which had a profound effect on our undocumented students; by extended school closures because of wild fires and/or power outages three years in a row; by what has been called "Summergate"; by the imposition upon our system of successive education reforms, all of them controversial and passionately contested; and now by a pandemic. Through most of these tumults, the Academic Senate has had a small Executive team which has collaborated with AFA and Department Chairs to provide leadership to meet these challenges, and guide important decision of the Academic Senate as a whole.

I want to thank those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty to collaborate with me as a team over the last couple of years.

Although she is no longer with us, I want to give tribute to **Jessica Melvin**. For a period of about six months, May-December, 2018 there were no other executive officers, as the previous ones had resigned and no one had yet come forward to run. During that time Jessica and I ran the Senate and it couldn't have been done without her. I also want to thank **Tristan Frazier** for stepping into the storm with no previous experience and practically no preparation with the senate and doing a noble job helping us keep it together.

I am grateful to **Julie Thompson** for stepping up to run for president, and for being a tireless and effective member of the executive team, especially in the current crisis. Although she often says she is relatively new to the senate, she has been well and rapidly prepared by the crucible of sequential crises. I have absolute confidence in handing it over to her.

Anne and Paulette have been my teammates for a year and a half and they have been essential, working on Senate issues in addition to so many other responsibilities. **Paulette Bell** is the first adjunct instructor to hold such a senate office in which I know she found herself juggling many competing demands which have been a challenge. I have greatly appreciated her insightful contributions and often startlingly fresh perspective.

**Anne Donegan** has amazed me throughout the last year and a half as she has done this work in addition to being department chair and working on several committees. She has done much of the heavy lifting, lead with intelligence and initiative, and the Senate is lucky to have her.

I will finish with a couple of reflections about what the Academic Senate is and does. Many will recognize here that I address some complaints and criticisms we have received. Feedback is always welcome, we know we make mistakes, and we have adjusted many times to criticism and suggestions. But not all criticisms are valid, in fact. And it remains the case that the faculty at large, the institution at large, and those new to the senate, still have need of understanding what the senate is and is not.

### **The Senate is Not a Rubber Stamp.**

Some have complained that the Senate is too critical, and doesn't trust its own committees and accept their work without any challenge ("I expected only minor tweaks here and there" was how it was put on the senate floor by a committee chair). Others complain that at times the Senate feels like a rubber stamp. One cannot act on both of those criticisms because they are mutually exclusive. And the correct one to act on is the second. The Senate is not a rubber stamp.

That necessarily means that trust really has nothing to do with it. The senate's relationships to committees and task forces that it forms or that report to it is not analogous to interpersonal family relationships that depend on trust. Rather, the relationship is analogous to democratic institutions such as the relationship between the US congress and its various committees. Bills, resolutions, and recommendations that are brought to the larger body are always scrutinized, edited, altered, and often rejected by the decision making body which represents a diversity of opinions and interests. Trust is irrelevant and can have nothing to do with the process; rather it involves reasoned arguments and hashed-out compromise. Another analogy is peer evaluations. It would be unprofessional for a faculty member up for evaluation to say to her department colleague whose turn it was to write the evaluation, "Trust me. Trust that I'm a good teacher, and don't bother coming to my class, just sign the form." The correct, professional response to that would be, "Trust has nothing to do with it. My job is to observe your teaching while, as far as I am able, to set aside, to hold in abeyance, whatever prejudice I have—whether positive or negative—in order to write as honest and unbiased evaluation as I can." The Academic Senate has an absolute duty to scrutinize, criticize, assess, evaluate and debate what its committees bring.

Returning to democratic institutions, that IS the way they work. I have served on three statewide Academic Senate (ASCCC) committees that report to the state Executive Committee, and after they get through with it, to the whole body of delegates. I have spent hundreds of hours of work writing resolutions, articles, and white papers. Many have been rejected by the executive committee. Others have been altered there only to be rejected by the body as a whole. Nothing I have produced has gone through the evaluation and debate process unscathed, intact, or "a little tweaked." Nothing. No one doing senate work at the state level expects that the Executive Committee or the voting body just trusts them to do well and rubber stamps it.

## **The Senate is a Decision-Making, Elected, Representative Body**

We hear that some senators are afraid to speak, and that other dominate. We hear that some senators only express their own opinion rather than representing their constituents. All senators should reflect on the following responsibilities, which is in fact what you signed up for, whether you fully realize it or not.

### **Find Your Voice and Use it.**

The chair of the meeting (the president) has a little bit of power to guide the conversation, but the president is not and cannot be the personality police, or micromanage tone of voice. The president does not, as an instructor does, take initiative to reach out to the quiet students in the back of the room. That is not their responsibility. The onus to find out what one's constituents think, to process that in terms of one's own convictions, and to make it known on the floor is on each individual senator. It is not anyone else's responsibility.

### **Participate in the Democratic Process**

If you don't like or disagree with something, first speak up, then vote accordingly, then run for office. There is always a shortage of people to do this work, both of the Senate as a whole and of the Executive Committee. There will be elections for Vice President and Secretary in the fall, senate seats will be open next spring, and the next presidential election will also be in spring of 2021. Who will be the next Senate President? Who the Vice President? Secretary?

Maybe you.

Think about it. The senate is one of the most important organizations in our system. If you want to improve it, the best way is run for office.

Shalom al'khem

Eric Thompson