

Speaker's Oral Board of Visitors Report
November 2021

The Faculty Senate has identified a serious governance problem at JMU. Let me share that concern with you today. Governance at a well-run university is a collaborative effort of the Board of Visitors, the Administration, and the Faculty. The Board of Visitors, which is the final authority on all governance matters, plays the vital role of ensuring that the university serves the interests of the public that funds it. It hires the top administrators and, working with them, sets the strategic direction of the institution. The Administration works with the faculty to develop strategic recommendations for the Board, and it manages the myriad day-to-day activities incident to running a university. As for the faculty, their most important governance role is to ensure the academic integrity of the institution. In playing this role, the faculty serve both the university and the larger society.

A civilization is most likely to flourish if it fosters the free and open exchange of ideas. So we need institutions that allow ideas of all kinds to be laid on the table, then be rigorously critiqued, evaluated, and applied. The university plays this role. And within the university, this role is played mostly by the departments, from medieval times a group of self-governing scholars schooled in the canons of evidence in their discipline and devoted to the discovery and dissemination of new knowledge.

Three things are essential for departments to play this important social role: tenure, faculty ownership of the curriculum, and faculty primacy in the hiring process. We need new ideas, but if one's employment is at risk whenever one proposes a new idea, the flow of new ideas that is the lifeblood of a progressing society will be staunched. Thus, the need for tenure.

There is no limit to the number of political, religious, and commercial groups who have an interest in the curriculum and who would like to control it. Faculty ownership of the curriculum helps ensure that the content of courses is knowledge that has been tested and validated by the canons of evidence within the discipline. So it is important to maintain faculty ownership of the curriculum.

However, faculty tenure and ownership of the curriculum protect the life of the mind only if they are coupled with faculty primacy in the hiring process. Academic disciplines are a

complex web of theories, facts, specialties, and subspecialties. That complexity means that one generally needs to be a specialist within a discipline, a department faculty member, to properly evaluate whether job applicants have mastered the discipline and are equipped to develop new knowledge in it.

Recent changes in JMU's hiring protocol, made without consulting the Senate, have greatly reduced the role of department faculty in the hiring process. Faculty no longer control the composition of search committees. People outside the department are routinely added, even serving as chair. Faculty used to leverage their deep disciplinary expertise, their detailed knowledge of the department's needs, and their intimate acquaintance with applicants' accomplishments to develop a ranked list of applicants most fitted for the job. Job offers were then extended in the sequence specified by that ranking.

The new protocol requires faculty to do all the same review and evaluation work, but forbids them to embody what they learned in an ordered list. The right to determine who will receive an offer has been transferred to the Provost and Dean, with an assist from the AUH. Provosts and Deans do not have a nuanced knowledge of each candidate's accomplishments and, for most hires, lack disciplinary expertise.

The rationale for stripping faculty of their primacy in the hiring process is to more efficiently and quickly achieve DEI objectives. Concentrated power facilitates the quick attainment of focused ends. But it also opens the door to ideologically motivated sudden shifts in direction. It is much easier to replace a few Board members, have them replace the Provost and Dean, then use those Administrators' now concentrated power to change the faculty and the curriculum, than it is to replace 1200 faculty.

Thus, JMU's present and future DEI achievements would rest upon a surer foundation if the University restored faculty primacy in the hiring process. In its October meeting, the Senate passed two resolutions that affirmed the faculty commitment to DEI. Its hiring resolution stated, "the objective of recruiting and retaining diverse faculty is universally shared by JMU faculty." A separate resolution concluded as follows: "Be it therefore resolved that the Faculty Senate supports strengthening DEI in the General Education Program." I have repeatedly

mentioned in these meetings the Senate supply side DEI resolution that passed last April and awaits funding.

The Senate and its officers have not met with the Provost since the Senate passed its hiring resolution. We have had a long-standing collaborative relationship with Provosts that is decades old and consider our cooperative relationship to be a major strength of JMU. Our fond hope is that we can enter into discussion with Provost Coltman, find a way to reverse this policy, and restore the centuries old role faculty have played as guardians of academic integrity within each discipline, while also facilitating the attainment of our shared DEI objectives.