

UT administration subverts, silences faculty voice

By Tom Palaima
 Daily Texan Guest Columnist

Before the meeting of the Faculty Council scheduled for April 12, the only philosophical conundrum I had ready was the time-honored "If a tree falls in the woods, and there is no one there to hear it, does it make a sound?" Now, I have given rise to another: "Is it possible to walk out on a meeting that isn't taking place?"

This has been a trying year for those charged with meaningful decision-making at UT. Note: I do not include here the Faculty Council. The council makes no meaningful decisions and, by UT statutes, mainly dispenses advice that no administrator is required to take seriously.

Its role in University governance is highly circumscribed. Its every decision is, again by University statutes, subject to controls by duly appointed administrators in a chain of command stemming from the governor and Board of Regents, which appoints the president, the presidentially appointed provost, and down through college deans and departmental chairs.

Recently, a proliferation of original ad hoc committees, dominated by administrators, has superseded the roles of many of the Faculty Council's standing committees. These new committees virtually guarantee that decisions of the president and provost will be made within administrative silos.

There are meaningful levels of dissatisfaction about many decisions that have been made and how they have been made: the controversial changes to foreign-language requirements that took up much of the late summer and fall; the authorization of a \$2 million raise for the head football coach in December; freezing of staff salaries; firings of staff and lecturers; and significant reductions in graduate assistants; \$1 million of University trade-

mark and royalty revenues spent transforming Room 212 of the Main Building into what one faculty wit called "a Victorian tart's boudoir" at a time when educational programs were being downsized and the Cactus Cafe was targeted for closing because of the purported loss of \$66,000 per year; proceeding with a new liberal arts building project funded via the unprecedented mechanism of cuts to the instructional budget; and mandating merit pools for faculty that would likewise come from cuts, without ever asking the faculty whether they approved of such a trade-off. Nor were faculty consulted about freezing staff wages while pushing through with a merit pool that saw raises going to fewer than 40 percent of the faculty.

On all these matters and more, meaningful faculty input was rarely sought and almost never at the proper time. As later information revealed, in regard to both the Cactus Cafe and the liberal arts language changes, the truth was at least shaded by administrators — or, let us say facts were "interpreted" and procedures were orchestrated in ways that subverted responsible and well-informed decision-making.

As is well-known, the closing of the Cactus Cafe is being revisited after full exposes based on documents obtained through Freedom of Information Act requests by the Austin American-Statesman, The Texas Observer and a fearless graduate student named Hayley Gillespie.

These show that two top administrators reached a decision in early December to close the Cactus Cafe and then proceeded to manipulate the process leading to a "decision" reached by a duly formed committee made up of students and faculty in a meeting when faculty were absent and the crucial issue was not on the agenda. In round two, the Faculty Council had still not been consulted regarding

a decision to be reached by April 30. On Tuesday, the Faculty Council received an e-mail from UT Vice President for Student Affairs, Juan Gonzalez, inviting its overworked and overbooked volunteer members to a general forum set for April 15.

This ridiculously short notice e-mail came as no surprise, given the fact that on Monday, Executive Vice Provost Stephen Monti had called a quorum at the council's meeting — something he had no right to do — where a Faculty Council resolution on the Cactus Cafe was to be discussed openly. And the meeting was canceled.

When council chair Janet Staiger continued the meeting off-the-record, overworked faculty who had come to hear reports from people who had taken the time to write and come to deliver them, Monti objected even to that.

When I requested to give my report on the Coalition on Intercollegiate Athletics, which had been postponed from March to April already, arguments were raised against so doing, I got up and left what one lone administrator had turned into a fiasco. The whole non-meeting was an insult to faculty who put in large amounts of uncompensated time to try to maintain some academic values here.

All that the Faculty Council has is the right to speak words. When administrators use parliamentary gymnastics to see to it that those words are not even uttered, well, we get more than a philosophical conundrum. We get much less in the way of guidance by the very people who even the United States Secretary of Education says should be guiding our universities and colleges on crucial issues.

As Bob Dylan remarked a dozen years ago, "It's not dark yet, but it's getting there."

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