

Opening Remarks to the CLA Faculty Senate by Chair Michael Johnston

September 13, 2022

It is a tremendous honor to serve as the Chair of the CLA Faculty Senate for the 2022–23 academic year. By way of introduction, just a brief bit about myself: I am an Associate Professor in the English Department. I joined Purdue in the inauspicious semester of Fall 2008, and I am now in my fifteenth year at Purdue. I am at the beginning of my second consecutive three-year term on the Senate. As for research, I work on the copying and circulation of literary manuscripts in late medieval England, and thus my work is based largely in archives and libraries in the U.K. In the classroom, I regularly teach the survey of early British literature, the history of the English language, and introductory courses on fiction.

At this first meeting of the year, I want to do three things in my opening remarks. First, I want to articulate for you all what my values and priorities are, so that you can have a sense for where I hope to take the Senate in the upcoming year. Second, I would like to touch on a few of the themes that have emerged from the Qualtrics survey that our faculty colleagues completed last week. And then finally I will reiterate two key issues that the Senate took up last year under Pat Boling's leadership, and which I would like to see us make progress on this year.

So, first, my value and priorities: Quite simply, transparency and shared governance are two things I believe are essential to any university. All healthy, well-functioning universities need faculty who are free to teach and research, and who have a large say in determining the intellectual direction of their university, their college, and their department. And such institutions need an administration who listens to the voice of the faculty, respects areas of faculty autonomy, and communicates its decisions clearly to the faculty. A healthy dialogue must lie at the heart of communications between faculty and administration. I hope that the Senate can be one of the primary venues for such a dialogue, and as Chair I will strive to make it so.

We, the faculty, generate knowledge and we, the faculty, help introduce students to the world of learning. Anything that gets in the way of that mission, I believe, is antithetical to our entire reason for being here at a university. So when curricular changes are instituted against the will of the faculty, or when faculty input into hiring their colleagues is dismissed, or when

tenure-track lines are replaced with contingent labor, we all have a right to be concerned, for these sorts of erosions strike right at the heart of our professional identity, which we have shaped over years of assiduous research and teaching. Our expertise and ability to communicate to our students is the reason they come here, and it's the essential service we provide to the public. So when faculty voices are devalued, the university loses. Period.

If you have seen the agenda, you will see that the final part of the meeting will be devoted to an open discussion of concerns, from the Qualtrics survey, which I hope we can use to set our goals for the year. But to anticipate a bit of that, in these opening remarks I want to touch on a few key themes that emerged from this survey. The two predominant themes in the survey were concerns about shared governance and concerns about transparency—precisely mapping onto my values, as it happens. For the former, our colleagues were troubled by hiring practices in the College. In particular, several raised concerns that departmental hiring needs are being ignored in favor of college-wide initiatives, and that the CLA administration is dictating hiring practices to departments. This is definitely an issue the Senate needs to address, and I hope that we, as a body, can work to assess how widespread this concern is, and if turns out to be so, then we will strive to achieve some resolution to this issue. Perhaps we can encourage representatives of the administration to meet with the departments that have these concerns. Perhaps we could have a town hall focused on directions for future hires, where we could also have a dialogue about practices in allocating lines. Perhaps the Senate could develop a statement of best practices and encourage the administration to sign on. We will, I hope, pick this up in our discussion later in this meeting.

The second main concern to arise from the survey of CLA faculty is that we would like to see more transparency. It is clear from their answers that faculty want to know about the intellectual direction of the CLA, and they want to know why certain decisions have been made. For example, several colleagues asked about the new hiring initiative in sociogenomics: Why this research area, in particular? What informed these priorities? Why so many hires devoted to this area, we asked in the survey. Speaking anecdotally here, and not gleaning from the survey: My sense is that CLA faculty are excited about any initiative that brings money and hires to our College. But when such a rapid change is introduced, centering around a term with which many of us are not even familiar, we have cause for concern.

As regards transparency, faculty also asked about the Dean's review, about which Provost Akridge emailed us a few weeks ago. As the Provost reported, 71% of us completed this survey, an unheard-of number for surveys of almost any type. So clearly faculty are invested in helping to shape the future of the CLA. But since the report is not being made public, many colleagues feel we are owed a summary. We want a frank and open discussion about the state of the CLA—what we're doing well, where we need to improve, and how we perceive our leadership. For those, like myself, who value transparency, this is a pressing concern, and thus I hope that over the course of this year, we can work towards giving faculty a voice in the direction of the College.

Finally, turning to unresolved business from last year's Senate, I first want to thank Pat Boling, last year's Chair; Rebekah Klein-Pejšová, last year's Vice Chair; and Bradley Dilger, last year's Secretary, not only for their work last year, but for their diligence and generosity in continuing to serve over the summer, as they sought to secure new leadership for the Senate. Pat gave her closing report to the Senate at the April meeting, and the issue of parental leave is one that I hope we can prioritize this year. First and foremost, the DEI Committee did yeoman's work in studying parental leave policies in the CLA and comparing those policies to those at peer institutions. As they showed, we have work to do. And the Senate had unfinished business addressing the recruitment and retention of faculty of color. So it is my hope that we can effect a policy change on parental leave and that we can make progress on ensuring that all faculty feel equally treated and valued by us all. If the Senate accomplishes something on those fronts alone, it would be a major boost to faculty morale and would represent a real improvement in working conditions for our colleagues.

In closing, I want to make a simple claim: We, the faculty, are the lifeblood of the university. As a medievalist, I recognize that our earliest universities, in thirteenth-century Paris, Oxford and Bologna, emerged from small groups of students congregating around scholars. As more students gathered around more scholars, a corporate body devoted to teaching and learning took shape. So, at its roots, the university is a collective of scholars doing research, and then sharing that research with students who have chosen to come to those scholars for knowledge. It is thus my sincere conviction that everything we do, at the department level, the college level, and the university level, needs to be driven by a faculty-centric mindset. When looking at a new

university initiative, I always ask myself, How does this initiative help faculty in their research and teaching? As your Senate chair for the year, this is the question I will always keep front and center. I look forward to serving you during the year, and I invite you to reach out to me with concerns, comments, or ideas for how we can continue to make the CLA an ever more engaging and dynamic place to be.