

Opening Remarks to the CLA Faculty Senate by Chair Michael Johnston

October 4, 2022

Welcome to the October meeting of the CLA Faculty Senate. The Agenda Committee for the Senate has an ambitious set of goals for the year. And although today's meeting looks to be rather straightforward, we have a lot of issues we wish to tackle throughout the year, so please do be on the lookout for some initiatives to be announced in the next few meetings.

So I thought I might begin today's meeting by giving you an update on the issues that the Senate leadership wants to address this year—outlining what we have done since the last meeting, and going over some of the priorities we have identified for the remainder of this semester.

Your Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee, under the leadership of Senator Andrew Flachs, will be reporting later in the meeting about their continued efforts to address faculty concerns about paid parental leave policies in the College. As you may remember from last year, they produced a detailed report, outlining the widely varying practices across the College, and they made a few proposals aimed at achieving a baseline, uniform set of practices. These proposals were tabled at end of the last academic year, as there were some concerns about the practicalities of implementation. Their report from the Spring concluded with the hope that this discussion would continue in Fall 2022. So here we are. You will have received links to this report and the Committee's proposals in the invitation to today's meeting, which Sen Lindsay sent to all of you yesterday.

For basic reasons of equity, we need to make progress on this issue. As their report from last year clearly demonstrates, most faculty are left negotiating parental leave policies with their department head. And while we have great department heads in this College, leaving things up to personal negotiation can create inequities. I don't know the way forward here, but we will discuss this later in the meeting, and I want to encourage everyone to share their thoughts and ideas about how we might do better in this area. We might ask the Faculty Affairs Committee to take this up and begin working with department heads and the administration on developing a policy. This is merely one idea that the Senate leadership team has discussed, and we can delve further into potential solutions later in the meeting.

The Senate leadership is next going to ask the DEI Committee to take up concerns that have been raised about the climate for Underrepresented Minority faculty in the CLA. We discussed some of these issues briefly at the end of the last meeting, but I want to reiterate those concerns here, simply to highlight what we are going to ask the DEI Committee to work on over the next few months. So, as you may remember from our discussion at the last meeting, there were three main issues faculty had raised in the Qualtrics survey. First, that we need to institute specific programs and policies to help retain URM faculty. Second, that we need clearer communication from the administration about the hires that were promised as part of the Equity Task Force. And third, that we need institutional mechanisms in place to protect URM faculty who are targeted by students when they teach about issues of race, gender, sexual orientation, or class.

Now, I cannot promise that the Senate, working with the DEI Committee, will be able to adequately address all these issues. But I can promise you that we are going to try. But I can also guarantee you that the more commitment we have from you, the Senators, to speaking up about issues of concern to URM faculty, the more likely we will be to achieve tangible results. And this applies to all of us—whatever our identity categories. It cannot be up to those who directly experience harassment or experience a lack of community to fix it themselves. I believe that it's the responsibility of all of us to create an equitable and hospitable workplace. And while I realize that the CLA Senate has limited capacity and a limited remit, I want to work within the powers we do have to make the CLA as equitable and hospitable as we can.

After our opening meeting, I had email contact with a few Senators who expressed a wish for the Senate to present more facts about the experiences of URM faculty. What is the retention rate of URM faculty compared to faculty as a whole? Can we identify reasons faculty are leaving, and does the environment here have a measurable role to play in this? I want to acknowledge the validity of these critiques of what I presented at our September meeting. At that opening meeting, I was merely reporting what issues colleagues had raised in the Qualtrics survey. I was not making a formal report of facts. As Chair, I am not in a position to be the fact-gatherer. That is where the DEI Committee will come in.

So now it is time to ask the DEI Committee to work on this issue. The Senate leadership has been in discussion with Senator Flachs about specific actions the DEI Committee might take, and we intend to formulate a specific charge for his committee in the coming weeks. In the meantime, I can tell you that both he and I are committed to coming up with something actionable. Neither of us wants to produce yet another report that might make us feel good about ourselves, but which winds up in a desk drawer. We want, that is, to come up with some direct and straightforward proposals about things the CLA can do. But we also want to make sure that we understand the issues being raised by URM faculty. This is the concern raised by some of those who emailed me—that is, do we know for certain what the issues are. I can say, based on the Qualtrics survey, that there is work to be done. So, I encourage all of you to be in touch with your departmental colleagues, asking them to help us identify what the specific issues are and what specific actions they would like to see us adopt.

Your Senate leadership team also continues discussing ways forward on addressing faculty discontent with hiring practices across the College. We realize that not all colleagues share this concern, but we also realize that, among those who do, passions are running hot and morale has taken a serious hit. So we are going to ask the Faculty Affairs Committee to discuss potential ways forward. We are not yet ready to formulate a specific charge for them, but we are going to work on this over the coming weeks, and we will keep you apprised at future Senate meetings. Perhaps we will ask the Faculty Affairs Committee to adopt a statement of best practices, expressing the will of the Senate for how hiring committees ought to be populated. But, once again, we need the entire Senate to be involved, so please do communicate with your colleagues regarding concerns about hiring, and bring those concerns to us, so that the Faculty Affairs Committee can be fully apprised of our colleagues' thoughts.

Finally, at the last meeting, we discussed concerns regarding Cornerstone. The Agenda Committee formulated a list of questions that we posed to Dean Ebarb, and we will discuss those later in the meeting.

You will notice a trend in my remarks here—that is, I have repeatedly emphasized that the Senate is a representative body. I do not want the Senate leadership to make up things for the Senate to do based on our own ideas, intuitions, hobby horses, etc. Instead, I want us to be responsive to changes the faculty want to see and actions that our colleagues want us to undertake. So I ask you all to be in regular contact with your department about the proposals coming from the Senate. But I also ask you to be in contact with them to solicit ideas for the Senate to take up. I would like to see the Senate continue as a democratic body representing the will of the faculty. We have a good foundation for this, but we can do more. So we always leave room on the agenda, near the end of each meeting, for New Business. My dream would be to see this part of the agenda get filled with proposals being brought to the floor. But I leave that up to you all to fill that up.