News from the Senate

• The Senate and its committees, Distance Education and Student Learning Outcomes, have been working hard to address the recommendations from ACCJC.

• On March 17 and 26, the Senate sponsored a Taskforce on Student Success in the Classroom. The conversations generated many ideas and suggestions, some of which may be included on the Title V proposal due on May 19.

• Elections were held on March 17. The 2015-2016 Senate Officers are Robert Bethel, President; Kevin Smith, 1st Vice-President; Katie O’Brien, 2nd Vice-President; Michelle Bean, Secretary; Sheila Lynch, Parliamentarian; and John Frala, ASCCC Representative.

• The Chancellor’s Office informed the college that the Auto Tech Baccalaureate Degree will not be on its March agenda. The Chancellor heard concerns from some area CSUs. However, we are encouraged that Steve Tomory, John Frala, and Dean Mike Slavich are talking with their CSU counterparts and trying to find solutions.

• Congratulations to the following on their academic rank promotions: Eugene Blackmun, Professor; Jeronimo Ribaya, Associate Professor; Michelle Bean, Associate Professor; Ted Preston, Professor; Jeannie Liu, Assistant Professor.

The Question of Academic Freedom

Vann Priest, President Academic Senate

The Board of Trustees recently approved a revised policy on academic freedom. The revision was the result of collaborative efforts among every campus constituency. This is its story.

I began pondering about academic freedom in 2010, when I came across the book No University is an Island: Saving Academic Freedom. Written by Cary Nelson, a former president of AAUP, the book lays out a case for vigilance and action against the threats to academic freedom. I highly recommend this book to those interested in the danger of outcome-based instruction, the increasing dependence on contingent faculty, and the intersection of academic freedom and shared governance.

Academic freedom exists, because “the common good depends on the free search for truth and its free expression.” (AAUP) Now some people outside of academia often misconstrue the notion of academic freedom. Some claim that professors use it to inculcate impressionable minds with dangerous political ideas or that we use it to excuse rude and boorish behavior, but it primarily guarantees that we are free to discuss our discipline, especially when that discussion involves controversial topics.

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The Question of Academic Freedom

For example, I have the credibility, responsibility, and right to rail against politicians who ignore the vast scientific consensus on climate change when I discuss thermodynamics.

We must remember, though, that we do not take class time to discuss the last Dodgers’ game or abortion rights in a course in which such discussions are not cogent, such as an electricity and magnetism course.

Then in the summer of 2013, I read an article in the Chronicle of Higher Education describing the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals decision in Demers v. Austin stating that professors in public institutions can speak to matters of public interest, particularly in areas of governance. What impressed the Senate Exec most in this article was the call by the authors, both high level administrators, to recognize the additional need for the freedom to also address matters in college governance. It was then that the Senate Exec began a discussion on academic freedom.

Senate Exec crafted a draft that explicitly covered participatory/shared governance in the policy. After the Senate approved the suggested revisions, we forwarded the draft to the President’s Office so that it could begin the review process. It was in the Planning and Fiscal Council (PFC) that the collaboration of the campus constituencies began to improve the draft.

PFC named a subcommittee to look at the draft and suggest changes based on the conversation in committee. This subcommittee consisted of Vice-President of Student Affairs Henry Gee, then-Dean of Student Affairs Darryl Foster, CSEA President Sandra Rivera, ASRHC President Alejandro Ramirez, and yours truly, the Academic Senate President. It was there that two substantive changes occurred. Henry suggested the inclusion of language from the AAUP that reminds us that we should be accurate, exercise judiciousness, and show respect for the opinions of others. But perhaps the most radical change happened because Sandra asked a simple question: “Why shouldn't the policy guarantee academic freedom for all campus members.”

The newly revised draft became a subject of a special session of the Board of Trustees. A lawyer for the college provided a comprehensive history of academic freedom, as well as the relevant case law. I reviewed the draft for the Board and explained the rationale behind each change. Trustee Mary Ann Pacheco related, somewhat passionately, an example of her classroom days when the subject matter invited emotional and energetic discourse to illustrate why the policy encourages intense discussions.

The college now has one of the strongest and most forward-thinking board policies on academic freedom, one that strongly mirrors the principles of Rio Hondo College. The policy can and should be used by other colleges as a model.

To see the new policy, click on the Board of Trustees link under the Faculty & Staff tab, go to Board Policies and Administrative Procedures, and look for BP 4030.

“... the common good depends on the free search for truth and its free expression.”

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Some thoughts to consider when you look at the value of our Rio Hondo College Faculty Association. What do we all get as members?

Here are just a few things that the Association does for its members: Employment stability, contract security, due process, a voice on issues, health insurance benefits, work load, liability protection, and collective bargaining power.

The Association I am talking about is you. You, the members, make it strong. It is that strength that has made all of those protections our contract provides a reality.

When you look forward into 2015, become an advocate for your Association. Get involved and help shape the Association in the direction that you would like to see us all move.

Join us for our next luncheon and meeting:
Thursday April 16 at 12:45 pm in the Board Room and in May join us for the end-of-the-year luncheon.
CLIC•ERS for Success!

Facilitators can come to your classroom if you are going to be out or if you just want a presentation given. They will talk to your students about topics that you choose including those relating to important dates, achieving success, and others. All you need to do is go to the CLIC•ERS link from the Rio Hondo home page and complete a short form. Please take advantage of this program designed to enhance student success.

For Spring 2015, CLIC•ERS has the following presentations • Help! Where do I go? A General Overview of RHC Student Services • Dang Deadlines! A Recap of Upcoming Important Due Dates at RHC • I’m On What? Keys to Avoiding Academic Probation • Wanna Get an “A” Tips for Student Success.

Presenters may also share their journeys in reaching college success and personal stories on how and why they ended up in their disciplines or majors.

The CLIC•ERS committee is also looking for any faculty member who would like to join in presenting to classes when available. Please email clicers@riohondo.edu, if you are interested in joining this vital student success effort.