

Minutes of the Faculty Senate Meeting

UTRGV Faculty Senate

Date: Tuesday, March 11, 2025

Time: 3:00 pm – 5:00 pm

Location: Zoom Webinar

Senators Present: Abdurrahman Cagri Atesin, Alexandre Couture Gagnon, Belinda Rivas, Bruno Arthur, Christian Zuniga, Christopher Gabler, Cory Wimberly, Cynthia Paccacerqua (FSEC), Denise Longoria, Donald J. Lyles, Edna Orozco, Elizabeth Deven-Hernandez, Erica Buchberger, Erwin Suazo, George Atisa, Folake Adelakun, Fuat Firat, Genaro Ramirez Correa, George Padilla, Ignacio Rodriguez, Igor Ryabov, James Gleason, Joel Garza, Jose A Rodriguez, Jose Gutierrez, Joseph D. Hovey, Ph.D., Juliann Garza Castillo, Jung-IL Oh (Jung IL-Oh), Krista Jobson, Laura Seligman, Laurie Deleon, Liliana Galindo, Mahmoud Quweider, Marcela Hebbard, Marcus Farris, Margaret Rubi, Marisa Knox, Mataz Alcoutlabi, Megan Keniry, Michelle Alvarado, Mohamadhossen Noruzoliaee, Monika Rabarison, Mounir Ben Ghalia, Norma Beardwood-Roper, Owen Temby, Pauli Badenhorst, Pedro Martinez, Punit Ahluwalia, Randall Monty, Jack Ruelas, Ruth Crutchfield, Salma Mahmood, Sarah Blangero, Servando Hinojosa, Silvia Solis, Suad Ghaddar, Tamer Oraby, Ulku Karabulut, Vejoya Viren, Wanrong Hou

Guests Present: Brian Evans (Texas AAUP-AFT) (Brian Evans), Luis Zayas, Provost Office, Vanessa Ceballos, Provost Office, Alma Rodriguez, Colin Charlton, Sarah Rowe, Sandra Morrow, Katarzyna Sepielak, Dawid Wladyka, Zelma Mata, Michael Lehker, Daniel Hunter-Holly, Dora Saavedra, Andres Amado, Giorgio Gotti, Kristine Wirts, Amy Hay, Cristina Villalobos, Ana Carolina Diaz Beltran, Jonikka Charlton, John Vandeberg, Ed Pogue, Joy Esquierdo, Haiyan Zhou, Amy Cummins, Naomie Jean, Ney Alliey-Rodriguez, Ala Qubbaj, Andrew Anabila

Senators Absent: Ahmed Touhami, Andrew Smith, Brent Campney, Cynthia Lopez Guerrero, Ferenc Moldovanyi, Gladys Maestre, Haiyan Zhou, Jose E Hernandez, Marzieh Ayati, Maysam Pournik, Sonia Chapa, Veronica Castro, Noushin Nouri (FDL)

1. Opening and Preliminary Items (3:00 PM – 3:05 PM)

1. Call to Order (3:00 PM)

- The meeting was called to order at **3:00 PM** by **Silvia Solis**.

2. Welcome and Agenda Overview (3:02–3:05 PM)

- Silvia Solis welcomed attendees and reminded members to use both voice and the Zoom chat for questions or comments.

3. Secretary report by Dr. Owen Temby

- February minutes presented and approved by unanimous consent.

2. Faculty Senate President's Report (approximately 3:06–3:43 PM)

Delivered by Dr. Christopher Gabler

Dr. Christopher Gabler presented his President's Report, beginning with an overview of the Faculty Senate's ongoing priorities and providing updates on significant institutional and legislative developments. He noted that the second half of his report would also serve to introduce the legislative update to be delivered later by Dr. Brian Evans.

Senate Priorities:

Dr. Gabler reaffirmed the Faculty Senate's seven core priorities for the year:

1. Addressing faculty salary inversion and compression
2. Revising the university workload policy
3. Developing a formal grievance policy
4. Creating a policy on departmental reorganization
5. Supporting faculty impacted by reorganization
6. Reducing barriers to research
7. Establishing a financial exigency policy

Salary and Compensation:

Dr. Gabler reported on recent discussions with President Bailey and Provost Zayas concerning faculty compensation. Provost Zayas has been directed to allocate a percentage of the academic budget to address salary inequities. He has begun a series of college-level presentations announcing compensation packages, including increased base raises associated with promotions. However, no new specific figures have been released.

Workload Policy:

There were no new developments to report regarding the revised workload policy, though regular meetings with Vice President for Faculty Affairs Dr. Dora Saavedra are planned to advance the effort.

Grievance Policy – PARC Group:

The Senate has approved the creation of a peer advisory group to help resolve faculty grievances (the "PARC group"). Next steps include developing a written directive outlining the group's rules, eligibility, and operational procedures. Faculty are encouraged to express interest in joining the advisory pool, which can begin to be populated prior to formal use.

Departmental Reorganization:

Gabler reported that the College of Liberal Arts underwent reorganization without faculty input or established procedures, with departments such as Political Science, Public Affairs, and

Sociology among those affected. The Senate will now investigate the impacts on affected faculty and pursue potential remedies.

Barriers to Research:

Efforts to reduce administrative burdens on faculty research, including discussions with UT System leadership, were sidelined by emerging issues related to federal executive orders and state legislation. Nonetheless, Gabler emphasized the importance of continuing this work and identifying best practices across institutions.

HOP Revisions on Faculty Evaluations:

Feedback on revisions to HOP policies ADM 06-503 and 06-504 was collected by the March 7 deadline and reviewed by the Executive Committee and the Rules and Governance Committee. The findings and major concerns were to be presented later in the meeting. Dr. Gabler reminded senators that a special session had been approved to further discuss and vote on the Faculty Senate's formal response.

Financial Exigency Policy:

The proposed financial exigency policy—adapted from the UT System model—has been submitted to President Bailey and to the HOP Committee via Samantha Allen and Angie Coronado. Although no response has been received, Gabler emphasized the urgency of finalizing the policy amid worsening economic conditions, including the suspension of faculty searches in the College of Sciences and other units across the UT System. He proposed allocating 20 minutes at the upcoming special session to vote on the final policy language.

Legislative Concerns and Academic Freedom:

Dr. Gabler concluded his report with a rapid overview of proposed legislation in the Texas Legislature, many of which pose direct challenges to academic freedom, tenure, and shared governance. Drawing on analysis from the Texas AAUP and Dr. Brian Evans, he highlighted:

- HB 2311: Removes DEI-related teaching and research carve-outs
- HB 1830: Bans the future award of tenure
- HB 2548 and HB 2339: Restrict teaching of or funding for certain social topics and programs
- SB 1489 and SB 452: Curtail the authority of faculty senates and centralize administrative power
- Proposals to remove SACSCOC as the state's sole accreditor

Gabler warned against the “compliance in advance” approach being taken by some administrators, which undermines academic freedom even without formal legal mandates. He encouraged faculty to continue teaching and researching as usual unless explicitly prohibited by law.

He announced that the Faculty Senate's Council on Academic Freedom and Responsibility had proposed hosting bilingual informational town halls open to the public, students, faculty,

lawmakers, and media. These events would highlight the importance of academic freedom, tenure, and the public value of higher education, particularly in the Rio Grande Valley.

He concluded by encouraging each faculty member to identify at least one concrete action they could take—whether public or private—to support higher education during this critical period.

Transition Note: At **3:26 PM**, following the President’s Report, **President-Elect Blangero** stated that she did not have a report to deliver at that time, transitioning the meeting toward the next agenda item.

3. Discussion on HOP Revisions (3:27 PM – 4:00 PM)

1. Initiation of HOP Revisions Discussion (3:27 PM)

- Dr. Gabler shifted focus to the HOP revisions. He noted that the Standing Committee on Governance had compiled extensive faculty feedback on the proposed revisions.

2. Standing Committee on Governance Overview by Ruth Crutchfield

- **Ruth Crutchfield** provided a detailed overview of the responses:
 - **Consensus:** She explained that there was broad consensus among respondents on the major concerns.
 - **Documented Feedback:** A document summarizing the issues was presented, which identified key concerns such as the removal of department-level evaluation.
 - **Understated Figures:** Crutchfield cautioned that the numerical summaries might understate the true level of concern, as responses from full departments were aggregated.

3. Action Planning

- Dr. Gabler discussed the need to turn the feedback into actionable items by prioritizing the concerns raised.
- The removal of department-level evaluation was highlighted as a particular area of concern.

4. Q&A Session on HOP Revisions (3:41 PM – 3:43 PM)

- **Jose Gutierrez** asked a question regarding a recent experience with a limited submission grant, emphasizing the impact of delayed proposals on the university’s aspirations for R1 status.
- **Cynthia Paccacerqua** clarified via chat (timestamp **3:43 PM**) the scope of the department-level review, questioning whether the issue pertained to Annual Reviews or other evaluative processes.

5. Concluding HOP Revisions Discussion (ending at 4:00 PM)

- Further clarifications were discussed briefly, with faculty agreeing that the Governance Committee would integrate the feedback into its final recommendations.
- Dr. Gabler thanked the committee for their work and indicated that the conversation would continue in subsequent meetings as needed.

4. Texas AAUP Legislative Update (4:04 PM – 4:24 PM)

Guest Presentation: Dr. Brian Evans – Texas AAUP Legislative Update

Dr. Brian Evans, President of the Texas Conference of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP), provided a detailed legislative update on higher education policy developments at the state level. Drawing from his recent policy briefings and the Texas AAUP bill tracker, he discussed a series of proposed laws impacting faculty governance, academic freedom, tenure, research funding, and student support.

Key Points from Dr. Evans's Presentation:

- **Legislative Climate:** The 89th Texas Legislature has introduced numerous bills with far-reaching implications for public higher education. Many target diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, faculty autonomy, and institutional accreditation.
- **Threats to Shared Governance and Tenure:**
 - *SB 452* would give exclusive hiring authority for department heads to Boards of Regents.
 - *SB 1459* would restrict faculty senates from conducting investigations, require public meetings with 72-hour notice, and potentially diminish faculty influence over curriculum.
 - *HB 1830* proposes eliminating tenure for future hires effective September 2025.
- **Challenges to Academic Freedom:**
 - *HB 2548* would prohibit over 30 topics from being discussed in required courses—including race, racism, equity, and social justice. Violations carry severe penalties, including suspension without pay or termination, and bar future employment in Texas public higher education.
 - *HB 2311* would remove exemptions in SB 17 for academic instruction and scholarly research, effectively banning faculty from engaging in DEI-related teaching or inquiry.
 - *HB 2339* seeks to ban LGBTQ+ and DEI-related studies entirely.
- **Concerns Over Research and Funding:**
 - Bills such as *SB 184*, *SB 530*, and *HB 4277* aim to protect external research grants with DEI-related content from SB 17's restrictions.
 - Dr. Evans noted that while SB 17 did not explicitly ban DEI-related research or course content, institutional interpretations—especially related to state funding—have led to over-compliance.
- **Student Rights and Financial Aid:**
 - Legislation includes measures to create new student loan programs, protect financial aid eligibility, and restore equity in GPA weighting for AP and dual-credit courses.
 - Some bills propose rescinding in-state tuition eligibility for undocumented students and intensifying local law enforcement's role in immigration enforcement.

Q&A Highlights:

- **Carve-Outs under Senate Bill 17:**
Responding to a question from Faculty Senate President Christopher Gabler, Dr. Evans explained that SB 17 originally included carve-outs protecting academic course instruction, scholarly research, creative works, and certain student organizations. However, these protections are now threatened by new legislation such as *HB 2311*, which would eliminate these exemptions. He emphasized that course content and research in DEI areas are still permissible under current law, but must avoid the use of state general revenue funds.
- **Use of State Funds:**
Evans clarified the implications of a budget rider accompanying SB 17, which prohibits the use of state funds for DEI activities. This has led many institutions to prevent certain events or grants from proceeding, even when the law does not explicitly prohibit them. He urged faculty to understand the legal boundaries and not over-comply out of caution.
- **Concerns Over Faculty Self-Censorship:**
Dr. Gabler noted reports of faculty being discouraged from attending conferences or pursuing DEI-related grants. Dr. Evans emphasized the importance of continuing to teach and conduct research as legally permitted, and cautioned against what he termed “compliance in advance.” He encouraged faculty to reach out to AAUP or allied organizations like FIRE and the ACLU if they face questionable restrictions.
- **Calls for Collective Action:**
Faculty Senator Dr. Fuat Firat asked whether AAUP planned to organize more visible national action, such as a march on Washington. Evans responded that advocacy is already underway through Texas AFT’s lobbying efforts, and that a National Day of Action is scheduled for April 17, 2025. He added that media engagement, op-eds, and demonstrations—such as the recent 400-person gathering at the Texas Capitol—are all part of ongoing strategies to raise visibility and defend higher education.
- **How to Get Involved:**
Dr. Evans shared multiple ways for faculty to engage, including training to testify before the legislature, participating in local and statewide advocacy days, and signing up for organizing events through Texas AFT’s Mobilize platform. He stressed that participation is open to all faculty, regardless of AAUP membership.

5. Standing Committee for Professional Track Faculty (4:32 PM – 4:53 PM)

Marcela Hebbard presented a proposal to establish a Faculty Senate standing committee for professional track faculty (PTF), formerly referred to as non-tenure track faculty. She described the critical role of PTF at UTRGV, highlighting that over 960 faculty members serve in these positions, compared to 698 tenured and tenure-track faculty, according to data from the Office of Strategic Analysis and Institutional Reporting (SAIR). PTF are primarily responsible for the teaching and service missions of the university, especially in core undergraduate courses, and include titles such as lecturers, instructors, professors of practice, clinical professors, research professors, and adjunct faculty.

The presentation emphasized the demographic diversity of PTF, their unique professional development needs, and the underrepresentation of PTF in Faculty Senate (only 20 members, compared to 47 tenured or tenure-track senators). Hebbard argued for the formation of a standing committee to represent PTF interests, advocate for fair institutional policies, and provide a formal channel for communication and collaboration within the Senate structure.

Motion Introduced

“I move that the Faculty Senate establish a standing committee for professional track faculty charged with representing the interests and concerns of professional faculty members within UTRGV.”

- **Seconded by:** Fuat Firat
- **Amendments:** Two friendly amendments were accepted to clarify language. The terminology was updated to “professional track faculty,” in alignment with terminology used by the Provost’s Office.
- **Discussion:** Several senators emphasized the importance of ensuring the committee operates within the Faculty Senate structure and does not act as a separate advocacy body. Clarification was provided that the committee would function like other standing Senate committees and serve as a platform for elevating PTF concerns to the full Senate.

Vote:

- In favor: 37
- Opposed: 0
- Abstained: 1

6. Follow-Up Meeting on Faculty Affairs (4:53 PM – 4:59 PM)

Presenter: Christopher Gabler

A motion was introduced to schedule a special session of the Faculty Senate to review and discuss feedback on proposed revisions to HOP ADM 6-503 and 6-504, and to finalize the Senate's official response to the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs.

Motion Introduced

“I move that the Faculty Senate host a special session on Tuesday, March 25, 2025, from 3:00 to 5:00 PM, to discuss the proposed revisions to HOP ADM 6-503 and 6-504, review faculty feedback, and vote on the Senate’s formal response to the Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs.”

- **Seconded by:** Marcela Hebbard

- **Discussion:** The Executive Committee confirmed that the March 25 date would allow sufficient time to review all faculty input and revise the proposed response before the end-of-month deadline.

Vote:

- In favor: 38
- Opposed: 0
- Abstained: 1

Outcome: Motion adopted.

7. Adjournment (5:00 PM)

1. **Motion to Adjourn**
 - **Dr. Christopher Gabler** moved to adjourn, seconded by **Fuat Firat**.
2. **5:00 PM – Adjournment**
 - The meeting was formally adjourned at **5:00 PM**.