

## The Student and the Personnel Machine

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*“Whenever new kinds of thinking are about to be accommodated, or new varieties of music, there has to be an argument beforehand. With two sides debating in the same mind, haranguing, there is an amiable understanding that one is right and the other wrong. Sooner or later the thing is settled, but there can be no action at all if there are not the two sides, and the argument.”*

Lewis Thomas, in *The Medusa and the Snail*.

This paper is based on opinion, it presents no absolutes or statistical treatment of any hard data (collected randomly, mindlessly, or otherwise), and fills no long-felt need for a treatment of the subject. I regard it as an opportunity for therapeutic spleen-venting.\* Understood? I now proceed cheerfully on my way to offer some views on student participation in personnel procedures.

That students are involved in these matters is fact; the issues are the methods and extend of participation. These are not questions which rest quietly, and the pots have been boiling as evidenced by recent moves in high places which have raised the problem from the status of “sleeping dog” or “dead horse”<sup>1</sup> to the particularly hot item of “students-on-personnel-committees,” which can serve as an appropriate focal point for this note.

Most of the expressed opinion in favor of student committee members seems to center on two presumed benefits. First, that a student would in some way police the faculty to insure proper execution of the committee’s duties; and second, that a student’s presence would increase the quantity of student input, especially on a candidate’s teaching effectiveness. Regarding the first point, the utilization of student “overseers” on the committees is neither warranted nor needed. The procedures are reasonably clear at all levels of consideration. The multiple examination of files, the number of people reviewing the files, the defined committee responsibilities, and the necessary verification of proper procedures, insures, in my opinion, that extant policies are not being violated successfully. There are sufficient “check points” in the system to identify and correct such violations as may occur because of ignorance, oversight, or other reasons.

The second implied benefit, that of increased student input, is nonsensical. Favoring such an idea is born of a lack of understanding. The tiresome editorials pressing the issue reflect this lack of understanding, and the persistence of the attitude underscores an unwillingness to learn about the policies in question or the role of personnel committee members. Many students do not seem to comprehend that members of such committees *cannot* provide oral input during deliberations which is admissible to a candidate’s file; they can *only* evaluate what is in the file as received by the committee. Additional information may only be introduced in writing through proper channels of the committee hierarchy. These regulations may seem a bit fuzzy at the departmental level where members and candidates mingle more or less freely. The guidelines are there however, and we should all be aware that, “if it ain’t in writing, it ain’t in the file.” Thus a student member could do no more than a faculty member without violating procedural policies. Perhaps students assume that their evaluations of a candidate would somehow be intrinsically different from ours, or that they are more interested in good teaching than are faculty members. In either case we are back to point one of policing our actions, or of initiating changes in our present set of rules.<sup>2</sup>

The main thrust of the student argument is in terms of judging faculty as teachers. The review process, however, involves several other areas of consideration (Scholarship/Creative Activities, Service to the University and Profession, Community Service, and the lovely can of fidgety worms called Special Attributes). It is to the students’ credit that these criteria have rated little space in their arguments, for I believe that in nearly all

cases they are not qualified to evaluate these activities. They simply do not have the necessary background or experience, and it would create obvious problems if they were expected to contribute to deliberations on such matters.

It seems to me that students presently have available to them an unprecedented level of participation in personnel procedures, at least at Humboldt State University. The existing opportunities for students to present their views on candidates for reappointment, tenure, and promotion are more extensive in number and kind than are afforded the faculty at this institution. Colleagues may only submit signed letters evaluating a faculty member. Students, on the other hand, may submit signed letters, oral testimony at hearings held in each department on each candidate, and anonymous evaluations taken in classes. Those who stubbornly believe that these forms of appraisal are not taken seriously in the personnel process are simply quite wrong. Perhaps this disbelief is one reason that relatively few students utilize avenues of faculty evaluation beyond the classroom forms. Of course, faculty members do not all agree on the validity of student evaluations of teaching, or how much weight they should carry in personnel decisions, but their importance and use is rather clearly outlined in various passages of the Faculty Handbook.

The above arguments do not exhaust all of the fears and resistance I feel concerning the idea of students on personnel committees. I envision numerous additional problems, but can do little more than express them as such; the reader will either agree or disagree with them. I worry to some degree about the maintenance of confidentiality with students on committees. Would students feel bound by the regulations and procedures of a *faculty* handbook? The objections to the disregard for present policies that have been expressed in some of the editorial comments would be disrupting, if not downright dangerous, if brought into the committee structure by a student sympathetic to such feelings. Would we be faced with the common problem of, "Those who want to serve, shouldn't?" There are other problems: the time commitment (dismissed as unimportant by some), the exact role of students on committees, the method of selecting student members, the placement of students on committees which are not available to non-tenured faculty members, *et cetera*.

I am led to the conclusion that there are very many arguments against student personnel commit-

tee members, and remain unconvinced that there is a single justification for them. They have enough (more than enough in some opinions) participation in these matters already. To place them on committees simply to quiet their demands would be to act on poor reasoning, would not be a direct answer to their questions, and would only add grit to a machine which runs a bit hot from friction anyway. To those for whom the above series of arguments is insufficient, consider this: I believe that students have no business participating beyond the present level in our process of peer evaluation. Such a procedural change may be forced upon us, but I do not like it. In fact, I resent it.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>When people are uncertain about the status of an issue ("dog" or "horse") their reaction to the issue is confused (to "let lie" or "to beat"). If one beats a sleeping dog it generally becomes aggressive (and justifiably so); if one lets a dead horse lie it begins to stink (through no fault of its own). Thus the mandate to somehow place students on personnel committees and the subsequent reversal of that decision are not very surprising outcomes of this combined confusion in various quarters.

<sup>2</sup>It strikes me about now that there may be some faculty members (perish the thought) who find certain bits of our Faculty Handbook somewhat less than crystal clear or in need of minor revision. Having served at all three levels of personnel committee deliberations I have occasionally felt gentle stirrings along those lines. If such imperfections exist, perhaps the faculty might bestir itself to do something about it.

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