

Faculty, Students, Education: The Mystery of the Personnel Process

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Students should be allowed to participate on personnel committees. To support this contention, I will identify one of my basic assumptions regarding university governance, and I will address a few of the questions and concerns which have most frequently arisen in the debate over this issue.

My perception of the university is simple: the purpose of the university is to educate. Education is a process which, at its base, requires only two ingredients: a teacher/guide and a student/seeker. Through the process of education, both parties learn. Based on this perception, I argue that the responsibility for making important decisions about the university should be left to those actively involved in its central purpose, to students and to faculty. Clearly, many faculty colleagues do not agree. Some faculty do not wish to be bothered with the responsibility of considering and making important university decisions; moreover, these faculty members hold that students are not in a position, intellectually and emotionally, to engage in such important decision-making responsibilities. I can only respond that faculty, by virtue of their professional training, are prepared and obligated to assume decision-making responsibilities and that part of the process of education demands they prepare students – by example and by experience – to participate in making important decisions. Admittedly, due to the structure of the University, governance is not truly an issue. At best, faculty and/or student groups only can have the authority to recommend. But the making of recommendations is an important contribution to decision-making, and at present, only faculty members have this authority in personnel matters. I argue that students should also be given the “power” to participate in making these important recommendations leading to decisions.

Now, I will respond to some of the issues which have been raised in the debate concerning student participation on personnel committees in the reverse order, from my perspective, of their importance.

Some have asked why students should be seated

on personnel committees while this privilege (or right) has been denied non-tenured faculty. The question is, simply, irrelevant. The issue is student representation. Of course, the question of non-tenured faculty participation is important, and I would argue that non-tenured faculty should be eligible – as members of the faculty – to run for positions on personnel committees. But to argue that one group (students) should be denied participation because another group (non-tenured faculty) cannot participate is hardly convincing.

Another relatively trivial question is: would students be willing to devote the necessary time required of personnel committees? My observation has been that students are frequently more willing than faculty to devote time to duties which they consider important. Anyone who has served on an elections or an appointment committee knows how difficult it is to find faculty willing to fill important university posts. Furthermore, most of us have been members of committees in which our colleagues are more noted for their absence and/or their ability to avoid shouldering their fair share of the workload than for their active participation. From my experience, I am inclined to expect students to be responsive and attentive to personnel deliberations. At any rate, this whole question is subject to empirical verification; no one can know whether students will devote time to personnel committees unless students are given an opportunity to serve on these committees.

A third concern relates to the issue of confidentiality and other procedures guaranteed under the university's personnel policy. As I understand this concern, some feel that student representatives would not be obliged to honor the guidelines of the personnel process. Yet, there are no sanctions now in the personnel process to insure faculty compliance to the procedures. The fundamental principle assuring compliance is trust, so apparently this concern rests on the assumption that students cannot be trusted. Again, I am reluctant to accept the contention that students are less trustworthy than faculty. My experience suggests

that students are for the most part mature and capable of maintaining confidences. Moreover, with the policy of "open files," which allows any candidate in the personnel process eventual access to his or her documents, the debate over confidentiality is rendered somewhat moot. Of course, no one would advocate that deliberations of personnel committees be broadcast over the campus, but I can see no justification for suspecting that students would be any more inclined to such ethical transgressions than anyone else.

Another claim frequently made is that students already have more "input" into the evaluation of teaching effectiveness than faculty, so why should they have still more? I am not certain of the basis of this claim, it certainly cannot be founded on the Faculty Personnel Policies and Procedures document. There, in section V, A, 1, a, *Teaching Effectiveness*, it states: "Evaluation of a candidate's teaching effectiveness shall be based primarily upon written statements from his/her colleagues in his/her area of service, and shall be substantiated by other evidence such as student evaluations, . . ." Clearly, under these proscriptions, student input can only substantiate collegial assessment of teaching ability. The most important "input," then, does not come from students at all. Since the only criterion under discussion here is teaching effectiveness, and the question is why give students more of a role? I submit a heretical, but nonetheless adamantly held conviction: those best capable of assessing teaching effectiveness are those being taught. I think it is crucial to provide a larger role for students in the evaluation of teaching effectiveness. I am not sure that having students on personnel committees is the *only* method of giving students a greater impact on assessing teaching, but it is *a* method.

The final two topics I intend to discuss are the most serious – but not compelling – reservations to having students on personnel committees: Are students in a position to evaluate faculty on the other criteria specified in the personnel document? And, what role are students to play on personnel committees and how are student representatives to be selected?

The other criteria on which personnel decisions are based are scholarship and creative activities, contributions to the profession and the university, and community service. The problem of evaluating these criteria, however, is one which applies to everyone who sits on personnel committees at levels above the initiating unit when the candidate being evaluated is from another discipline. That is,

I would think it difficult for an historian to evaluate a geographer, let alone a biologist, on these criteria. More to the point, since most of the debate on this entire issue has been engendered by the Trustees' decision – now suspended – to have students on initiating unit, or departmental, personnel committees, it seems to me that a geography student would be in as good a position to assess a candidate in the department of geography as a political science teacher on a school committee. In addition, any candidate in the personnel process is obligated, when submitting his or her file to personnel committees, to present his or her case in a clear and concise fashion and, furthermore, personnel decisions are to be based exclusively on the materials presented by the candidate. Having reviewed many of these files, I have no doubt that students would be as able as faculty to make reasoned and judicious judgments about them. I would submit that anyone who believes that there is something esoteric, mystical, or even particularly difficult in assessing personnel materials has not participated in the process of reviewing personnel files. To be sure, this review requires careful reading and thorough analysis. But surely, our students are capable of this; we expect as much from them in our classes.

As to students' roles, it goes without saying that I believe student members on personnel committees should be full members, with a vote. Nevertheless, I share some of the concern about the methods of selecting students to serve on personnel committees. But this is a technical matter, which I assume could be worked out. I would prefer a selection process that allowed all students in a discipline (or, for that matter, if students were to serve on higher committees, all the students from the relevant constituent group, the school or university) an opportunity to participate in the selection of student representatives. Each department could surely arrange an election to insure such participation, or develop a mechanism with which it would be satisfied.

To conclude, then, I endorse student representation on personnel committees. It seems to me that the faculty's overwhelming opposition to student representation is founded on a misunderstanding of the personnel process and/or an inordinate and unjustifiable fear of students. Students, as a group, are conscientious and judicious when undertaking important responsibilities. Their participation may serve to demystify this important process for students and faculty alike; moreover, it may give students a greater sense of responsibility in their own educations.