THE ROLE OF THE GENERAL FACULTY: SLEEPING GIANT

KATHRYN L. CORBETT, Faculty Emeritus

In the past five years I have perceived a growing abdication of the General Faculty from its role in institutional governance. Having been a member of the original committee of nine who, on their own initiative, met sans portfolio during one long summer and produced the Constitution upon which the present system of faculty governance exists, I feel strongly the need to express my views on the seriousness of the steady erosion of influence by the General Faculty. It has occurred by neglect of responsibilities by the General Faculty rather than by deliberate invasion by other segments of the campus governance structure. I do not wish to place the onus on the elected General Faculty officers, but rather put it into the realm of General Faculty malaise about its rightful functions and role.

While the officers of the General Faculty can and do act in some prescribed leadership roles for which we elect them, their actions are perforce limited by the demands of their constituency. The General Faculty has not only been undemanding, but somnolent. This apathy is, I think, based upon lack of awareness of the function of the General Faculty—the principal issue I wish to address.

The elected leadership of the General Faculty centers in the office of the President who serves on an annual basis. There are three other elected officers, two selected by the General Faculty, the Secretary and the Treasurer, and the Vice-Chairman of the Academic Senate, who is selected by that Body. Upon the pleasure of the Faculty President, these four officers can serve as an Executive Board, and in times past have done so. The utilization of this Board has been primarily dependent upon the political concepts of the General Faculty President. Some Presidents have convened the Executive Board frequently, others have not so chosen.

As the General Faculty rarely meets and most of the faculty see no reason to pay dues to an organization which seemingly has no function, no purpose and no expenses, neither the Secretary nor the Treasurer are called upon for much but honorary service. Besides the annual election, the newly instituted sherry hour for the faculty is the first sign of life which the faculty has seen for some time.

The President, however, acts in two general areas, representative and ceremonial, the former being a duty empowered by the Constitution and the latter by custom. The representative function carries a voting membership on the Academic Senate and membership on the powerful Committee on Committees, which makes appointments. As the university has grown in size, the latter Committee assumes greater importance as it is one of the most direct ways for new faculty to break into faculty governance. In the ceremonial sphere, faculty presidents have been dutiful and diligent, and until one has served in the office, as I have, it is difficult to imagine the multiplicity of demands. Over the years, the President of the university has been enthusiastic about the ceremonial stance of the office (a fine compliment to the high quality of persons elected by the faculty to the office) and Faculty Presidents seem to be invited to go to everything. At least so it seemed to me during my term. Most of us enjoyed the ceremonial and the weight of it rested easily on our shoulders. The representative carried with it much more responsibility, demanded much more work and preparation, but again Faculty Presidents have carried it with dignity and integrity. I have heard neither complaints nor concerted proposals to change either of these functions.

The thesis of this article is to propose additional
areas of activity in which I think Faculty Presidents should take active leadership; not to do so is an abdication of responsibility. **There are four general areas where the General Faculty has a unique role to play:** (1) a forum for faculty concerns, (2) community relationships, (3) student relationships and (4) alumni contacts. Unless the Faculty President seizes the leadership in these areas, there is no faculty voice in matters which are vitally important.

It is essential to define the relationship between the Academic Senate and the General Faculty. The Academic Senate can act for the faculty; it is empowered to do so. It is a legislative body and exists primarily for that purpose. It is acting as we envisioned it during our meetings to write the Constitution. What has ceased to function is the General Faculty. The Academic Senate has been quick to seize upon the inactivity and silence of the General Faculty with the acquiescence of the General Faculty officers. I think the Academic Senate is doing just fine, but I think it would be better if it worked in conjunction with its polity, the General Faculty. No, I do not want to set up more work for anybody, but I think there is a place where the General Faculty can and should act, and in some cases, should instruct the Academic Senate.

The first is in faculty debate, the hearing process, or, if you wish, the consultative process. Basically the Senate is a legislative body. The General Faculty should be the hearing body. **If there is an issue, and there are many of concern to the faculty, there should be hearings where any faculty member can be heard and where academic debate holds forth.** The Academic Senate cannot and should not act in this fashion. I personally am incensed at the idea of getting the floor only at the largesse of the Senator even if I did elect him or her. What is needed is the faculty debate to hone the ideas. After the ideas, concepts, and concerns are aired and debated, only then is the issue ready for the Academic Senate. What kinds of concerns am I talking about? One example was the cut in institutional funds, which as far as I was concerned was disproportionally carried by teaching faculty. I did propose to the Faculty President that there should be a Task Force from the Teaching Faculty to work with Resource Allocation Committee, etc. to allow the Teaching Faculty to be heard. The suggestion, while dutifully heard and acknowledged, came to naught. The General Faculty has set itself up to be muted.

Another illustration was the long-range plan for HSU which was not subjected to formulative faculty debate. The faculty got it when it was fait accompli, with the only debate possible being again under Senate aegis and control. The process of that plan acted to exclude faculty debate and to engender intense faculty inner strife. We reached no consensus, no understanding, and experienced no growth as faculty dedicated to educating students. We witnessed instead a straight power play, resulting in first class faculty and second class faculty status being determined by the curriculum in which one chanced to fall. Again, the General Faculty acted in complete accord to destroy its own identity as a viable force in the institution.

Function two concerns Faculty-Student Relations. Yes, we do have a Dean of Students, but the backbone of the school is the faculty. Of prime concern to faculty is Financial Aid, Career Development, Orientation, and the new regeneration of student clubs. Let's take them in order: There is an all-purpose committee for Financial Aids, and it does function. But if most of you feel as frustrated as I did about getting information on that maze of regulation and "cannot do" there is need for some action, or at the least, inquiry. Regarding Career Development I have kinder words. That office has shown remarkable on-target growth in service areas; however, it does appear that increased faculty liaison would benefit all of us in working with this current job-oriented student populace. Orientation appears to have faculty input and participation. As the principal time utilized for this activity is not within the academic year, I suspect the planners would like more faculty participation. As for the "Born Again" club movement, this is cause for faculty alert. I go back to the days when every faculty member was expected to be an advisor, and only faculty collective action kept us from being responsible for the students' finances, actions, etc. I feel like I have gone full circle, and if clubs are going to thrive again, faculty for their own protection need to be part of the development in order to define roles we can accept.

So, I have two, Financial Aids and Career Development, which are off and running and for these it seems to me the General Faculty needs periodic ad hoc watch dog committees, which function for short periods of time and then self-destruct. For orientation, we should, I think, assume the other stance. More faculty ought to be involved. As for student clubs, if faculty are to have anything to do with them, we need a committee to work closely with the Dean of Students.
in policy formation.

No, I do NOT want the General Faculty to do everything, but the ad hoc committee, the task force concept, the watch dog committee if you will, would enable the General Faculty to deal with matters of faculty concern. The present committee structure can go right on with their business and use the input from the ad hoc General Faculty Committees dealing with matters of special timely interest. I think the General Faculty officers have the responsibility to set up such mechanisms when there is need.

A working relationship of the General Faculty President and the Associated Student Body President is also part of our responsibility. The impetus should come from the faculty. The General Faculty could set in motion some working relationships with ASB officers to deal with matters of mutual interest. I do not anticipate student uprisings as in the early 70s, but I do know that Humboldt’s responsible actions at that time were due in large part to working relationships between the General Faculty President and the AS President which had been established long before the crisis and which President Siemens recognized and respected.

The third area is that of community relationships. Town and Gown controversy is historic; ours is not unique, just more noticeable in a small community. While I do not espouse the concept of the university’s raison d’etre being that of a “service station” for the community, there is an implicit relationship with the community in the mission of the university. And properly so! The university bears the responsibility in freedom of information, in knowledge areas, and in forthright stance for open, peaceful debate.

The political participation of persons from the university community has become particularly apparent since the advent of the lowered voting age to 18, which means that the total community including students is a viable voting force. If you doubt this, just ask any aspiring politician in Arcata about the electing power of the university community. Thus, we find the university both feared and courted, but not ignored.

Faculty, by the very nature of their profession, are in peculiarly important positions in the eyes of the community. We are also highly vulnerable, although through the years this faculty has been able to maintain sturdy defense for the right of any faculty member to participate in any controversial discussion. It has not, at times, been easy, but I for one am proud of the way we have maintained and furthered the participation of faculty in the community polity.

The General Faculty, through its elected leadership, can greatly facilitate our participation in community affairs. It certainly is not the role of the Academic Senate to have anything to do with this. That body is simply the legislative body of the faculty and attends to our business, and ours alone. A role of community-relationships has rarely been practiced by faculty leadership. It is a timely thing, dependent upon contemporary local issues, but the responsibility should exist for the General Faculty President to assist in the participation with the community in matters of community concern in a non-partisan, open debate, informational way. This participation will be dependent upon the foresight and public responsibility of the faculty’s elected leaders, but it is a role which should become inherent in the functions of the faculty’s elected officers. The faculty should demand that their elected leadership consider community relationships implicit in service as General Faculty officers.

As night follows day, so should the faculty interest in our alumni follow community relationships. This is the fourth area of faculty function. Increasingly faculty remain at Humboldt and with our steady growth has come greater corresponding numbers of alumni. Some faculty like myself, after 28 years as a faculty member, are astounded by the number of persons who have been students. That figure of 6,650 grades which were in my grade books, 1952-1980, rekindled my interest in our alumni. No other group exists which is so immediately identifiable and which could contribute so much to the university in terms of faculty stimulation, interest and support. I am not speaking solely of money in regard to the latter, but primarily of good will, voting support, and concern for the well being of the university. I would not disdain the money, heaven forbid, but I think financial support would inevitably follow if we would concentrate on the total supportive concepts. Call it the soft sell if you wish, but asking for money is not the main thrust of my plea for faculty-alumni relationships.

It seems to me that we have an academic responsibility to our alumni. We need to know them as professionals and as citizens, as we knew them as students. We need to make them aware of the great resources of the university in keeping them abreast of the ever expanding knowledge areas which are at our finger tips. Just because a student learned
something in my classes (I’m forever an optimist) is no sign the acquisition of knowledge has ceased. As I frequently told my classes, “You learn this now in my classes, but if you repeat what I have said as eternal truth ten years from now, then I have failed. Knowledge is expanding. The point is, your knowledge must keep expanding or I have failed as your teacher.”

Plainly the responsibility rests with the faculty, but university resources could certainly be called upon when needed. I have ideas. It seems to me that each department should have a faculty member part of whose assigned duties are alumni contact. Why isn’t this as much a faculty task as that each department should have a faculty member part of whose assigned duties are alumni contact? Whatever devices we can think of to get alumni back on the campus could be utilized. Invite them to lunch, walk them through that great library, invite them to class lectures as special visiting speakers, ask them to meet with students and talk informally with them, above all do it in small groups and personally. Show them off as successful graduates, give the students role models, impress on one and all that Humboldt is now a University, and professors are there continuing their life-long quest in the knowledge arena—sharing, finding, searching, teaching students. But effort should be made to make alumni partners in the endeavor. It would pay off a hundred fold. It would also help the professorate meet their responsibility.

Only the General Faculty has the stance to do this, and it is a logical extension of the leadership of General Faculty officers to organize and further an activity such as this. It need not be a massive effort at first, any small beginning would help. Possibly it could be within the folds of the University Open House structure, which was pioneered this past year.

Prerequisite to the utilization of faculty power is an understanding of the genesis of that power. I am continually astounded at the innocence on the nature of faculty power. Faculty power is rarely given, bestowed or assigned; it is assumed when faculty act in concert on matters they consider to be rightfully theirs. After this preemption of decision, the power and its twin, responsibility, are the inevitable result. Assertion of faculty power, historically, has been demonstrated at Humboldt State University.

The first instance concerns personnel decisions of hiring, reappointment, retention, tenure and promotion. I well remember the day (I first held a faculty appointment in 1952) when these decisions for recommendation to the President were all made by the Office for Academic Affairs. Little participation by individual faculty was allowed or encouraged. Faculty demanded the right to participate; we found and won this right. We won it by creating our own committees.

The first steps were difficult and entailed hours of time (no assigned time for us) by faculty who were elected by the faculty. The process was not open, and I well remember having been a member of the first committee which decided to publish, against the wishes of the President, the committee recommendations. Most of you cannot imagine a situation where the faculty-approved list is privy only to the President. Ours was, but we decided it was our committee and we would publish our list and the President could adjust. This also entailed being responsible for our list. We published our list. Then we consulted with the President. We heard colleagues who were dissatisfied with our decision. Thus we became full partners in personnel decisions. We accepted our baby and the bath water!

Personally, I like the duality of the present system. The President holds the legal power for all personnel matters, but the faculty has assumed what is rightfully theirs—peer judgment which is so strong it is tantamount to the basic decision which the President overrides at his own peril. I do, however, accept easily the President’s legal empowerment in personnel matters and I defend his/her right to add to the faculty list of recommendations. Sometimes that is best for the institution and no individual faculty member should be forever damned. But I will deny vehemently the President’s right to delete any name from the faculty list. But the point is, faculty power came not by presidential request or bequest, but by faculty assumption of what they considered rightfully theirs.

Another instance is the whole faculty governance setup. President Siemens did not ask us to create a faculty constitution. We decided we needed one. The committee of nine, self-appointed, all met one summer to put together what is now the basis for the faculty constitution. We succeeded because we approached it from the faculty governance concept, what we thought we ought to do, what we thought we had the right to do, and what we were willing to accept as our responsibility. To get there, in all our discussions we had to outlaw any phrase which mentioned the President. Sounds simple, but it was not at the time. It is always so much
simpler to lapse back into the paternal setup so naturally favored by presidents. The faculty acted, not by request or behest, but by assumption. It is true that we were not acting in isolation by this time. Other campuses were also stirring, but remember, we did not have the ATSS at that time, and intercommunication within the CSUC system was poor. I reiterate, it occurred only because we at Humboldt acted together, on our campus, for our own concerns. If it happened to coordinate with the rest of the state, great, but basically we were acting on our own recognizance.

Another instance is the key decision in the personnel process which occurred when the General Faculty took personnel matters from the Academic Senate. This occurred by the petition process, still in the Constitution (it was used last year) and the faculty took the Personnel Committee for its very own. I know all about that petition. I originated it and helped pass it. I still think now as I thought then, personnel matters are much too important for the Academic Senate. They belong in the General Faculty. Many of us are much too concerned about personnel matters to leave that up to the Senate.

Let us move on to the Humboldt State Foundation. It is not an accident that there are three much sought-after positions on the Board which are held by elected faculty. It was not always thus; I know for I went after that one, too.

Having been influenced by an article I read in the AAUP Bulletin, it became apparent to me that faculty rightfully belonged on that Board. It was not difficult to enlist other faculty, particularly in the Sciences and in Natural Resources, since they were becoming increasingly interested in and dependent upon grant monies. The private umbrella which the administration was using for benefit to the college had no room for faculty advice. I shall not elucidate the process I used, but it worked. Faculty support was strong, although spotty, and eventually President Siemens bent. The key decision was when we were informed that the Foundation Board would accept nominations of faculty and then choose between them. We said, "NO." If the faculty elected, and we considered only election of our representatives as the proper process for selection, then the Board accepted the person elected. We carried the day. When you go to the polls and elect faculty representatives to that Board, do not ever forget that the right, privilege, and responsibility of having elected faculty representatives on that Board came about because of faculty action, not HSU Foundation request or administrative fiat.

So far I have just dealt with the success stories. There are others. In two instances where the faculty acted, we did not accomplish as much as we wanted. The first was years ago, when the Bookstore transfer occurred. At the time the Bookstore was transferred from the Associated Student Body to Lumberjack Enterprises, which had been created to handle the situation. Some of us thought that the ASB had been "ripped off." I still think so, but the situation is long gone and irreparable. What we did do, however, by our faculty task force, was open up the accounting of Lumberjack Enterprises to the College Community.

In the other instance, the Mai Kai office affair, the ad hoc Faculty Committee did force the University to cease using that facility for faculty offices. Some of the same conditions of safety existed for the students who lived there; however, to our intense regret we found we had no jurisdiction over housing regulations, which rest with the City of Arcata. This left us in the very undesirable position of successfully objecting to the facility for faculty offices, but unable to upgrade the facility for students to live there. I like to think that our efforts were not completely mislaid, because one side effect was that in the course of the intense investigation the ad hoc Faculty Committee discovered that faculty offices were slated to move to the property now known as the University Annex, with the stated purpose of putting the support staff offices in the center of the campus and the faculty offices on outskirts. The ad hoc Faculty Committee literally erupted in indignation. Faculty offices stayed in the center, and support services went to the Annex. (Although, I do note again a creeping motion to return some services, and put faculty in the boon-docks.) So colleagues, when you by chance groan and groan as you struggle down to the Annex on a very wet day, just think that but for the grace of Mai Kai ad hoc committee you might have been located there.

There is, of course, one unfinished move which I have worked on for a number of years. It seems highly desirable to me that there be faculty input on the President's Advisory Board. I do not think that the President should be the sole funnel for advisement for community concerns and, the other side of the coin, university interpretation. I also think that faculty should have the right, privilege and responsibility for nominations for membership
on that Board. My track record of interest in this Board, which I consider important in community-university relations regarding the goals of the university, is pretty good. My files have a note of a letter to President C. H. Siemens in 1952 asking for the appointment of a woman to that Board, a request I might add which was not met until President McCrone’s time. I have other ideas which I have expressed in letter form about the composition of that Board. On two points, however, I have never varied. There is a need for direct faculty input (by faculty designated by the faculty themselves), and for the faculty privilege of nomination of community persons for membership on that Board. The latter could be handled very easily by our own President McCrone, and I suspect would be if he were approached by an official request from the General Faculty. But the former takes more maneuvering.

Membership on that Board is appointive through a mechanism in the Chancellor’s Office. That means not only Humboldt State is involved but whatever is done becomes precedent for the rest of the system. There is another way, one which I have informally recommended to the last three Presidents of the General Faculty, none of whom, has chosen to act.

The General Faculty, should it choose to do so, could elect a consultant for the Advisory Board, and inform that body of the selection. Some tactful creative initiative on the part of the selectee could result in a productive relationship. Advisory Boards are usually not covered by the Brown Act which requires meetings to be public; however, currently there is pending legislation, a so-called “Sunshine Act” sponsored by our own Senator Barry Keene which might alter the situation. But this represents another case where if the faculty wants to move, and feels it should, it can. Rest assured, however, that in all probability no Advisory Board nor any President is likely to request us to make such a move. We should do it if we think it is right, if we think it is in the purview of our professional responsibility and if we are willing to accept the responsibility for our actions. I think we should make the move.

The erosion of faculty power has occurred by our abdication of the source of our power, namely action in concert. The academic Senate does not meet the need for open discussion, open hearings, open discussion between colleagues. It should act as a legislative body, with its decisions based on reasoned faculty debate which precedes action. The faculty can appoint ad hoc committees, or any other kind of committee it so desires, and by being the parent body, the report must go back to the faculty before proceeding to the Academic Senate. In addition there is also the possibility of the Academic Senate referring matters back to the General Faculty. The President of the General Faculty, an ex officio voting member of the Senate, could move for referral to the General Faculty. It is here that the ad hoc Faculty Committee, the special task force, could augment the already existing committee structure. Certain matters are of such overriding concern to all the faculty that this might well be the appropriate way to deal with them. Certainly more of the faculty would be able to participate.

In summation, in the areas of a forum for faculty concerns, community relationships, student relationships and alumni contact, the General Faculty has neglected its responsibilities. Its officers have preferred the ceremonial title route. The General Faculty has let this happen by default to the Academic Senate. Many faculty now feel impotent on matters of deep concern. Faculty power exists when the faculty thinks it is rightfully theirs, assumes it and takes responsibility. So I say to the sleeping giant of the faculty, quit feeling sorry for yourself. If faculty power is lost, we lost it. Arise and take up those matters which rightfully concern you.