

ACADEMIC COUNCIL

Minutes of Meeting

March 12, 2024

I. Regents Policy on Use of Administrative Websites

Academic Council held a special meeting to discuss comments from the Academic Senate divisions and systemwide committees in response to a proposed Regents Policy on Use of University Administrative Websites. The policy would restrict department members from expressing “the personal or collective opinions of Unit members” on the main landing pages of administrative websites, and mandates that any opinions expressed on other parts of websites include a disclaimer clarifying that the opinions do not represent the official views of the University or the Unit. Each of the campus divisions and systemwide committees expressed serious reservations about various aspects of the policy, noting its ambiguity, overly broad approach, and lack of clear implementation and enforcement mechanisms. Reviewers were also concerned that the policy as worded could limit aspects of academic freedom and free speech.

During the Discussion:

- It was noted that the conception of academic freedom codified in APM 010 depends not on political neutrality but on accountability based on faculty’s scholarly competence in their field, and that the proposed policy was approaching a complicated issue in an overly simple way. Council members agreed it is unclear how the policy would be implemented consistently and equitably across campuses, and they raised concerns about delegating the adjudication of the ambiguities to staff and faculty website administrators who may lack sufficient understanding of the issues. There was also concern that the policy could allow individuals to harass faculty and campuses with spurious claims of policy violations.
- It was noted that department websites are platforms for scholarly communications, so imposing blanket restrictions could limit academic freedom. Members also observed the distinction between personal opinion and research-based scholarly work. Depending on their personal beliefs, members of the public may view research-based statements as either facts or opinions.
- It was suggested that the Senate’s response acknowledge the policy’s goal to ensure that individual and collective viewpoints are not misconstrued as official University positions, while noting that departmental statements also have the potential to infringe on academic freedom of members who do not agree. Council members emphasized that these goals and related issues are addressed in the Senate’s June 2022 recommendations for department political statements.

ACTION: The Academic Council voted unanimously (19-0) against endorsement of the policy.

Meeting adjourned at 9:00 am

Minutes prepared by Michael LaBriola, Assistant Director

Attest: James Steintrager, Academic Council Chair