Faculty Listening Sessions

Members of the WSU Board of Regents (BOR and Board) conducted five faculty listening sessions between March 18 and April 10, 2024. The purpose of these listening sessions was to create a two-way dialogue between the faculty and the Board of Regents regarding areas of concern to the WSU faculty. The BOR sought to solicit feedback with the intention to actively listen, to develop a relationship and to build trust. The feedback received will assist in the development of an ongoing actionable plan to ensure alignment with the BOR, WSU administrative leadership, faculty and staff.

Process

The majority of the BOR participated in the sessions. Board Chair Lisa Keohokalole Schauer facilitated and attended all sessions. The listening sessions were additionally supported by a member of the Faculty Senate Executive leadership team. Regent Schauer was joined by the following Board and Faculty Senate leaders at the five listening sessions:

- Pullman, March 18 - Regent McDonald, Regent Ramos, Regent Blankenship, Regent Powell, Faculty Senate Chair Eric Shelden, Faculty Senate Past Chair Christine Horne
- Vancouver, March 19 - Regent McDonald, Regent Cerna, Regent Powell, Faculty Senate Chair Elect Tracy Klein
- Spokane, March 25 - Regent McDonald, Regent Dickinson, Regent Blankenship, Faculty Senate Past Chair Christine Horne
- Virtual, March 27 - Regent Picha, Regent Ramos, Regent Cerna
- Tri-Cities, April 10 - Regent McDonald, Regent Powell, Faculty Senate Chair Eric Shelden

BOR members listened to the concerns and potential solutions of over 240 members of the faculty in small groups. Each regent provided a summary of the feedback they heard. Each listening session was initiated by identifying twenty concerns gathered from previous correspondence to the Board and input prior to the start of the listening sessions. This initial list did not change based on new information from the listening sessions. Members of the administrative leadership team did not attend the listening sessions.

In addition to faculty members speaking directly to individual regents in the listening sessions, the Board received over 55 messages containing questions, seeking clarity or providing input through the Board’s web page. We did not track the names of attendees, and feedback was facilitated anonymously through the Regent’s website. Consequently, it’s important to note that these numbers may not accurately reflect unique individuals providing feedback, but potentially includes duplicate participants.

The Board, through its chair, committed to providing a summary based on the feedback received without disclosing the specific names of those providing feedback. This is a high-level summary prepared by the members of the Board and is intended to be comprehensive but not a transcript of the dialogue; it has not been approved by the Board and does not necessarily reflect the...
opinion of the Board. Any feedback specifically naming an individual as a contributor to the challenges or an advocate for change has not been included in this summary.

Faculty Perspectives + Key Takeaways

These statements reflect feedback from individual faculty members. It’s crucial to clarify that these challenges don’t necessarily represent the perspectives of all faculty members or the broader WSU community; rather, they are indicative of the voices we directly engaged with. The following key takeaways emerged:

- There was a strong commitment to WSU, a drive to enact change, and an unwavering dedication to actively contribute to solutions.
- A sense of anxiety was evident, accompanied by doubts regarding the stability of the university. Rebuilding trust through action is needed.
- A prevailing sentiment of feeling overburdened, undervalued and underpaid was consistently expressed. Fundamental needs remain unaddressed, including access to essential teaching and research resources.
- We observed a strong emphasis on the significance and pride in WSU’s academic excellence, alongside a pressing call for increased investment in research endeavors
  - A significant and meaningful investment in our research operations is critical.
  - An articulated research vision is imperative. The Drive to 25 was a goal to work toward. When this initiative was deprioritized, there was a lack of communication and understanding as to why this was not being pursued.
  - As community needs expand, the demand for our extension services grows; however, there is insufficient support for these programs.
  - When new tenure-track faculty are hired they are not supported with adequate investments.
  - Faculty were discouraged when submitting grants stating a shortage of staff to assist with preparing/processing grants for submission. They also expressed basic billing functions were not occurring on regular intervals making it difficult to compete for future grants with these organizations.
- There was an urgent call to streamline operational procedures and eliminate unnecessary bureaucratic hurdles in HR which currently impede efficiency and effectiveness.
  - Faculty turnover has been extensive, resulting in the departure of distinguished, top-tier faculty members.
  - To retain talented faculty and staff, other benefits should be explored including tuition waivers for families of faculty members and childcare for faculty families on every campus.
  - A fear of reprisal prevents open and honest dialogue.
- There was a lack of clarity regarding the distribution of revenue and allocation of expenses within the system. This lack of transparency, coupled with inequitable budget reductions, underscores the necessity for more strategic and inclusive financial decision-making processes.
- The expansion of administrative functions is diverting resources away from our core mission of teaching and research, hindering essential investments in these areas.
- While hiring graduate students is crucial for advancing our research mission, the recent collective bargaining agreement has rendered it financially unfeasible within current budgets, especially amidst pending budget cuts.
- A budget model is needed aligned with current enrollment.
- Athletics was acknowledged as having an important role in the WSU culture particularly in terms of the student and alumni experience but needs to be right-sized.

- **Student enrollment** is on a downward trend without a clear path or **actionable plan** in place to promptly halt the decline and achieve increases in enrollment.
  - Increasing undergraduate and graduate student enrollment is critical
  - Student enrollment is linked to national rankings.
  - The current enrollment strategy is only focused on Pullman
  - The focus of Marketing/Communications should be on assisting in achieving enrollment goals

- Internal communication lacks **consistency, clarity, and transparency**. Communication and transparency are not authentic.

- The State of Washington lacks visible **support** for faculty priorities.
  - An understanding as to who sets the legislative agenda and priorities was requested.
  - There was interest in how faculty can be more engaged in advocacy.
  - Capital requests are needed to address core needs.

- The organizational structure supporting additional **administrative leadership** positions requires restructuring with a need to reduce administrative roles. Feedback was shared that OneWSU was synonyms with increases in administrative overhead.
  - Inherent competition exists between the Global campus, which was seen as Pullman-centric and all other campuses.
  - The feedback based on the perspective of a specific campus revealed a divisive 'us versus them' mindset.
  - A need to understand the reporting structure and authority between campuses, the colleges and the system is critical.
  - Concerns were raised in the timing of hiring a provost without changes in the authority, role and organizational structure empowering the provost to be successful.
  - The structure of the chancellors, VC’s, provost and president was unclear and confusing.
  - There was a desire to reduce administrative overhead by consolidating key roles rather than maintaining highly compensated positions, particularly in light of declining enrollment.
  - There was a desire for an increased presence of the president on the WSU-Pullman campus.

- Marketing and communications need to **explain the value** of the WSU education / degree and ensure it is relevant for each campus.

- We consistently heard a need to remain **land grant mission focused**.
While the recent Diversity Cohort hiring was well-intentioned, **true inclusion and belonging** would be better fostered by ensuring faculty of color are concentrated within the same department rather than scattered across the university. Our BIPOC students and faculty need to have a greater voice in our system and this should not be designed by the predominant culture.

We encountered a palpable tension between **career-track and tenure-track faculty** members. There was a desire to increase the number of tenure-track faculty as a recognition of our commitment to academic excellence and research.

There was concern the Board and the leadership team was **out of touch** with the real issues facing the university. There was a desire for accountability through regular administrative evaluations.

Strategic planning efforts to achieve and monitor real goals were missing.

There was **not unanimous agreement** that the letter ‘Time for Change’ accurately represented the perspective of the faculty. While there was unanimous acknowledgment of challenges at WSU, it was noted that this group may not necessarily represent the entirety of the faculty. Opinions varied, with some expressing the view that the letter was reflective of the faculty perspective while others felt the letter was disrespectful and failed to acknowledge the research conducted on campuses beyond Pullman. The overarching message conveyed was that negative external perceptions about WSU could impede efforts to enhance student enrollment and national rankings.

**Opportunities**

- **Dedication** - A deep commitment to Washington State University permeated every session, evident in a myriad of emotions—hurt, anger, enthusiasm, motivation, advocacy, and more. Harnessing this passion unleashes a powerful force that can propel us swiftly and unitedly towards addressing our most pressing challenges. Faculty members are eager to contribute and be proactive in finding solutions, yet they require additional resources, improved communication, administrative support and greater transparency to effectively engage in the process.

- **Resiliency** - The Faculty's resiliency shone through their adeptness in meeting students’ diverse needs. They transcend their roles as teachers and researchers, stepping into the roles of mentors who prioritize addressing critical mental health needs, navigating bureaucratic hurdles to break down barriers, and fostering critical thinking in an era where AI threatens traditional skill sets. Embracing a culture rooted in a commitment to change is imperative as WSU charts a visionary course to navigate the evolving landscape of higher education nationwide.

- **Organization Support** - While the role and value of 'Administrators' remained unclear, there was a consistent and strong desire for assistance from traditional operational support services. These services include Human Resources, Marketing/Communication, and Enrollment Management.

- **OneWSU** - There was a consistent theme of recognizing and capitalizing on the collective strengths across all campuses within the system, alongside a shared sense of urgency to enhance efficiencies throughout WSU.
Conclusion + Next Steps

The Executive Committee of the Board of Regents have shared this feedback with President Schulz. Informed by the faculty feedback in addition to the priorities set by the BOR, in the coming months we recommend the Board work with faculty, staff, and the administration to further develop actionable times in the following focus areas:

- **One WSU:** Implementing and evolving the One WSU system approach to achieve excellence, inclusivity and empowerment across all aspects of campus life
- **Fiscal Transparency:** Securing a prosperous fiscal future through a comprehensive program review resulting in transparency and engagement across campuses, programs and department’s.
- **Reputational Strength:** Safeguarding our legacy by prioritizing academic excellence, amplifying our WSU story, and increasing enrollment.
- **Stabilizing Athletics:** Ensuring WSU student-athletes play competitively on the West Coast and securing our place in an ever-changing athletic environment.

While there was a sense of appreciation that these sessions were hosted, there is a need to continue supporting and advancing measurable action. We value the honesty and dialogue fostered during these listening sessions and we eagerly anticipate future opportunities for transparent, two-way communication. We acknowledge and offer our gratitude for our faculty as the cornerstone of our university. We urge you to collaborate with the Board in addressing the challenges confronting WSU *together.*