

NEWS

When transparency turns murky

-- A statement from the AAUP Executive Committee

At the Board of Trustees meeting on Sep. 23, the Board heard a presentation by David Daniels, President of Integrated Solutions at Pearson Embanet.

Mr. Daniels described ways that Pearson Embanet might be able to assist Cincinnati State in delivering successful and financially-desirable services to enhance College activities such as marketing, recruiting, and admissions.

Mr. Daniels also said a team of Pearson staff members would be investigating how these College processes work, and then reporting on how Pearson could assist the College in delivering services.

Several members of the Board asked questions about the faculty role in the investigation of Pearson's possible services.

Mr. Daniels replied that the faculty role would be "nothing, initially," because discussions would concern non-academic matters.

Dr. Owens told the Board that faculty members "typically are not engaged" in the types of College activities to be examined by Pearson.

Mr. Daniels said that Pearson had been talking to College

executives (and, we surmised, some Board members) for the past year about possible ways to assist the College by "teaming up with your experts at Cincinnati State."

Mr. Daniels acknowledged that some past discussions had focused on a possible Pearson role in distance education but said distance education was not the focus of current initiatives.

Mr. Daniels assured the Board that all Pearson interactions with the College would be "100 percent transparent."

Dr. Owens said the Faculty Senate would have an opportunity to review the report prepared by Pearson after its investigation.

On Oct. 16, Faculty Senate President Ryan Shadle received a message from Dr. Owens' executive assistant stating that Pearson Embanet "will be on campus for an Institutional Readiness Assessment Campus Visit from Wednesday, October 22nd – Friday, October 24th."

Ryan asked if he could see the detailed agenda for the visit, and he received a document (dated Oct. 8, 2014) with a detailed agenda for the Pearson "Institutional Readiness Assessment Campus Visit."

According to information on the website embanet.com,

during an Institutional Readiness Assessment (IRA for short), Pearson "examine[s] your infrastructure to determine if your institution has the resources and processes in place to serve larger numbers of students at a distance."

Of course, everything at embanet.com addresses Pearson's role in supporting online education. As Mr. Daniels told the Board (and as everyone attending the Board meeting already knew), the bulk of Pearson Embanet's business relates to supporting online education programs, primarily at the graduate school level.

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that the agenda Ryan received is chock full of topics that appear to go far beyond just marketing, recruitment, and admissions.

The agenda does not say where sessions will take place or who will participate. As far as we know, the only faculty members who have been asked to participate are Academic Advisors from the Enrollment & Student Development area.

The IRA agenda begins with introductory topics (review of scope, method, process, timeline) and then moves into "Student Life-Cycle Process

continued on 2

Mapping,” with a stated objective of reviewing the “overarching process for students from inquiry to graduation/transfer.”

We’re pretty sure that somewhere within that life-cycle, students probably interact with a fair number of faculty members.

Other sessions scheduled for Oct. 22 and Oct. 23 include topics like assignment of remediation courses, academic advising and advisor staffing, dual enrollment, articulation and transfer, retention initiatives, instructional technology, and library.

And—scheduled for 2 p.m. on Oct. 23—is a session on distance learning, including “resources, processes, staffing, and system requirements.”

So it appears to us, based on information provided to Ryan, that this investigation of “operations” is a lot bigger than the Board meeting dialog about “operations, not academics” implied.

On Oct. 24, sessions are scheduled with students “from programs across campus,” with Student Government leaders, and with Deans and Division heads. Then the investigation wraps up with a “debrief” session.

One group of significant stakeholders is conspicuously missing: the faculty.

Never mind that the AAUP contract (we’re referring to Article 6, Section C) says that the administration and the AAUP “recognize that the Faculty has a direct and compelling interest in College issues including, but not limited to, long- and short-range planning, priorities in the deployment of financial resources, acquisition and use of existing physical and human resources,

institutional self-study, and marketing, public relations, and recruiting activities.”

Never mind, because that contract section goes on to specify that “College-wide committees and Quality Management Teams established to make recommendations on such issues... shall include at least one-third appointments of the Faculty Senate.”

Never mind, because some of us are exceptionally tired of years of compromise (and sometimes near-combat) with administrators who claimed they didn’t need to include faculty in their discussions of “non-academic” matters, because said administrators had not formed an official College-wide committee or team.

That’s been a convenient loophole for a lot of administrators, over a lot of years.

And never mind that it’s been less than two months since we completed the most collaborative contract negotiations in the entire history of union contract negotiations at the College.

The collaboration was made possible because Board members reached out in a sincere desire to understand “what went wrong” the year of the strike. And Board members took steps to facilitate candid, insightful conversations among faculty, administrators, and Board members about all of the topics—academic and “non-academic”—that matter so much to everyone who cares about maintaining the mission of our College, and enhancing our ability to provide high-quality education and training for a range of students.

Some of us are more vehemently opposed than others to possible

partnerships with Pearson.

All of us have questions about what real benefits—other than short-term infusions of funds—are gained from increasing relationships between our public educational institution and private, for-profit companies.

As Mr. Daniels said to the Board, describing his company, “We’re not philanthropists.”

We have a hunch that by the time you read this statement, you’ll also have heard some sort of statement from the College administration about the Pearson IRA visit. You might even have received an invitation to participate in sessions.

Should that transpire, we encourage you to attend. And we definitely encourage you to attend the Board meeting on Oct. 21, where we suspect the topic of the Pearson visit will be addressed.

And should it happen that not many faculty are able to participate—because we do, after all, have scheduled responsibilities that can’t always be adjusted instantaneously—we will try not to sigh and roll our eyes when we hear again that “faculty don’t turn out for meetings.”

Instead, we’ll try to keep doing our jobs with excellence—recognizing that our jobs include participation in institutional governance as well as classroom instruction, advising, counseling, coordinating, and myriad other tasks that fit our definition of work that is possibly “academic.”

For us, and we believe for most Cincinnati State faculty, caring about academics means caring about excellence, efficiency, and yes, even fiscal sustainability, in all the College “operations” that lead students to seek an education at Cincinnati State, and then help those students to achieve success.

And we fervently hope a day will come when faculty interest in achieving success won’t be viewed with suspicion by those who supposedly share our goals.

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