

**Policy on Discussion and/or Vote on Political or Social Issues by the
Valparaiso University Faculty Senate**

Approved by Valparaiso University Faculty Senate, February 2015

Introduction

From time to time, issues may arise in the political or social realm beyond the University which faculty members feel merit comment.

While the Valparaiso University Faculty Senate is not a body that creates official University positions on such political or social issues, faculty may desire discussion and debate of these issues as they relate to the particular mission and values of Valparaiso University, and may wish to seek the more formal forum for such discussion and debate that Faculty Senate might provide.

This document presents a Philosophy and Guiding Principles with regard to this subject, and provides a Process to be followed if the subject is broached.

Philosophy

In several ways, the Faculty Handbook reminds faculty that their position as faculty members necessarily involves engagement with the world outside the University.

Indeed, the Faculty Handbook states, with regard to faculty responsibility to society, "the citizen-scholar neither works in a social or political vacuum, nor prepares students simply to mirror the values of current society, adjusting to its needs and authorities. The University conserves a heritage but also creates new visions of truth, including the criticism of present arrangements in society" (FH 2.5.2.5).

Concomitantly, as part of their responsibility to students, faculty members are enjoined to attend to the teaching/learning process "from within an intellectual orientation," in "an atmosphere of free inquiry, free of gender and racial stereotypes, with strong encouragement toward independent and critical thinking" (FH 2.5.2.2).

Further, the Faculty Handbook expresses Valparaiso University's commitment to academic freedom, "for only with such freedom will the members of the University community who teach and learn be able to benefit society by judgments and criticisms which might otherwise be withheld because of fear of offending a dominant social group or a transient social attitude" (FH 2.3.3.1). At the same time, the Handbook stresses the correlative responsibility of faculty to be "honest in their judgments" and "independent in their criticisms" (FH 2.3.3.1).

However, the Faculty Senate, as part of the collective system of shared University governance, concerns itself primarily with "academic policies and programs of the University as well as policies affecting the general welfare and professional life of its members" (FH 2.4.5) rather than with issues lying principally in the political or social realm. As the body to which the University faculty has delegated its advisory and legislative functions, the Faculty Senate's scope of responsibility pertains specifically to "all matters within the province of its committees" (FH 2.4.5).

Thus, the only situation in which it would be appropriate for a faculty member to request that Faculty Senate discuss or endorse a particular point of view concerning a political or social issue would be if that issue can persuasively be shown to have a direct effect on one of the areas of responsibility of Faculty Senate and on the educational mission of the University. Certainly the purview of the committees of Faculty Senate (whose remit defines the Faculty Senate's scope of responsibility) is broad, and includes issues that are both academic and concerned with the professional life of the faculty, but any link between the political or social issue under consideration and the Faculty Senate's mission must be compellingly argued.

Guiding Principles

- 1) The University's educational mission overall, as expressed in its Mission Statement, is to "prepare students to lead and serve in both church and society" (FH 1.2). Therefore the Faculty Senate must be mindful of its responsibility to serve as a model for ways in which Valparaiso University students learn to conceive, debate, and take a stand on issues of importance. Discussion must be respectful of the variety of points of view that may be espoused by Senators and by faculty, must be reasoned, and must be given sufficient time to unfold such that all wishing to speak may do so.
- 2) Further, the Faculty Senate must be aware of its representative nature, and ensure that the full faculty, who has delegated several functions to the Faculty Senate as stated above, is given opportunity to voice opinions to their elected representative to the Faculty Senate, or to express those opinions during a meeting of the Faculty Senate at which discussion of the relevant issue takes place.
- 3) The Faculty Senate must take seriously the power of its voice and use it not for endorsement of transient or partisan issues, but rather only on those issues about which it feels compelled to speak, reminding our University community and the society beyond of crucial ethical or moral dimensions of those issues and how the issues impact the life of the University.

Process for Consideration or Discussion of Political or Social Issues

- 1) Whenever possible, Faculty Senators must alert the Faculty Senate Chair or other member of the Executive Committee at least one week in advance of the relevant Faculty Senate meeting that they intend to introduce a resolution to discuss, debate, or endorse a particular stand on a political or social issue.
- 2) Even if alerted to this intention in advance, the Executive Committee may or may not choose to place the resolution on the Senate's meeting agenda, which is distributed to all faculty members in advance of the meeting. Inclusion on the agenda does not mean endorsement of the resolution by the Executive Committee or its members.
- 3) In all cases, whether on the advance agenda or not, the resolution is not considered as coming from the Executive Committee. Accordingly, the resolution must be formally moved and seconded by Senators in order to be discussed or voted on by the Faculty Senate.
- 4) The University President, as chief executive officer, and the Provost, as chief academic officer, will be made aware in advance of the relevant Faculty Senate meeting that the issue will be discussed by the Faculty Senate at that meeting.
- 5) Any resolution of this nature to be considered by Faculty Senate must be presented to Senators in writing at the time of its initial presentation to the body. The document must contain the arguments that the mover evinces as evidence for why it is appropriate for the Faculty Senate to consider the resolution. Normally this will involve the traditional language "Whereas....; and whereas...; therefore...."
- 6) Faculty Senators should not expect the Faculty Senate to vote on whether to endorse a given point of view at the first meeting at which debate on this issue takes place. Accordingly, a vote to approve or disapprove the resolution will not be taken at the meeting at which the resolution is first introduced. This is because Faculty Senators must be given the opportunity to consult their constituency and indeed should be strongly urged to do so in as timely and complete a way as possible. They should further be mindful of their responsibility to represent the opinions expressed by their constituents fairly and openly in any discussion on the floor of the Faculty Senate.

Conclusion

Through this policy, the University community is reminded that the Faculty Senate, as a representative body of the faculty, does not speak in any official way "for the University" on political and social issues that go beyond the University.

Nonetheless, the body can lift its collective voice in order to call attention to issues that are deemed of critical interest to the society at large, inasmuch as those issues affect the life of the University, as stated above.

As part of an academic community grounded in the Lutheran tradition of scholarship, freedom, and faith, the faculty of Valparaiso University may have uniquely pertinent perspectives on an issue, but we must remain mindful that the University is made up of many individuals who may have diverging points of view, and that any vote or endorsement by Faculty Senate might seem to imply unanimity of voice when that is not the case.

Accordingly, requests for discussion of political or social issues lying outside the University, and endorsement of particular points of view on these issues, should be extremely rare and, as expressed above, their appropriateness for Faculty Senate must be compellingly demonstrated.

Works Cited

Valparaiso University Faculty Handbook. August 2014.
<http://www.valpo.edu/generalcounsel>