

Background paper on the motion to discontinue the Council of Chairs and place the participatory governance committee chairs on the Executive Committee

The current chair of the Council of Chairs is the only member of the council who has been on the council since the redevelopment of the participatory governance committee structure in 2011. The current chair had been active in participatory governance committees since the formation of the college in 1993. The chair has knowledge of the history of the participatory governance structure and a perspective afforded by over two decades of work on a number of different committees.

The redevelopment of the participatory governance committee structure in 2011 sought to reduce the number of standing committees while increasing participation in participatory governance.

Prior to 2011 committees were chaired by an administrator in the area in which the committee operated. Committees operated each in their own institutional silo and were not often aware of work being done in other committees. Decisions made in a committee were filtered through the administrative chair to the cabinet.

There was perceived to be a need for a way that committee decisions could move up through a participatory governance structure ultimately to the president. As part of the redevelopment, a committee comprised of the chairs of the standing committees was formed, the Council of Chairs. The president was an ex-officio member of the Council of the Chairs and was present in meetings beginning in March 2012.

With this structure, the Council of Chairs provided a meaningful pathway for the participatory governance committees to inform the president of recommendations being made in the committees.

In November 2012 the college formed the Executive Committee, a committee intended to be on the participatory governance side of the college structure. Hindsight often affords a perspective that was not available at the time a decision was made. The Executive Committee should have superseded, replaced, the Council of Chairs. Once formed, however, institutional entities tend to take on a life of their own and to continue to function even when their core mission has been taken over by another entity.

At that time the decision was made to place the chair of the Council of Chairs on the Executive Committee as the representative of participatory governance committees on the Executive Committee. The result, however, is an Executive Committee that has only a single member charged with representing participatory governance at the college and with being the voice of participatory governance. The presence of a single person does not make the committee a participatory governance committee. The present Council of Chairs chair has noted that if one measures "talk time" in Executive Committee, the Executive Committee is dominated by administrative voices and is functionally an enlarged cabinet with the voice of student representation and the Faculty Staff Senate also at the table.

The Council of Chairs chair also has but a single vote, thus to say that decisions by Executive Committee are well representative of the voice of participatory governance is to suggest that a

token member allows a larger body to claim to speak for the group with token representation.

The presence of the committee chairs for participatory governance standing committees would permit the Executive Committee to claim to speak for inclusive participatory governance.

The dissolution of the Council of Chairs and the placing of the standing committee chairs on the Executive Committee should have occurred in the fall of 2012. When that did not happen, the Council of Chairs was left with issues of purpose and identity. There was the hope that the Council would be a form of information switchboard, moving matters between committees. In practice, however, matters were being directly routed from one committee to another via other channels such as email, dialog, and memos.

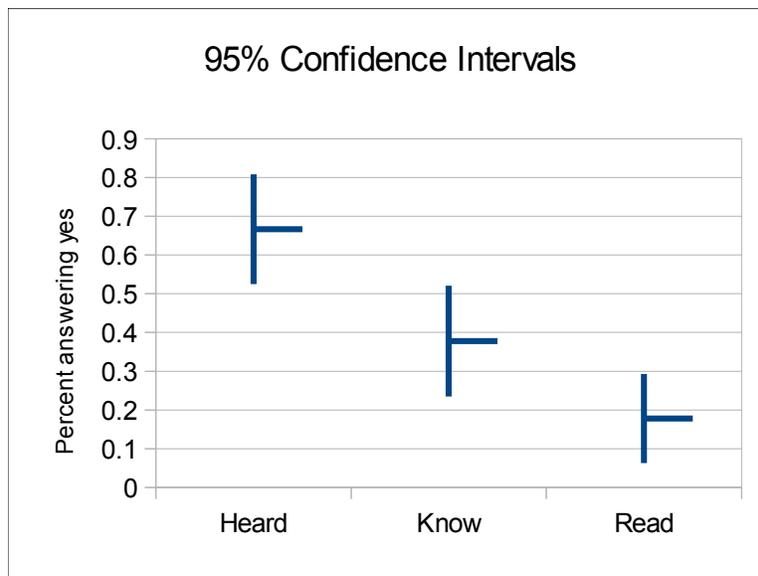
Lacking a clear sense of self-identity and purpose, the Council of Chairs most often reflected the view of the chair as to the role of the Council of Chairs. The result was a council that tended to focus on matters of particular importance to the chair, which often reflected the participatory governance committee that the council chair chaired – if that makes any sense.

The Council of Chairs would be beset by recurrent questions as to the role and purpose of the committee, the roots of which were that the Executive Committee had taken over the original functional role of the council.

One of the potential roles of the Council of Chairs was that through the minutes of the council, the college community might have a single central location in which to learn about policies and procedures under discussion at the college. To attach some numbers to this potential role, the chair sent a three question survey via email to all six sites.

1. Have you heard of the Council of Chairs?
2. Do you know the function of the Council of Chairs?
3. Have you ever read the minutes of the Council of Chairs?

The questions were deliberately simple yes/no questions. Email was chosen as surveys in the past have suggested that many faculty and staff still rely predominantly on email for information.



The core result was that for 45 responses 67% had heard of the council by name, only 38% knew the function of the council, and only 18% had read the minutes. The 95% confidence intervals for these suggest that at most 81% have heard of the council, at most 52% know the function, and at most 29% have read the minutes.

What the numbers do not reveal is that administration and former council members are over-represented in the responses and that the 18% who read the minutes are primarily members, former members, and administrators. Thus that value is likely an overestimate. In addition, those who can answer yes to all three questions are more likely to respond to the email sent than those who would answer no - the survey was not anonymous and some employees might fear that a triple "no" response might have repercussions.

The Council of Chairs is not a communication hub for the college. The Executive Committee is in a better position to handle this role. Among other factors, the Executive Committee has minutes linked directly on the front page of the college web site.

The present council has also self-assessed. Members have noted that the committee has only an information sharing role. The council rarely makes recommendations, those are made by the respective participatory governance committee to the administrator or administrators in the areas in which the committee operates. Bearing in mind that council members are chairs of committees and are engaged in and support participatory governance, some council members find the Council of Chairs meetings to be an activity without a useful output, put more bluntly, a waste of time that could be replaced by direct information sharing between chairs.

As one member noted, "Can't really think of anything that worked except for those brief opportunities for sharing what is going on in each committee. This comment is not meant as a negative reflection on the COC Chair or other officers. This comment is simply a statement of my perception of the functioning of the committee in the structure."

The member went on to note that "COC doesn't really have a clearly defined role. If it is to

continue, its role needs to be clearly defined. If COC is expected to be some sort of clearinghouse for college policies coming out of committees, that is a very unreasonable expectation given the fact that COC only meets once a month for an hour. Also, if COC were to play that role in the governance structure, I can see it being a bottleneck for the movement of policies from all committees. Things are already slow; such an expectation would make things even slower. My recommendation is for COC to be disbanded and deleted from the governance structure. At the same time, there needs to be some way to expeditiously move policies recommended by the various committees to EC and on to the Board, if necessary."

In the two most recent meetings of the council there was no voice raised in dissent to the above statements.

There was the suggestion to dissolve the Council of Chairs and not place the chairs on Executive Committee. The reasoning was that the recommendations made by a committee are passed to the ex-officio, the administrator in the area in which the committee operates. The argument is that this provides sufficient participation in governance and that routing a recommendation through the council to the Executive Committee would be tantamount to end running around the administrator for that area, undermining and questioning their authority. The present council chair has not, during the past four years, seen an instance where this arose as a problem.

For the Executive Committee to be considered to be part of participatory governance at the college, the presence of the committee chairs is required.

The aforementioned comment by a member that the council might be a bottleneck rather than a channel through which information flows is evidenced in part by the lack of knowledge of what was happening on the Executive Committee from 2012 to 2014 for the current council chair. Although a member of the council since its inception, the present chair remained rather uninformed as to the business of the Executive Committee under previous council chairs. Of course the minutes were available, but that is exactly the point. The presence of the council did not improve the flow of communication from Executive Committee back into the participatory governance structure.

While the presence of the participatory governance committee chairs on the Executive Committee would not automatically ensure better flow of communication, the removal of the council of chairs and the placing of the chairs on the Executive Committee would remove a bottleneck through which information has not always well flowed.

At the Council of Chairs meeting on 10 April 2015 the council voted unanimously to dissolve the Council of Chairs and to place the committee chairs on the Executive Committee.

The council wants to see rapid action on this proposal as elections for committee chairs occurs in May. Currently a chair serves once in four weeks on the Council of Chairs, under the proposal the chairs would serve on the biweekly Executive Committee. Chairs would need to know this prior to standing for election. Delaying action could stall the transition for a full academic year. As noted by the chair in the recent council meeting, a failure to act now could put the college in the position of telling a visiting team in spring 2016 that improvements to the participatory governance structure were proposed in spring 2015 but will not be enacted until fall 2016.

Concern has been expressed about finding a common free time for the slightly expanded Executive Committee. The dissolution of the council partially solves this matter as well. The council would leave behind an open biweekly slot on Friday at 1:00 for the Executive Committee to meet.

- Dana Lee Ling, Chair Council of Chairs 12 April 2015