

October 25, 2012
Report on the Meeting of the Faculty Senate
with Internal Governance Consultant Rod Smolla

President Smolla was introduced by Dr. Laura Jacobsen, president of the Faculty Senate, who observed that the IG Task Force that has been working with President Smolla represented all constituencies: student, staff, AP faculty, and TR faculty.

President Smolla first spoke about his role, reviewing both the limitations and potential benefits of bringing in a consultant. As a limitation, he observed that he cannot have the feel for the culture of RU that is possessed by members of the RU community. He also observed that as a consultant he has no prescriptive authority, nor should he. Such authority would be unrealistic and not representative of the culture of higher education. He stated that changes to internal governance at RU must reflect widespread buy-in by all constituencies and that there must be a widespread sense of shared values and an enthusiasm that arises organically.

President Smolla also pointed out that the obverse of arriving without in-depth knowledge of the culture of RU is that he was not burdened with the baggage of bias and would be able to bring to bear objectivity and a fresh perspective. In addition, his lack of prescriptive authority freed him to be candid and to ask hard questions and allowed him the neutrality to help channel conversation without steering it toward a position in which he was invested.

He also stated that the meeting was intended to be an open forum rather than an occasion for him to deliver a report or an assessment, as delivering a report or assessment at this stage would cut off conversation. He did, however, provide a general overview of what he perceived to be the nature of the frustrations with internal governance at RU. He characterized these frustrations as falling into three categories. Some were responses to institutional values or culture. Some reflected managerial issues. Others were responses to inefficiencies arising from a cumbersome IG structure that had created a machine that was large, slow, and difficult to understand.

At this point President Smolla opened the floor to discussion.

The first speaker stated that “shared governance” was a contradiction in terms because by definition power is not shared. The speaker stated that he feels both frustrated by the current situation and resigned to it. President Smolla responded by reviewing how power is distributed at a university as opposed to a corporation. He began by pointing out that board membership may be determined in various ways (he characterized the process for VA state institutions as “political”) but that regardless of how boards are chosen, legal power to run university sits with a sovereign board. However, higher education is governed by a system of “constitutional checks and balances” overlaying a corporate structure. By tradition, university boards, unlike corporate ones, intentionally divide power. In higher education, one line of authority funnels power to the president, a second line of authority funnels power to the faculty, and core academic decisions are left to the faculty or to the faculty and president. At his own institution, President Smolla either defers to faculty or shares decision-making power with faculty on some issues. Some decisions may appear to be administrative versus academic, but in reality in almost any decision of consequence, the administrative overlaps with the academic. In the end, though, in a healthy

governance culture the precise governing structure may not matter. Often of greater importance is whether members of the university community feel enough trust in other members to work their way through an issue.

The next speaker asked for President's Smolla's perception as to the strengths and weaknesses of the current IG document. President Smolla replied that its greatest weakness is its complexity, pointing out as an example an elaborate flow chart based upon the IG document. He also referenced the existence of three different senates as representing unnecessary complexity.

The next speaker asked whether RU should amend the existing IG document or start afresh. President Smolla stated that RU should start fresh. He referred again to the multiple senates, stating that mechanism should exist to provide non-faculty staff with a voice but questioning whether provision should be made for voting on certain issues. He suggested that RU might have "too much democracy" on matters that are not central to the university's mission.

The next speaker commented on the perception that power was concentrated higher up, i.e., at the level of the BOV, and asked whether President Smolla had met with its members. President Smolla stated that he had not yet met with the BOV but that a retreat with the board was planned for February. The speaker stated that board was remote and that it was difficult to know where they stand. President Smolla stated that it is easy for boards to caricature faculty and faculty to caricature boards but that nationally there was a movement toward boards being more engaged and open. He also observed that the cultures of boards change as the membership changes and that RU's board had recently experienced a turnover of a third of its membership.

The next speaker observed that the Faculty Senate works tirelessly but that it is limited to doing nothing more than making recommendations on issues such as resource allocation. As a result, the speaker stated, she "feels like a little rat running on a wheel." President Smolla replied that at other universities resource allocation is an administrative issue. The faculty may take on an advisory role and some decentralization may be a possibility, but there will always be a central authority.

The next speaker asked whether President Smolla had any recommendations for keeping track of the status of motions and recommendations that come out of the Faculty Senate. President Smolla said that he had no specific recommendations beyond establishing clear timelines for action at the next level once a motion or recommendation advances beyond the senate.

The next speaker related an incident in which a high administrator appeared to be unfamiliar with the fact that the IG document mandated the existence of a standing committee to address certain issues and called for the creation of committee whose charge seemed to overlap with that of the standing committee. President Smolla was not able to address the incident in particular but speculated that there might have been a perception that another committee was necessary. He then asked the audience who possessed the legitimacy to make changes in cases where there was a consensus that change was necessary. One member of the audience stated that the power to change the internal governance of the institution stopped with the president and the cabinet and did not extend to the BOV. Another speaker stated that she believes that RU's president is interested in IG reform. Returning specifically to the matter of committees, a speaker observed

that appointments to IG committees are made but that committees are not convened. As a result, faculty feel that such committees are not valued. It may be the case, however, that the administrator was unaware of the role it was supposed to play in convening these committees.

The next speaker asked about the decline of tenure and suggested that adjuncts don't feel the same connection with an institution as tenured/tenure track instructors. President Smolla stated that academic freedom is the soul of tenure and that tenure is not going away. He also stated that there are issues of cost and efficiency behind the hiring of adjuncts and that these are not dirty words: efficiency makes higher education accessible. He offered the analogy of law firms that rely on both equity and non-equity partners. In a follow up, another speaker asked whether it is better to have one adjunct teaching three courses or three adjuncts, each teaching one. President Smollas replied that Radford is complex enough to need the flexibility of "utility players" as well as adjuncts carried a larger load.

The next speaker asked whether Radford should be "starting over" versus reforming, observing that the university has a structure in place for reforming. President Smolla answered by outlining what he sees as desirable changes. Radford needs to eliminate duplication, e.g., multiple curriculum committees. The process requires the establishment of a representative group "with legitimacy" that, with consultation, can come up with streamlined structure, one that differentiates between the administrative and managerial versus the academic, that eliminates duplication and establishes clear lines of control. He concluded by stating that the process should "generate excitement" and result in an "elegant" structure, but also by acknowledging that there are "political issues" that will arise in any such process.