



Alcorn
State University

MEMO

February 21, 2022

To: Dr. Nave and Dr. Wooden

From: The Faculty Affair Committee

Subject: Ongoing Concerns Regarding Academic Integrity of Alcorn State University

Dear Dr. Nave and Dr. Wooden,

The faculty at large, Faculty Senate and Faculty Affairs Committee have ongoing concerns about issues that affect the academic integrity (i.e. quality of teaching and learning) on this campus. We have made several attempts in the past to address these issues, via a Town Hall that was held on November 24th, 2020 and other communication between the Faculty Senate and the administration, primarily via committee motions and questions/concerns that we have asked our president, Dr. Byron Johnson, to communicate. While some of our questions and concerns have been adequately addressed, many remain unaddressed or unresolved.

Below are ongoing issues that have not yet been resolved that relate to teaching and learning and/or the overall academic integrity of Alcorn State University:

- 1. We continue to have ongoing concerns regarding lack of communication/lack of transparency in regards to policy decisions that directly impact teaching and learning on this campus.**

The following are some key examples:

- The complete SACSCOC report that was concluded in March of 2021 has not been shared with the faculty at large, even though the decisions/outcomes of that report are of direct relevance to us as faculty.

-Access to the SACSCOC report is necessary for departments to meet proposed guidelines and metrics to remain in compliance. Schools typically make the report available for transparency and accountability. Not having access reduces faculty members' ability to collect and maintain records and to modify student learning outcomes.

- Faculty were not able to provide input on the 2022 legislative agenda until after Alcorn's representatives already presented to the legislature.

-Dr. Nave did share the agenda with the faculty in a virtual meeting held on February 15th, 2022. However, the input of the faculty at large (via the Faculty Senate), was not solicited in regards to the university's requests for funding and budget priorities. The result of this was that the funding requests focus largely on building maintenance/repairs and improving certain facilities. We do not inherently disagree with the fact that those areas might be in need of funding. However, we would like to see budget priorities that reflect the value and importance of teaching and learning as a whole across the campus and across departments. Faculty as stakeholders in the university, should be allowed the opportunity to comment or request resources pertaining to the University. As the entity in closest contact with the student our input is needed as we will be the individual directly or indirectly affected by those resource allocations.

- Faculty still do not have access to the compensation study that was conducted by Segal.

-We received a memo from Dr. Nave on November 4th, 2021, stating that Segal gave them recommendations on October 12th, 2021, and that sharing of the information would begin occurring in November of 2021. She wrote that two key recommendations were "some job title changes and compensation adjustments." On December 22nd, 2021 we received another memo from Dr. Nave stating that "the first phase of the rollout of the compensation study is underway." However, we have not received access to the study itself, so it is unclear what this information means. What, specifically are the job title and compensation adjustment recommendations? Who will be affected and when? In other words, the language in the memo is vague and does not provide any specific information about the study results or recommendations. In the context of shared governance, all parties should have access to documents that pertain to compensation. Creating a level of transparency enhances the relationship between faculty and administration. Releasing the information would support or dispute comments made in public or private forums. Not releasing the report creates an atmosphere of distrust.

- Our strategic plan has still not been published or shared with faculty and other stakeholders, despite the fact that the university contracted Smith Group, Inc. to facilitate one. The plan was supposed to be published in April of 2021, yet one has still not been published.

-Sister institutions, including Jackson State University, have already published theirs. A strategic plan is crucial for all stakeholders, including faculty, because it helps set the tone and priorities for Academic Affairs for the upcoming years. The lack of a strategic plan hinders the forward progress of the University. Transparency allows faculty buy-in and promotion of the proposed vision. Access to the strategic plan also will allow faculty to address student concerns about facilities, new construction, etc., thereby potentially increasing student retention and recruitment.

- Delay in communication regarding key information that impacts faculty and students. For example:

-An updated syllabus template was communicated to faculty on January 24th, 2022 when the semester had already started on January 18th 2022, which meant that our students had already received our syllabi for their classes. This created extra work and confusion for instructors and students at one of the busiest times of the semester.

- Concerns with leadership style/the "chain-of-command" model and lack of transparency

- The chain of command method is not effective in higher education, where there needs to be an open dialogue between faculty, staff and administration. As individuals with advanced and terminal degrees, we should be allowed the flexibility of communicating directly to the source, while including our direct line supervisor in the communication. Opening the communication pathway for faculty without the concern of reprimand will improve the faculty administration relationship and indirectly improve the student experience.

- Many meetings related to Academic Affairs are not recorded and no meeting minutes are taken. This results in a lack of clear and consistent communication from Academic Affairs. Often, information is communicated from the Provost to one individual (such as a Dean) due to the emphasis on the "chain-of-command" leadership model. However, there is no record of what is said in the meeting. This means that the information is sometimes not communicated at all, communicated incorrectly (even if it is unintentional) or there is a delay in communication. This hurts all parties involved, because no relevant stakeholder can go back to examine a particular piece of communication or remember accurately what was said. This system creates mistrust and secrecy and facilitates the spread of misinformation and/or hides/obscures decisions made by the administration.

Possible solutions to ongoing concerns regarding lack of communication/lack of transparency:

- Provide the SACSCOC report, Compensation Study, and Strategic Plan to the faculty (via The Faculty Senate) and all other stakeholders immediately so that we are aware of the content of those documents.
- Record and publish (via the Academic Affairs website) any meeting that involves a potential academic policy decision, including the rationale behind it.

- Solicit input from the Faculty Senate regarding such policy decisions before a decision is made.
- Solicit input from the Faculty Senate regarding any future legislative agendas/funding requests.
- Cease from relying on an authoritarian, “chain-of-command” style of leadership. Instead, focus on building collaborative relationships with faculty, who are highly educated, intelligent and competent peers/colleagues of members of the administration, with expertise in areas related both to the academic profession and teaching and learning. Use us (as faculty) as resources and sources of collaboration rather than treating us as “subordinates.”

2. We still do not have a revised Faculty Handbook, despite the hard work of the Faculty Affairs Committee, and the SACSCOC recommendation that we revise the document.

- The Faculty Affairs Committee sent the administration the revised Handbook on February 26th, 2021. The entire committee worked hard to get this completed before the SACSCOC accreditation visit (which occurred in March of 2021). We have yet to receive comprehensive and detailed feedback regarding this document from the Office of the Provost. The request that the entire Faculty Affairs Committee meet with administration to discuss the handbook was denied by the Office of the Provost. On January 26th, 2022, the Faculty Affairs Committee was asked to provide the administration with a side-by-side document, which we did, and sent to them Monday, January 31st, 2022.
- However, there was a lag time between the submission of the revised Handbook and the first initial feedback. Dr. Johnson did not receive the first set of feedback until April of 2021. The inauguration of Dr. Nave occurred in April 2021. As a result, the inauguration took precedence over the Faculty Handbook. We believe that more consideration should be given to the Faculty Handbook than to the presidential inauguration or other similar events.
- Dr. Byron Johnson, chair of the Faculty Senate, has continued to emphasize to administration that we need the Faculty Handbook to be approved.
- Currently, we continue to operate using an outdated Faculty Handbook (2013).

Possible Solutions:

- Dr. Wooden should schedule a formal meeting with the **entire** Faculty Affairs Committee immediately to discuss the handbook and any potential revisions in detail. Plenty of time

should be allocated for this meeting so that we can go through the entire document, all together, and discuss any issues/concerns points of disagreement between both parties. This way, we can move forward on getting this document updated.

3. Writing Center/Math Lab and Upswing Concerns:

- The Alcorn Writing Center and Math Lab have consistently been premier resources in the state and commended by SACSCOC. They also provide employment to under-privileged students who display a high aptitude for writing, math skills and communication to serve the student body and community. The Writing Center/Math Lab also do much work to create a collegiate, studious environment, increase library traffic, and offer many unique services to students found nowhere else on campus. It is a major retention tool, especially for freshmen and sophomores.
- We are concerned that the new acquisition, without faculty consent or input, of the online tutoring platform Upswing will outsource all the good work Writing Center and Math Lab tutors have traditionally done, and thereby impact retention severely. The value of having Alcorn students tutor each other cannot be replaced, as they are far more in tune with our student body, their needs, and context than an impersonal tutor on Upswing.
- It is also not clear how much this platform costs Alcorn, but we do know that this is not a free service.

Possible Solutions:

- End the contract with Upswing, and instead invest more funds and support to bolstering our Writing Center and Math Lab, working with the Directors and Assistant Directors of these two resources to ensure that the needs of the student population at Alcorn are met.

4. Ongoing Scheduling Concerns:

- Faculty across departments continue to experience challenges with course scheduling. Below are some key examples:
 - Classes cancelled that are needed for students to graduate on time
 - Challenges with creating the schedule
 - Classes cancelled the first week of class and either not added back at all or added back one-two weeks later
 - Limitations on number of courses and classes offered due to limited instructor numbers
 - Classes cancelled before they even appear in Banner for students to enroll in.

-Instructors being asked to conduct independent studies for students who need to graduate, with no additional pay, while still teaching a full 4/4 load and doing service work, research etc.

-In a memo sent out to the faculty on January 25th, 2022, Dr. Wooden claimed that the university has taken a “student-centered” approach to scheduling classes, writing that “While courses with low enrollments have been canceled, we continually seek alternative options to address student degree progress (i.e., course substitutions, independent study, etc.)” Dr. Nave also made this same claim in a memo sent to the SGA on February 11th, 2022. The faculty disagree with the statement that course cancellations and other restrictions/limitations on the schedule are “student-centered.” Rather, the cancelling of courses has produced panic and anxiety in our students. It also creates a chaotic one to two weeks of the semester in which students are not sure if they have all the classes they need. Even if a class is added back, the students lose instruction time and the faculty have to scramble to adjust their syllabus schedule and lesson plans.

-Furthermore, faculty who conduct independent studies should be paid for their labor. Independent studies still require prep time, grading time, email communication time, and one-on-one communication time with the student.

Possible Solutions:

- No class that is required for a student to graduate should be cancelled without the express written permission of the department chair, and only if a solution that fairly compensates the instructor is found.
- Consider allowing departments to cross-list courses, as we were able to do prior to the spring of 2020.

5. Lack of faculty input regarding positions in Academic Affairs in which those employees have a direct impact on teaching and learning.

The following is a key example:

- Academic Affairs recently hired Dr. Joyce Buckner-Brown as Associate Provost of Undergraduate Learning and Student Success. Faculty were not informed about this new hire until after it had occurred, nor was our input regarding this candidate (and other potential candidates for the position) solicited, even though Dr. Buckner-Brown plays a crucial role in shaping and implementing academic policies here at Alcorn. The result is that future faculty procedures and processes will be coordinated by an individual that faculty had no opportunity to vet.

Possible Solutions:

- The Faculty Senate should be included in the hiring process and asked to attend the interviews and provide feedback on any potential candidates for positions that are directly related to Academic Affairs and/or have a direct impact on teaching and learning policies.

6. Instructor Workload

- Faculty workload encompasses quality instruction and best practices in teaching and learning, both of which are reflective of the mission statement and vision of the institution. Thus, it is important that faculty, regardless of status, participate in the provision of input as it relates to workload guidelines in each school, department, and/ or unit. Such practice fosters transparency and shared governance.
- In the fall of 2019, the teaching load for full-time non-tenure track faculty was revised from twelve to fifteen hours. The Faculty Senate, the Faculty Affairs Committee, and instructors were not solicited for input. The changes to the instructor workload was communicated to the Faculty Senate in a meeting with Dr. Metcalf-Turner (Dr. Nave's Chief of Staff at the time) on November 19th, 2019. Faculty input was not solicited in advance regarding this. Dr. Metcalf-Turner informed us that the decision had already been made. In that meeting, Dr. Metcalf-Turner informed us of the policy decision. It was not a collaboration or a conversation. The policy took effect in January of 2020.
- The very real financial impact on instructors was not discussed at all, despite the fact that our instructors earn lower pay compared to PhD faculty, and significantly lower pay compared to members of the administration. Many relied on a teaching overload just to pay their bills and other basic costs of living.
- Moreover, the revised policy (inclusive of no additional pay) is not congruent with the language of the current Faculty Handbook, which stipulates a twelve-credit hour load. This is located in Section 6.5 of the current (2013) Faculty Handbook, which states the following: "Faculty loads reflect differences in assignments for teaching undergraduate classes, advising, directing seminars, supervising clinical experiences, and directing theses. The teaching load is twelve (12) semester hours per term at the undergraduate level, and nine (9) hours at the graduate level" (page 26).
- Non-tenure track faculty comprise half of the faculty composition in degree-granting programs across the country as reported by the AAUP (American Association for University Professors) and peer-reviewed literature. Given the adverse effects of the pandemic on student enrollment, the new policy has engendered challenges in assigning full-time schedules. By contrast, a 12-hour load enables more feasibility for assignments as these unprecedented times in higher education are continuously navigated. Best practices and faculty expertise are held in the highest regard, consequently.

Possible Solutions:

- No instructor should be asked to provide additional teaching labor (i.e. an additional course that is higher than a 4/4 or an independent study) without being fairly compensated.
- Any decision regarding instructor workload should be made with the collaboration of the instructor population here at Alcorn State University via the Faculty Senate.

7. Use of COVID-19 to excuse or deflect from other issues and/or decisions.

- We completely understand that COVID-19 has had an impact on this campus. However, students and faculty are back to in-person environments, so using COVID-19 as a reason for any additional policy at this point is not reasonable. Furthermore, there are several decisions that have been made that have hurt the academic integrity of this institution that have **predated** the COVID-19 pandemic.

The following are some specific examples:

-The issues related to class scheduling began before the COVID-19 pandemic, occurring at the beginning of Spring 2020 in January. The pandemic did not hit the United States, and we were not ordered to go to virtual teaching, until March of 2020.

-The changes to the instructor workload was communicated to the Faculty Senate in a meeting with Dr. Metcalf-Turner (Dr. Nave's Chief of Staff at the time) November 19th, 2019. The policy took effect in January of 2020, well before the pandemic hit the United States.

8. Use of fiscal austerity to justify decisions that have an adverse effect on teaching and learning

- We are all acutely aware that we are underfunded compared to PWI universities in this state. However, when we begin to look more carefully at how our limited resources are being spent, we do not see that teaching and learning, nor the educational needs of our students, are being prioritized in the budget. **Where a university spends its resources is an indication of its priorities.**

The following are some specific examples:

-If fiscal austerity is an important issue, in reference to course offerings and staffing, the same austerity has not been considered with the filling of administrative positions. Institutional support has grown considerably while instructional support has not.

- There is a huge pay gap between faculty and members of the administration. This leads to a top-heavy, bloated administration with overworked and severely underpaid faculty (administrative salaries). This also leads to faculty resignations and faculty flight. Due to these ongoing issues, faculty burnout and talented faculty flight have severely impacted the university.

-Another example is that currently the library and several academic department budgets have been reduced from previous years (Alcorn State University Academic Department Budgets Fiscal Years: 2018, 2019,2020,2021,and 2022). A limited library budget has a huge impact on the academic integrity of a university. It severely limits the ability of both students and faculty to conduct research on this campus. Students and faculty struggle to access even the most basic of resources (like JSTOR) and much of the technological infrastructure is outdated. Likewise, limited department budgets prevent students and faculty from having access to resources to conduct research and other academic activities.

-Furthermore, we continue to experience consistent and persistent internet and technological infrastructure issues. As faculty, it is frustrating when we are crippled in our ability to do our jobs by such things as unpredictable wifi outages and infrastructure issues. Likewise, our students also experience these ongoing issues, which makes teaching and learning extra challenging for both students and faculty on a regular basis. So far, little improvements have been made to classroom technologies in most of the buildings and only minimal improvement has been made to increasing the internet broadband. Furthermore, many of our students who come from low-income backgrounds would greatly benefit from laptops and other basic educational technology and supplies. However, there has yet to be any widespread or consistent effort to provide these resources. There were laptop kiosks placed in the library, but they currently do not work.

- Therefore, we have concerns about how the emergency COVID-19 funds that we received were spent. The availability of CARES resources for Alcorn was a huge opportunity to employ creativity within guidelines to supplement the existing budget. Faculty never received any communication from the administration to solicit input on how CARES money could be most usefully spent to improve teaching and learning and to help our students. The lack of involving other stakeholders outside the administrative cabinet may have resulted in the loss of a financial opportunity.

-Various classrooms could have used updated computers with cameras and projectors to complete the mission of virtual learning. The updating of on-computer labs, rental of laptops, iPad dissemination to students, faculty and staff are things that other institutions implemented, which meant that they were options for us and our students. Additionally, resources could have been used to compensate instructors who used their resources instead of university resources.

- Additionally, Alcorn State University received a donation of 25 million dollars from the Mackenzie Scott foundation, which could also be used to help address some of these issues.

Possible Solutions:

- Use some of the Scott donation to address some of the issues listed above, including reinstating departmental and library budgets and addressing technological infrastructure issues.
- Use more of the CARES money that we have been allocated to address some of the issues listed above, including reinstating departmental and library budgets and addressing technological infrastructure issues.

In summary, we are all highly qualified experts who work hard and have chosen to work at Alcorn because we believe in the mission of this institution. The faculty at Alcorn are highly educated, intelligent and competent resources. We are also Alcorn's frontline workers, the ones who interact with our students every single day and the ones who see the impact of policy decisions on our students and in the classroom. And all of us care, deeply, about our students and about the quality and integrity of our institution. We respectfully ask that the administration use us as valuable peers who can collaborate to address these ongoing issues.

Respectfully,

The Faculty Affairs Committee