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Seattle University Faculty Prepare to Finish a Stressful Quarter

Andru Zodrow, News Editor

As Seattle University students are preparing to wrap up a difficult quarter, faculty are also looking forward to the long winter break. After eleven weeks during which Washington state has experienced a mounting COVID-19 crisis, a polarizing national election and the stresses of facilitating another quarter completely online, professors are preparing to take a much needed rest.

Frank Shih, professor of mechanical engineering and president of the Seattle U Academic Assembly, which represents faculty interests, noted the variance in the adversities professors face during the pandemic.

"Faculty exists on a spectrum—it's impacting some faculty more than others," Shih said. He then went on to describe the differences in home situations.

"I think faculty are dealing with a range of issues based on their own circumstances. Some are more difficult than others. Some are easily percibale and others unseen," Shih said. "Particularly if they are in caregiving roles, there are challenges, both for them to provide a quality education and take care of people that are in need of their care."

Due to the diverse array of problems faced by faculty, Shih stressed how the Academic Assembly has been helpful by providing resources on a case-by-case basis according to need.

Dean Joseph Phillips of the Albers School of Business and Economics echoed Shih's observation that faculty are in need of the longer winter break.

"My sense is they're really exhausted and getting very, very tired because it's been a lot of work for them. And in many cases, they feel like they haven't had a break since March," Phillips said.

Phillips also stressed Albers' dynamic approach to addressing faculty needs. Especially when it comes to the thought process behind what classes need hybrid models versus all in person or fully virtual.

"I think the faculty in the most challenging situations generally aren't interested in face to face. They don't want a hybrid class. So we have very few of those on the schedule this quarter and very few in the schedule next quarter," Phillips said, as he went on to describe the impact of the new teaching methods. "I think faculty have by and large done a good job in the classroom. The feedback we've gotten is pretty good despite all the stress."

Dean of the College of Science and Engineering Michael Quinn articulated his intention to take the additional stresses of 2020 into account when assessing the needs and performance of professors.



"We just have to understand that this is a highly unusual time. There are many faculty members who have an unusual level of responsibilities, because their kids aren't in school, or they're concerned about their parents' exposure to the coronavirus, and so we do need to take that into account and be realistic," Quinn said.

Phillips wondered whether any of the changes instituted this quarter will remain in future academic calendars.

"One of the interesting things in my mind is, what do people say after this break if we stay in the quarter system? Should we do this schedule all the time? Should we start in early September?" He went on to conjecture that there could be broad student support for such a move. "It would not surprise me if there were to be a groundswell for that, of course, we are still figuring out what academic calendar we're going to use, but we'll see what happens there," Phillips said.

Provost Shane Martin described the work his office is doing to ensure that faculty needs are met.

"Faculty have some options for those who are working on tenure, they have the option to postpone their tenure clock if that would be beneficial to them and without of course any penalty at all," Martin said.

Additionally, there are additional resources available for non-tenure track professors.

"For faculty who either have a sabbatical currently or are working on a sabbatical proposal, we extended the deadline for the proposal and we want to give flexibility on the sabbatical report or completing a sabbatical depending on an individual faculty member's circumstances," Martin said.

Martin, Quinn, Shih and Phillips all agreed that issues are being addressed on an individual level.

"We've asked individual faculty who need any accommodations to contact the Provost Office, so we can work with them and figure out what the best thing to do is," Martin said.

The broad consensus among administrators was clear: this has not been an easy quarter for professors, but university leaders are happy with the resilience of Seattle U's educators.

"Our faculty and staff, first of all I want to say are doing an amazing job in difficult circumstances and I'm just very, very proud," Martin said.