



April 27, 2020

**VIA EMAIL**

Chancellor Donde Plowman  
Office of the Chancellor  
527 Andy Holt Tower  
Knoxville, TN 37996

**Re: Faculty Governance and the Covid-19 Crisis**

Dear Chancellor Plowman,

We are the executive committee of the UTK Chapter of the American Association of University Professors (AAUP). We write to seek clarification for some of the remarks President Randy Boyd made at the University of Tennessee Board of Trustees Meeting on April 24, 2020. In briefing board members about UT's response to Covid-19, President Boyd lauded the hard work of the UT community during the transition to online learning. President Boyd correctly recognized that all UTK professors have been working tirelessly to engage with and educate our students online. We also note that the UT administration has thus far done an excellent job in making timely decisions as well as helping students and faculty adjust to this crisis mode of educating.

Concerning to us, however, were Professor Boyd's remarks that "[i]n the last 30 days, [UTK has] advanced five years," that there is no longer faculty resistance to teaching in an online format, and that "we're going to seize on this opportunity." When we listened to President Boyd's statements, it seemed as though President Boyd desires to move a substantial amount of UTK's curriculum into an online or hybrid format, even after the Covid-19 emergency is over.

The AAUP's core mission is to stand up for faculty governance and academic freedom. On this point, Professor Boyd's remarks gave us pause. The mere fact that we have been able to conduct online classes in this emergency does not mean that we should be required or even pressured to permanently switch to an online or hybrid format. In high-context courses (humanities and law for instance), so many things are lost when instruction moves to an online format, granularities that cannot be captured on a screen. And we've been hearing quite a few stories from students (many of whom are first-generation students from underserved and/or rural communities) who are really struggling with the technology and to connect with the curriculum and their teachers. During this

crisis, troubling issues have emerged that question the narrative that online teaching represents a positive culture change that should be permanently adopted in the future.

We would also like to point out that UTK should have robust faculty involvement on these critical issues. The UTK faculty [handbook](#) provides that the faculty has the “primary role in determining curriculum [and] educational policy.” We read this as requiring meaningful faculty input on any decision involving the curriculum as well as its method of delivery. Once the pandemic crisis is over, control over the curriculum and its delivery should return back to the faculty, through the faculty senate and through faculty governance at each individual college/department.

The handbook also states that the faculty should have “representation in university decision-making that directly or indirectly affects faculty ability to function effectively.” Faculty governance requires that teaching faculty members (tenure-line as well as lecturers) have a strong voice in how teaching and curricular issues get resolved, during this crisis, but also in the future. We are optimistic about the Re-Imagining the Fall Task Force and its various sub-committees, but we were disappointed to see that the Task Force is mostly comprised of administrators and faculty holding administrative positions (we positively note that the Task Force sub-committees have more teaching faculty members). The faculty handbook also provides that the University should “solicit peer nominations of faculty to serve on university committees.” We would like to see this become a reality.

Thank you for taking the time to consider our concerns. We are grateful for your leadership during these unprecedented times.

Sincerely,

*The UTK AAUP Executive Committee*

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