

Clarifying the role of the Faculty Welfare Committee in evaluating sabbatical applications

According to Faculty Senate Bylaws, the Faculty Welfare Committee is to receive applications for faculty sabbatical leaves and “certify their validity” to the administration. In recent years, the committee has interpreted certifying the validity of applications to mean ensuring that applicants meet minimal sabbatical requirements (e.g., the number of semesters since last sabbatical) and have the clear support of their chair and dean. When there is doubt whether an application meets these requirements, the committee—in the interest of promoting faculty welfare--notifies the applicant, chair, or dean to give them the opportunity to make revisions to strengthen the application. At present, then, the Faculty Welfare Committee does not focus on the academic substance of sabbatical applications. All sabbatical applications that meet the two above requirements are endorsed by the Faculty Welfare Committee; the Provost then receives the sabbatical applications and decides which of them will be funded.

The Faculty Welfare Committee has decided on this relatively minimal role in the sabbatical application process for three reasons:

1. The members of the Faculty Welfare Committee often lack the expertise to judge the academic merits of sabbatical proposals in disciplines removed from their own. Because chairs and deans are in the best position to judge the academic merits of sabbatical proposals from their own departments and schools, the committee has decided that it is best to rely on their judgments.
2. In addition to reviewing sabbatical applications, the Faculty Welfare Committee has the responsibility to hear faculty grievances. Among these would be grievances from faculty members challenging their denial of sabbatical. Ideally, the committee would not have these two responsibilities—of certifying the validity of sabbatical applications and of hearing grievances of the denials of these same sabbatical applications. In order to minimize the potential conflicts between these roles, the committee has decided it is best to limit its initial review of sabbatical applications to determining that applications meet the basic formal requirements (and if they do not, providing guidance to faculty on how they might meet these requirements).
3. The Faculty Welfare Committee has found that the most substantial decision-making process regarding funding and non-funding of sabbaticals occurs *after* the committee has completed its review of sabbatical applications. Applications that the Faculty Welfare Committee has studied and endorsed have ultimately been denied; and applications that the Faculty Welfare Committee has studied and not endorsed have ultimately been approved. The committee has not been privy to the decision-making process that follows its review of sabbatical applications. However, Associate Provost Bob Tardiff has shared with the committee (in a spring 2010 meeting) that after receiving the sabbatical applications (and the FWC’s endorsements and non-endorsements), the Provost solicits

additional information as to the relative strength of those applications from deans. It seems, then, that the Faculty Welfare Committee does not receive the information that would be necessary to play a more substantial role in the assessment of sabbatical applications.

Many faculty members seem to believe that the Faculty Welfare Committee plays a substantial role in decisions on the funding of sabbaticals. In fact, it does not. The primary purpose of this document is to clarify what role the Faculty Welfare Committee does play in the sabbatical application process, and to explain why it plays that role.

The Faculty Welfare Committee believes that decisions about which sabbatical applications, and which types of sabbatical applications, are funded should not be left entirely to the Provost and the deans. For this reason the committee is currently preparing a document proposing some university-wide structural priorities for sabbaticals, as well as some tools to address the unevenness in numbers of sabbatical applications from semester to semester. This document will be sent to the Senate within the next month.