

Confidential Presidential Search Underway at Utica University

by Leonore Fleming

The unexpected announcement of a confidential presidential search and the threat of program elimination set forth by the Board of Trustees have come to define the campus culture at Utica University. Both are clear examples of how shared governance is being sidestepped and how faculty are not meaningfully being included in these processes, despite the fact that faculty are essential to the mission and functioning of the university. COVID-19 was an excellent catalyst to bolster administrative control. Confusion, crisis, and a faculty more willing to trust—or at least tolerate—cases of shared governance being sidestepped in the name of “keeping things running” have all been prevalent over the past two years. Faculty may be back to teaching in a more “normal” environment, but the pre-pandemic climate of transparency and shared governance never fully returned.

The success of Utica University hinges on the success of transparency and shared governance. In regard to the presidential search, not only is shared governance necessary so that faculty and other members of the campus community are given adequate opportunity to participate in the process, but also so that any potential candidate can get a true sense of the campus culture. Indeed, the harm of confidential searches is emphasized in the following charge from the AAUP’s 2015 “Statement on Presidential Searches”: “Faculty members should demand that their institutions observe established norms of shared governance by involving faculty representatives in all stages of the search process and by providing the entire faculty and other members of the campus community the opportunity to meet with search finalists in public on campus.”

With a new university president on the horizon, the Board of Trustees and the administration would do well to heed the AAUP’s caution that “an institution cannot be rebuilt on mistrust or worse on a broadly shared sense of betrayal. Action that manifests regard for the faculty’s collective role is essential in order to rebuild commitment and trust” (“Report of an AAUP Special Committee: Hurricane Katrina and New Orleans Universities” 2007). The promise of a new university president can and should be a time for hope. This is not the case, however, when a campus culture is defined by threats of program elimination or when a campus culture is defined by a confidential search for the next leader of the university. The slow, but continual erosion of shared governance at Utica University has been made abundantly clear by the events of October, 2022, which included unexpected announcements of both a confidential presidential search, and an academic program review with threats of program elimination.

A Timeline of Shared Governance in Decline

October 3: The president of the Utica University Chapter of the AAUP (AAUP-UC) has meetings with the university president and provost. There is no discussion in either meeting about the status of the search for a new university president.

October 5: The provost gives a report at the monthly Faculty Senate meeting, which all fulltime faculty and librarians are required to attend. There is no discussion about the status of the presidential search.

October 6: The provost emails faculty the “Board of Trustees resolution directing the institution to conduct an academic portfolio review.” The resolution, drafted by the Board of Trustees on August 19, 2022, begins with the claim that “shifting enrollment patterns and a significant decline in enrollment have resulted in an unsustainable faculty-to-student ratio at the university,” and concludes, “the Board of Trustees of Utica University direct the administration to undertake an academic portfolio review designed to provide recommendations for any changes to credentials offered by the institution, including possible program design, redesign, or elimination.”

October 7: At 12:18pm—the Friday before October Break—the Utica University faculty and staff receive an email with the subject line “Presidential Search Update.” In this email, the search committee chair states the hired search firm “recommended the committee undertake a ‘confidential search’ process to potentially broaden the prospective pool of qualified candidates. A confidential search means the candidates are not introduced to the University community until a president is announced.”

October 14: The Black Student Union (BSU) sends a letter condemning the presidential search process because of the “glaring lack of racial diversity on the search committee,” and symbolically tapes its letter to the office door of one of the members of the Board of Trustees. Four days later, the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees responds to the BSU with a letter that does not adequately address the concerns raised in the BSU letter.

October 16: The governing board of the AAUP-UC writes an open letter to the Chairperson of the Presidential Search Committee and copies the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees. The letter asks that “the Board of Trustees reconsider their decision to undertake a confidential presidential search and conduct an open and fully transparent final selection process.” The letter ends by noting that a shift to an open final selection process would “demonstrate regard for the faculty’s collective, meaningful, and central role in upholding the mission and success of Utica University.” Three days later, the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees responds to the AAUP-UC with a letter that does not adequately address the concerns raised in the AAUP-UC letter. (Visit aauputicacollege.org to view the AAUP-UC letter and response.)

October 19: The Faculty Senate holds a special session and passes two resolutions unanimously: 1) an endorsement of the BSU letter, and 2) an endorsement of the AAUP-UC letter. In each resolution, the Faculty Senate notes the response by the Chairperson of the Board of Trustees is inadequate.

October 26: The Faculty Senate holds another special session and passes a unanimous resolution condemning the confidential search, stating, “...the Faculty Senate of Utica University vehemently opposes the decision to conduct a confidential search for the next President of our university community.”

October 31: All three Faculty Senate resolutions are sent to the Board of Trustees. As of November 21, the Faculty Senate has received no response.