

**THE PHILOSOPHER'S STONE**  
**or**  
**What I learnt, so far, in the Faculty Senates**

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I have included along with our minutes and my report Fred Walter "State of the Senate" speech, which he delivered at the February 6<sup>th</sup>, 2012 meeting of the University Senate. This is a very important speech, which if you have not read, I hope you will take the time to read. I would like to publicly thank Fred for his leadership in the University Senate. I also think that the extended, warm and loud applause at the University Senate was evidence that his speech was also well received by the University Senate.

Before I give my president's report, I like to take the opportunity to share with you some reflections on what I have learned in my decade of work in the senates. Soon, we will have elections for vacant and rotating positions in the A&S senate. I want to urge you to think about the senate, the vital role it plays in the health of this "our" university, and about how the senates are a place, an institution, and a community to which you should devote some, more, care, effort and commitment. In addition, I think it is important that you also know that the AAUP has some very important things to say about University Senates and governance in general. Visit this link:

<http://www.aaup.org/AAUP/pubsres/policydocs/contents/governancestatement.htm>

Let me summarize what I learned in five simple propositions:

- We are powerless, but we have authority
- We disagree, a lot, but we deliberate
- We convert force into legitimacy through our deliberation
- We transmute deference and fear into conviction and loyalty, and in this way
- We demonstrate why democratic education is fundamental to our democratic society

I began my career in the A&S Senate as a senator in the Committee on Academic Standing, which I chaired for a couple of years. There I learned that faculty take very seriously their pro bono work, and that when they confront problems that can be fixed, they make very sound and actionable recommendations. During my tenure in CAS, we made many detailed and implementable recommendation that I think had a positive effect in how we serviced our students. I think based on our recommendations, the number of students we had to dismiss after being on academic probation decreased. I also think our advising improved due to some of our committee's recommendations.

Later, I was elected to the University Senate committee on Research, in which I worked with a different set of colleagues, from across Nichols road and from the Engineering school. In this committee we designed, held and analyzed a university wide survey on research funding. We

presented our results to Jack Marburger, who endorsed our findings. On the basis of the committee's survey, the committee formulated some resolutions that were adopted by the University Senate. While I was serving on this committee, and since I recently had become a full professor, I was appointed to PTC, where I have worked under the leadership of two outstanding chairs, Gary Matthews and Ned Landsman. In this committee, I have worked with some truly exemplary colleges, whose commitment to the faculty, to scientific and academic excellence, and to students is only matched by the dedication with which they pour over tenure and promotion files, many composed of over a thousand pages. Over the three years I served on this committee, we have reviewed over a hundred files, easily over 10 thousand pages of cvs, statements, manuscripts, and letters from anonymous scholars, who have sat and reviewed hundreds of pages of statistics, essays, books, etc. During my tenure in this committee, which has overlapped my presidency of the A&S Senate, the committee made changes to the guidelines for the submission of tenure and promotion files, which we ratified by the A&S Senate. Most importantly, we moved to a digital version of tenure and promotion files. Now, nearly all PTC files are digitally submitted.

Over these last ten years, I have come to hold in the highest regard my colleagues, and to recognize how indispensable, nay, essential is their mostly unacknowledged work in the Senates. I am simply in awe of the incredible amount of work I have seen my colleagues perform, which barely gets acknowledged in their CVs. The question then becomes: why are we so diligent, loyal, committed to all this work that is surely not, or hardly, acknowledged by the administration. We know that at Stony Brook University you are not hired, or promoted, or rewarded by your service. And yet, we all give our utmost to work on "service."

As president of the A&S Senate, much less as a senator, this is what I can't do. No senator, in fact, can do any of the following:

- We can't fire anyone
- We can't demote anyone
- We can't ask for raises for anyone, and certainly not for myself
- We can't promote our friends
- We can't get our graduate student special stipends
- We can't get travel funds for ourselves, or our colleagues, or our graduate students.

On the other hand, this is what I, and my fellow senators, can get for themselves, as members of the senate:

- Stern reprimands when we ask about the wisdom of certain administrative decisions
- Some of us become 'black listed'
- Some of us are labeled obstructionist
- Some of us are vilified
- Some of us are seen as lazy and traditionalists
- Some of us are accused of not getting it, and wanting to return to the 'good o'times'

And yet we persevere, and continue to work in our senates. Why? Do we really know why we insist on shouldering Sisyphus's Rock up the yearly academic year, to see it roll back down the

next and the next? Over my ten years in the Senates, I learnt that my colleagues are committed to governance, not simply because it is one box they must check among the more important ones they have to check in order to get tenured. They certainly are not in the senate for a non-existent “power,” “rewards,” or “acknowledgement,” from the administration. I have come to learn that they, and I along with them, believe in and are thoroughly committed to governance for some powerful reasons and moving ideals. I would summarize them this way:

We are the guardians of Academic Freedom  
We are the anonymous preservers of scientific excellence and integrity  
We are at the vanguard of the production of knowledge  
We are consummate skeptics  
We are specialists and experts in a field, but we are all practitioners of pedagogy  
We are inveterate anti-authoritarians  
We are the Eeyores of knowledge –always pessimistic that we got it.  
We are the teachers of the new generation of citizens  
We are the trainers of the next generation of producers of knowledge  
We are the educational backbone of all colleges and universities  
We are the ones that stay, while students come and go  
We are a school’s institutional memory, while administrators come and go  
We are always the ‘boots’ on the ground.  
We are the Olympians of argumentation  
We are the multipliers of counter-arguments  
We are the church of neither dogmas nor gods, but of our students and our disciplines.  
We are paradigm smashers and builders  
We are the role models of our students, children and co-citizens.

Which is why:

If administrators can hire and fire, and thus have power, we only have authority  
If we disagree, we do so because that is our vocation, and thus turn it into deliberation  
If we deliberate, it is because we only believe in the force of the better argument  
If we are irreverent and skeptical, it is because we only act on rational conviction.  
This is how we transmute force and power into authority, namely reasoned and rational efficacy.

By now, I hope, it has become clear why I have titled my report “The Philosopher’s Stone.” Now, the reference in this title is not to J.K. Rowlin’ first volume of her Harry Potter saga, but to the alchemist’s dream of a stone, a substance, that would turn lead and copper into gold. I can conclude this part of my report by saying that shared governance is the philosopher’s stone that turns dissent, force, skepticism through reason deliberation into authority. But we can only produce this philosopher’s stone if we continue to have an engage, vibrant, and accountable senate. We are holding elections within a couple of weeks. I want to urge you to get active, to encourage your friends to get involved. I want to urge you, faculty in particular, to assume positions of leadership as we enter a decade of potentially revolutionary changes at Stony Brook University. Let me bring to you attendance the list of our past presidents during my tenure in the A&S Senate:

2010-Present - Eduardo Mendieta, Philosophy, Faculty  
2009-2010 - Aimee De Chambeau – Library, Faculty  
2008-2009 - Ruth Ben-Zvi, Economics, Staff  
2007-2008 - Cynthia Davidson, Writing and Rhetoric, Faculty  
2004-2006 - Frederick Walter, Physics and Astronomy, Faculty  
2002-2004 - Andrea Tyree – Sociology, Faculty  
2000-2002 - Joan Kuchner, Psychology, Faculty

There are departments who have not appointed their senators (English, Linguistics, Philosophy, Political Science, School of Journalism, Writing and Rhetoric, Asian & Asian American Studies, Anthropology, European Languages, and the recently constituted Cultural Analysis and Theory). We have about five vacancies in our standing committees. Perhaps most disturbingly, there are some senators who have been in committee for more than two terms, that is to say, for more than six years. There are senators serving on two standing committees. Neither of these two should be the case. I think this undermines the legitimacy of the senate, and adversely affects about ability to get more faculty involved.

I have aimed to persuade you why the Senates are important, to give you a sense of the urgency what they do, why they do it, and how they do it. Above all, I hope to have shown why the alchemy that we perform in the Senates is indeed something not simply useful but also philosophically important. Please vote this upcoming election. Nominate a colleague, and above all, be proud when you say, and list on our CV, that you are a “Senator of the Arts & Science Senate.”

Now turning to my report as President of the A&S Senate:

1. At the end of the Fall semester I had an emergency meetings with Dean Squires. One had to do with the need to stream-line the submission guidelines for the Senior Lecturer Title Award. We also discussed the need to have this committee’s function be hosted in the University Senate.
2. In tandem, I worked with Lee Miller to develop a set of guidelines that are more in accord with the title award. Once we have finalized the status of the function of this committee, the improved guidelines will be submitted to the appropriate senate.
3. Fred Walter, president of the University Senate and I met with Nancy Squires to talk about the resolutions on the Shared Service Centers. From this meeting, Lee Miller and I are discussing how to improve consultation about SSCs.
4. I had an emergency meeting with Provost Assanis to clear up some confusions that arose concerning the Senior Lecturer Award Title and the committee.
5. At the request of the EC of the University Senate I drafted a response to the President’s letter about the SSC, which he wrote after we passed an A&S Senate and University Senate resolutions on SSCs. These drafts were revised by the EC
6. At the request of the EC of the A&S I also drafted a response to the “Branding Initiative.” The draft was revised by the EC. This letter was then sent to the EC of the University, which adopted it as well. Along with the response to the President’s letter on SSCS, this letter was delivered to the president on the 13<sup>th</sup>.

7. I have attended all but one of the University Senate EC meetings (I was out of the country doing research).
8. I have met with the University Senate EC to plan the agenda for the Spring, as well as the agenda for the University Senate meetings.
9. I have met with the A&S EC to plan the agenda for the Spring semester.
10. At the request of the A&S EC have schedule meeting with chairs and ATC in Humanities Building.
11. I have scheduled the visit to the A&S Senate meeting by the Howard Schneider, Dean of the School of Journalism
12. I have scheduled a visit by Provost Assanis to the A&S Senate (confirmed for April)
13. I have been mediating deliberations between the University Senate and the A&S PTC on the future of the library promotion and tenure committee, and the request that it be disbanded and be assimilated into the A&S PTC.
14. I have also had to mediate on new procedures of reporting of the CAS committee in light of Donna DiDonnato's departure from SB.
15. I visited the Health Sciences Senate to talk about our Senates.
16. I have made repeated requests for updates on the "Senior Lecturer Title Award" files submitted last fall, but have not heard from the Provost.