

SFUFA White Paper on Term Limits for Chairs and Directors of Academic Units

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Background

The SFUFA Executive is committed to promoting collegial governance at SFU. To that end it authorized its Governance Committee to develop and publish a survey on the topic. The survey appeared in two parts in March and April 2010. The results still require analysis by the Committee, but it makes sense for the purposes of this Paper to consider a few relevant statistics.

One third of 165 respondents thought that collegial relations within Departments and academic units were poor or very poor. This considerable minority represents a troubling statistic. These perceived impaired collegial relations ought not, it seems, to be attributed in large part to the leadership of academic units. Slightly more than 40% of 164 respondents rated the collegiality at the level of Chairs and Directors as excellent or good. If we add those who rated collegial relations with Chairs and Directors as acceptable, the figure rises to just under 57%. Only 17% of respondents reported that these collegial relations were poor or very poor. Just over 25% of respondents did not know how to rate these collegial relations. The statistics indicate a considerable vote of support for Chairs and Directors.

Yet, during the past several years, SFUFA Staff and the SFUFA Executive became aware of complaints from SFUFA members in several units that indicated a perceived lack of respectful and equitable treatment on the part of a particular Chair or Director and a feeling that it was very difficult to raise and discuss contentious issues without fear of retribution with respect to career progress, allocation of resources, etc. Whether or not such concerns were exaggerated is difficult to tell from outside, but it seemed clear that a number of our members felt marginalized by Departmental decision-making processes, a perception that in itself needs to be addressed if there is to be a healthy climate of collegial decision-making. In several cases, Chairs or Directors of fractious units have been able to win ratification for a second or subsequent term by narrow majorities, leaving a sizable minority feeling despondent at the apparently limited prospects for change, particularly in the absence of recognized and accepted means of conflict resolution.

The Executive discussed the adoption of a university policy that stipulated term limits for Chairs and Directors as a solution to this problem. Before formally recommending such a policy change to the university, the Executive thought it advisable to canvass the opinions of Chairs and Directors, who are members of SFUFA, before formally surveying all SFUFA members.

Accordingly, I circulated a six-point rationale (see Appendix 1) for a proposal to establish a university policy of a limit of two consecutive terms for Chairs and Directors in an e-mail of 29 October 2009. In subsequent communications, I stated that the SFUFA Executive would support policy language that simply stated: "Normally, chairs would not be appointed for consecutive terms exceeding ten years. Chairs and Directors responded swiftly. The vast majority remained opposed to any policy that limited their terms. Professor Peter Ruben, Chair of the Department

of Biomedical Physiology and Kinesiology and Chair of the Chairs and Directors drafted a statement of opposition (see Appendix 2).

During my electronic discussions with Chairs and Directors, the SFUFA Executive gathered information from the Faculty Associations of other universities in British Columbia. We discovered that the University of Victoria had no policies limiting the terms of Chairs. The Faculty Agreement between the University of Northern British Columbia and its Faculty Association allows for one renewal of the term of a Program Chair and subjects a further renewal to the review of a particular committee: “Program Chairs may be renewed once by a process of review of their first term. A further renewal shall occur only if the incumbent is selected by a committee comprised in Article 72.4.2 [i.e. the Program Appointments Selection Committee chaired by the Dean or designate] which considers other appropriate candidates” (72.5.1). Policy 22 of the University of British Columbia imposes a limit of two terms: “Authority for the reappointment of Heads rests with the Board of Governors on the recommendation of the President. No candidate shall normally serve more than two consecutive terms as Head.” A Head is defined as “the Director of a School, Centre, or Institute, the Head of a Department, the Chair of a Division, or the equivalent.”

Recommendations

Without discarding the proposal to establish in university policy term limits for Chairs and Directors, the Executive feels that we should first explore other ways of improving governance in Departments and Schools. Consequently, we have developed the following recommendations.

1. Deans should regularly remind faculty in Departments and Schools of the provisions of Policy A 13.02: Appointment of Department Chairs and Directors of Schools. Faculty should be aware of the responsibilities of Chairs and Directors (Section 3) and of their right to petition the Dean to reconsider the suitability of a Chair (Section 4).
2. Policy A 13.02 should be revised to underline in Section 1.1 the Dean’s responsibility of ensuring a fair and effective election of an *internal* candidate and to articulate the need for a fair and transparent process for the election of a Chair and Director. The policy dwells in large part on the process of selecting *external* candidates (Sections 1.1 – 1.9).
3. The University Administration should consider revising A 13.02, Section 3 by clearly identifying in greater detail the roles and responsibilities of Chairs and Directors. Article 72 of the Faculty Agreement between UNBC and its Faculty Association can serve as a useful guide. The document is available online: <http://www.unbcfa.ca/pdf/2007FAOctobeRratified.pdf>.
4. The University Administration and SFUFA should establish a formal program to (1) describe the responsibilities of Chairs and Directors to potential Chairs and Directors, (2) prepare incoming Chairs and Directors for their administrative positions, and (3) provide on-going support for Chairs and Directors during the tenure of their administrative appointments. Here SFU can follow the lead of the University of Alberta, which has established an Academic Leadership Program (also known as the Chairs’ School) that not

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only provides essential orientation but also offers workshops to develop skills and a retreat that “encourages participants to explore a transformative leadership model.” More information about the Academic Leadership Program is available at http://www.academicleadership.ualberta.ca/docs/ACL/academic_leadership_brochure_09-10.pdf.