

March 24, 2004

## Faculty Senate meeting minutes: 03/24/2004

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*Northeastern University*

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### Recommended Citation

Ellis Jr., Charles H., "Faculty Senate meeting minutes: 03/24/2004" (2004). *Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes*. Paper 45.  
<http://hdl.handle.net/2047/d10004944>

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TO: FACULTY SENATE  
FROM: CHARLES H. ELLIS, Jr., SECRETARY, FACULTY SENATE  
SUBJECT: MINUTES, 2003-2004 FACULTY SENATE MEETING, 24 MARCH 2004

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Present: (Professors) Alper, Alverson, Aroian, Blank, Brookins, Bursey, Ellis, Flym, Hansberry, Hunt, Krishnamoorthy, Kruger, Lowndes, Margotta, Morrison, Peterfreund, Serafim, Shafai, Sherman, Sherwood, Vaughn, Wray  
(Administrators) Abdelal, Finkelstein, Greene, Hill, Meservey, Onan, Soyster, Stellar, Zoloth

Absent: (Professors) Bannister, Bansil, Barnes, Bruns, Futrelle, Howlett, Khaw, Metghalchi, Ondrechen  
(Administrators) Weiss

Provost Abdelal convened the meeting at 11:57 a.m.

I. **Minutes.** Consideration of the minutes of March 10 and 17 was postponed because they had just been distributed.

II. **SAC Report.** Professor Lowndes reported the following.

A. **Meetings.** SAC met twice since last week's Senate meeting, once with the President and Provost, and once alone with the Provost. The budget and search procedures were the topics of discussion at the first meeting.

In the budget discussion, the focus, based on recommendations of the Financial Affairs Committee, was on ways to improve interaction between the CFP and the Budget Committee and to bring transparency to the budget procedure. Some agreement was reached, and the FAC report and more details will be coming to the Senate soon for consideration.

The negotiations on the search procedures are nearing conclusion and will be shared with the Senate as soon as is feasible.

The meeting with the Provost focused on two proposals, one for a new School of Technological Entrepreneurship and the other for a master's degree in technological entrepreneurship in that school. SAC had some issues with these proposals, which likely will be coming to the Senate next week.

B. **Upcoming Agenda Items.** SAC has been waiting for documentation on a number of academic proposals that require trustee approval in mid-April, so it is hoped that we will be able to get everything to the Senate in good order for the next meetings.

C. **Next Meeting(s):** Next week, **Wednesday, March 31, in 450 DG at 11:45 a.m.**, and, if necessary to complete the agenda, on **Thursday, April 1, in 308 SN at 2:50 p.m.**

III. **Quasi Committee of the Whole**

Professor Lowndes explained that the purpose of moving into a quasi committee of the whole was to allow full discussion of the agenda item regarding the closing of the NU Press. [This action also allows the presiding officer to remain in the chair, which is not the case in a committee of the whole, which has to elect its own chair.] If the body chooses, it may develop a recommendation for action by the Senate when it comes out of the quasi committee of the whole.

Provost Abdelal presented an overview of his perspective on the NU Press. He explained that the primary issue for his office and the President's Office has been the financial liability associated with running an independent university press. Three years ago, before he arrived here, there was concern about the growing deficit in the Press's operations and the subsidy the University must provide. That subsidy increased from

\$370K in 2001 to \$600K in 2004. Small independent academic presses across the country also are being confronted with these challenges, and some have entered into consortia in which financial obligations are consolidated. In order to improve efficiency and protection, the University is looking into a consortium arrangement similar to those in which Tufts and Brandeis have participated. He and President Freeland had consulted with key people who were involved in developing the Press and concluded that the current operation be discontinued and that the nine individuals on the Press staff be notified of this decision. The Provost's Office has worked with HRM to ensure that every assistance be provided for placement in other positions, either on or off campus, and for appropriate severance packages.

Professor Aroian expressed surprise that the news of the decision was reported in the *Globe* without any apparent advance announcement to the university community. In light of our lofty expectations for the coming years, she would have appreciated an opportunity to offer input to the decision.

Provost Abdelal responded that the *Globe* article occurred independently of the schedule. He had planned to make an announcement to the university community before it was made to the public... He emphasized the importance of proceeding collegially and his office's commitment to that. In this instance it was difficult to determine how to proceed in a usual way, since the NU Press Editorial Board is not a governing body, nor was it involved in the management of the Press. While he was respectful of talking with the board, it was a business decision.

Professor Burse asked whether, in a consortium, the main NU Press would have a central staff of some kind. Provost Abdelal replied that, typically, a consortium would have an existing, central staff.

Professor Peterfreund explained that some consortia have individual press imprints, but not all consortia (the University Press of New England, for example) allow publishing under a proprietary imprint. Provost Abdelal countered that the New England Press has arrangements for publishing when a member institution wants publication under its own name.

Motion Professor Ellis moved to go into a quasi committee of the whole, and the motion was seconded.

Vote: PASSED, 28-0-0.

(The report of a committee of the whole does not become part of the minutes of the Senate meeting and is therefore appended.)

Adjourned at 1:26 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Charles H. Ellis, Jr.  
Secretary

**Report of the Quasi Committee of the Whole**  
**24 March 2004**

Vice Provost Meservey explained that the nine staff members of the Press were a key concern once the decision was made to close the Press. It was important to communicate directly with them before the announcement became public, so she had met with the staff members and HRM representatives last Thursday. They all have received severance packages and the opportunity for individual outplacement consultation with a professional firm. The second group of important individuals to be contacted is the authors whose work either has been or may be published. Those whose books are under contract will be published by NU, and their books will be marketed appropriately. Authors whose books were tentatively on the 2005 spring list will not be published in the usual way. Resources will continue to be available to authors whose works have been published and are still being used in various situations. Authors whose works are still in the negotiation stage will be contacted about other locations for their work.

Vice Provost Meservey went on to say that consortia arrangements were not pursued prior to the communication with the staff, but the University is now approaching a number of different presses. In some, we would become part of a larger group, while in others we would have the option of publishing some books or series under the NU Press label. She reported that other presses and individuals have expressed great disappointment about the closing of our press and have made strong statements about the quality of its publications, which are regarded highly, nationwide and worldwide.

Professor Sherman expressed concern that the closing of the Press was a step backward for the University's academic reputation. He asked whether any analysis had been conducted about the possible impact. Vice Provost Meservey responded that the number of NU faculty who have published through the Press is small. The preponderance of our academic reputation comes from the visibility and acknowledgement of our faculty's contributions. She added that only a small number of the "Lucky 13" institutions with which we compare ourselves have university presses.

Professor Peterfreund recalled that he had not heard about the possibility of joining a consortium until a chairs' meeting last Friday. He expressed dismay that faculty were not involved in the discussion that led to the decision to close the Press.

Vice Provost Meservey recalled that the Provost had mentioned consortia at the Thursday afternoon faculty meeting. She added that the concept of a consortium had been in the mix for quite a while; she had had conversations about consortia with Dr. Frohlich, former director of the Press, about two years ago.

Professor Blank asked whether the *U.S. News and World Report* considers a university press in its rankings. Vice Provost Meservey replied that, while a press may influence academic reputation, it is not a quantifiable measure. Provost Abdelal added that Tufts, Brandeis, and Dartmouth do not have independent presses but have consortia arrangements.

Provost Abdelal noted that the University has needs, in the areas of faculty and staff, the library, and support for professional development, competing tremendously for insufficient resources. It is difficult to look at something in isolation and then to decide whether it is worth having when there are equally compelling arguments to support other operations.

Professor Sherwood acknowledged Provost Abdelal's point but expressed concern about the lack of confidence in the process, which seemed to be deficient in fundamental integrity. He suggested that the issue of consortia should have been examined before the Provost, the President, and the Trustees made the decision. Provost Abdelal pointed out that the *Globe* article was in error—he and President Freeland, and not the Trustees, had made the decision.

Professor Alper expressed concern that this issue highlighted for him the central problem for the CFP: having only a limited opportunity to look at all the budgetary priorities the University is considering.

The floor was yielded to Professor Harlow Robinson, who read from a prepared statement:

“As a member of the Editorial Board of the NU Press, and a member of the NU faculty, I feel compelled to protest the decision by the University administration to terminate the operations of the NU Press by the end of 2004. Not only is the decision itself mistaken and short-sighted, but the manner in which it was taken, secretly, without any consultation with the NU Press Editorial Board or any other faculty body, displays a blatant lack of respect for the NU faculty community and a disturbing disregard for democratic governance procedures. As the Provost himself admitted in his communication to the NU community of March 8, 2004, announcing the foreclosure, ‘The Press, which has been in operation since 1977, has been a productive voice in the academic publishing world, serving general trade and scholarly titles in a number of areas.’ In particular, NU Press has achieved a high level of quality and recognition in the fields of music, criminal justice and women’s studies, and has published numerous books that have been reviewed very favorably by highly visible scholarly and popular publications, including the *NY Times* and the *Boston Globe*. Last night on Channel 2 there was a program on the *Jews of Boston* based on a book published by the NU Press. Many NU Press books have also been adopted as core textbooks on various campuses. NU Press books have also won a number of prestigious awards, and have been a powerful tool in communicating a very positive image to the national and international scholarly community, that NU is a place where scholarship is valued, created, and shared with the wider public.

At a time when one of the stated goals of NU’s ambitious campaign to reach top 100 status, . . . it makes absolutely no sense to destroy an institution that already possesses a strong academic image that has been built up carefully and created since 1977 by a remarkable, dedicated staff. To shut down NU Press now will send a damaging and counterproductive message to the scholarly, intellectual, and university community in the U.S. and abroad concerning NU’s values and aspirations. NU’s communication to the NU community through Provost Abdelal states that his decision was based solely on financial grounds and because of an ‘increasing level of subsidy incurred in recent years,’ and yet, the amount of the subsidy given to NU Press has been very small compared to the budgets of other non-academic units of the University, including public relations and athletics. One cannot buy that kind of positive advertising the books published by NU Press over the yrs have generated. . . . I have been very gratified by the number of university professors and ordinary leaders who have come to know of NU for the first time in a very positive way through NU Press books. The Provost’s decision leads one to ask, how well-considered and ultimately productive are the University’s financial and planning priorities.

Finally, that the decision to close NU Press was made without any consultation with the Editorial Board of NU Press, or any kind of public discussion of any kind with concerned members of the NU community, including faculty, raises troubled questions about the administration’s decision-making process. At the time of the founding director of NU Press, William Frohlich retired in June 2003, the Provost’s Office, under the supervision of Vice Provost Meservey, convened a search committee, of which I was a member, to identify candidates to succeed him. At its first and only meeting, this search committee was assured that the University intended to conduct a high profile search for its successor. Then months went by without any further meetings or communications from the Provost’s Office, despite repeated requests for information. The staff of NU Press, under the leadership of interim Director Jill Bahcall, was also assured that the search would be held, and that the only obstacle from launching it was the heavy local workload of the members of the Provost’s staff. As recently as 2/23/04, only 3 wks before the announcement of the impending closure, the Editorial Board met at a regularly scheduled meeting with the members of the NU staff, discussed plans, and were informed that assurances had been received that the Press would continue to operate and be authorized to search for a director. We were profoundly shocked and dismayed when we learned on 3/18 that earlier that day, Vice Provost Meservey had gone to the NU Press office to inform the staff that operations would cease at the end of 2004 and that they would no longer have jobs. We would hope that such arrogant, undemocratic and insensitive behavior would not be sanctioned by the highest academic officers at NU. It also sets a dangerous precedent, indicating that faculty and community input, will not be solicited or considered in confronting the difficult financial and organizational decisions that will have to be made as NU pursues its noble

quest for higher standards hence our excellence. I call on the Faculty Senate to urge Provost Abdelal to reverse his decision to close NU Press and to explore options for its continued successful operation, in consultation with representatives of the faculty and the university community.”

The floor was yielded to Professor Holbrook Robinson who noted that the decision to close the Press should not be a decision made purely for financial reasons because the University’s reputation depends on activities such as this. The fact that the Press is so well respected makes it all the more difficult to accept its termination. As for the top-100 institutions, how many of them have closed well-regarded presses? The fact that the Press did not publish more NU authors attests to its being independent and not a house organ for our faculty. He pointed out that the University spends over \$2M to subsidize the football program and recommended that this program be relegated to NCAA Division 2 status or even, like MIT, Division 3 status. He thought it intolerable to continue with that subsidy and not continue with the Press, which represents a much smaller expenditure.

The floor was yielded to SGA representative Peter Antonellis who expressed dismay that a university that is trying to move in an upward direction would terminate one of its reputation-enhancing components. He urged that some other way be found to continue to subsidize the Press.

The floor was yielded to Professor Fountain who had served two terms on the NU Press Editorial Board. He acknowledged the administration’s obligation to make business decisions, but he thought the decision to continue to operate the Press should be based on the intellectual capital and reputation of the University. He urged that the matter be revisited without delay.

Vice Provost Meservey was of the opinion that the consortium notion has the potential to help us. Reducing the book list could create a cycle of downward motion of not having enough revenue generated to allow work to be done. By joining forces with other universities we would have a larger base from which to operate, and this would provide an opportunity for us to be able to continue the work of the Press in such a way that the financial risk is shared with some of our colleague institutions.

Professor Peterfreund reported that the news of the closing of the Press appeared on the front page of the *Chronicle* online, which was negative advertising. He wondered whether the University’s image would be better burnished by the Press than by the Jumbotron Puzzler at Fenway Park. He pointed out that, were a new director, hired to craft a business plan with a time frame for achievement, not to measure up to expectations, people would be saddened by a decision to close the Press, but they would accept it. As it is, outrage is the result of the lack of transparency and sharing of information.

Several Senators were of the opinion that the possibility of entering a consortium should have been raised earlier in the process, so that the NU Press would not be seen as being terminated but rather as taking on another form. This would have given a more positive aspect to the decision to make budgetary changes.

Professor Holbrook Robinson suggested that the importance of football be diminished in order to invest in sports programs that would bring more acclaim to NU and also cost less.

Provost Abdelal explained that this year’s budget cycle was five-fold more transparent than last year’s. Although the process needs further improvement, for the first time, the budget assumptions were tested and debated and more information was shared with the CFP.

Professor Lowndes agreed that the transparency of the budget process had improved, but from a low reference level. He noted that, working with the incremental budget, the CFP does not get to see much of the operating budget. He suggested that, when the Senate would come out of the committee of the whole, some intent be expressed, such as directing the Agenda Committee to meet with the President and the Provost to examine options to save the Press.

Professor Harlow Robinson pointed out that under the terms for closing the Press only two of the NU Press staff would remain here after the first week of May.

Professor Sherwood thought that the Provost and the President would inspire faculty confidence by acknowledging that the process was less than desirable. He recommended that the termination be postponed for a year so that a committee could be established to look into the best way to proceed.

Professor Margotta suggested taking a vote to get a sense of Senators' opinions.

Professor Ellis explained that the committee of the whole could take a straw vote and report back to the Senate, or someone could introduce a resolution that would be reported out for a formal vote by the Senate.

Dean Soyster recalled a decision in 1998 to cut \$1M from his college's budget and that the Senate did not become involved in that matter. He expressed concern that the Provost's future executive authority to make difficult decisions would be limited by Senate involvement.

Professor Flym observed that, while he accepted that the decision to close the Press was made with the best of intentions, he did not believe the consequences were clearly foreseen by the Provost's Office. He suggested that the question be revisited in terms of its impact on morale. The Press, unlike the colleges, which are established units with their own budgets, is a small entity and people feel protective of it.

Professor Lowndes proposed taking a straw vote on the following: **"The Faculty Senate has learned with considerable dismay of the intent to close the NU Press and urges in the strongest possible way that the Administration reconsider this action."**

Professor Sherwood suggested adding "immediately" before "reconsider" and this was accepted. The text then read, **"The Faculty Senate has learned with considerable dismay of the intent to close the NU Press and urges in the strongest possible way that the Administration immediately reconsider this action."**

Dean Zoloth cautioned against confusing the issues of the process, the role of the Press, its future, and the individuals who are affected. He thought the decision, but not the process, was well done.

Professor Lowndes explained that the process could be dealt with later. While he did not want to undermine the senior administration's ability to make executive decisions on the budget, neither did he want to see faculty opinion muted.

Professor Kruger noted that, whether the decision was correct or not, bad press and ill will have been created. He suggested that by addressing the process issues we might be able to recapture some of what has been lost.

There being no objection, the committee of the whole took a straw vote on Professor Lowndes' motion.

Straw vote: PASSED, 19-7-3.

As it was the end of the meeting time, the committee of the whole rose so that the Senate could adjourn.