Staff Senate Minutes

April 09, 2021

**CALL TO ORDER**

Staff Senate President Margie Link called the Arkansas Tech University Staff Senate meeting with ATU Administrators to order on at 1:30 p.m. on Friday, April 9th, 2021.

* Speaking attendees included:
	+ Dr. Robin Bowen – ATU President
	+ Walter Brandon – Interim Vice President of Administration & Finance
	+ Christina Stolarz – Director of Human Resources
	+ Margie Link – Staff Senate President
	+ Kaitlynn Beaird – Staff Senate Secretary
* Approximately 241 people were in attendance and attendance was not recorded due to time constraints.

A list of questions (see Appendix A) was submitted to Dr. Bowen and Mr. Branson on Thursday, April 8th. Most of these questions were read aloud by President Link and are listed below with corresponding responses to those questions below each, in addition to a few follow-up questions that Secretary Beaird read aloud from the chat.

The meeting concluded at 2:30 p.m. before all questions from the original list and other follow-up questions were addressed. These will be sent to Dr. Bowen and Mr. Branson in a follow up report (see Appendix B) after Staff Senate approves.

**Layoffs/Restructuring**

* Why can’t those being laid off be notified sooner?
	+ Dr. Bowen stated that they want employees to remain employed as long as possible and be eligible for any openings on campus. She is concerned about disgruntled employees and referred to employees at a previous institution as the “walking dead” after they were notified they were being let go.
	+ They are following the guidelines set forth by the state, which is 30 days for staff members. It is different for faculty members because they listed the earlier date in their handbook. Branson shared that 30 days is sufficient as some employers only give two weeks’ notice and some just one day.
	+ All faculty members who will be laid off have already been notified.
* Will those who will be let go be told about open positions on campus before their end date?
	+ Stolarz said that HR is asking supervisors to hold any non-emergency positions open until employees are notified of layoffs.
* Why can’t supervisors be told of who will be laid off in their departments sooner?
	+ Supervisors will be notified before employees and will receive training on how to communicate layoff(s) to their employee(s).
* Is there a severance package for those being laid off?
	+ They decided not to offer severance packages because they would be less than what an employee would make if they were to stay until the end of their contract. Severance pay is based on tenure as follows:
		- Less than one year = $0
		- 1-5 years = $800
		- 5-15 years = $1,200
		- 15+ years = $1,600
* Will those who are laid off be covered on their health insurance policies for an extended period of time?
	+ The American Rescue Plan went in effect in April 2021, so the university will pay the COBRA fees of those laid off until September 30th, 2021 or until they are re-employed.
* Will people be paid out their sick leave?
	+ They will follow the handbook, which says that they will pay out vacation up to 30 days, but no sick pay will be paid out.
* Will there be resources for those laid off like resume help, etc.?
	+ Services that will be offered include resource seminars, financial wellness courses, counseling, first option to interview for on-campus positions, job fair for those who cannot find position on campus
* How will they be notified? HR? Supervisors?
	+ Supervisors
* Will staff be eligible for the additional pandemic-related unemployment payment?
	+ Yes, under the American Rescue Plan.
* If a current employee is laid off and re-hired at a later date, will their retirement benefits be honored or will they be under the new policies?
	+ Will have to honor APERS
	+ Stolarz was unsure about TIAA and said that she would follow up with President Link.
* Will the restructuring decisions be based upon seniority? If not, why are vacant positions being posted and filled?
	+ Not necessarily. It is different in different areas.
* What research was done to support the decision of dissolving the Division of Enrollment Management and placing it under Student Affairs? What best practices and models were referenced? What guidance and consultation were sought from other universities that faced similar issues and/or implemented similar plans? The consultant who came in just a few years ago said that we needed to add the Division of Enrollment Management. Why was this changed? Why even spend the money on consultants if we don’t follow their advice?
	+ Dr. Bowen reiterated that they are not dissolving Enrollment Management, just moving it under Student Affairs. She added that she did not want to do this, but that it was necessary due to budget constraints.
* How much money is the university saving by restructuring?
	+ $12 million
* How much will the restructure cost the university?
	+ The costs associated were adjusted within the $12 million in savings.
* What was included in that $9 million area that wasn’t discussed at the Board meeting?
	+ Travel, supplies, equipment, student support, software licensing, etc.
	+ Branson shared that they reviewed all budgets to make cuts.
* Will this information be shared?
	+ The Board is voting to approve the cuts in May and it will be released then.

**Tuition Waiver Benefit**

* Can current employees be grandfather into the tuition benefit at 100%, especially the people who have be consistently taking courses semester after semester?
	+ President Bowen shared that the waiver must be counted as an expense in the budget, despite how some may think that it doesn’t cost the university any money.
	+ Only 80 or about 10% of employees currently participate in the program and that by changing the waiver guidelines, it would generate enough revenue to save 2-4 jobs across the university.
	+ Branson shared that the waiver was similar to institutions across the country and that institutions in Arkansas were quite generous with the waiver in comparison to other states.
	+ Since faculty are recruited from across the nation unlike most staff positions, our waiver should be aligned with similar institutions across the nation.
* If employees have to withdraw from courses due to not being able to make their payment, will they be responsible for paying that back?
	+ Yes, the repayment policy has not changed.
* Can we get clarification on the date that the waiver will take effect?
	+ Stolarz confirmed that it will not take effect until fall 2021.
* We have a newer employee that has been told she can take summer classes for 100%, but come fall she will not be eligible for the faculty/staff waiver at all because she has not been here a year. How does that make sense? The [press release](https://www.arkansastechnews.com/atu-takes-steps-to-ensure-continued-fulfillment-of-institutional-mission/) clearly says “*new* employees.”
	+ Stolarz started that it would be hard to keep up with this and that they will just have to take the semester off.
* We aren't eligible for Health & Wellness services since we currently don't pay the H&W fees. Will those who take classes be able to take advantage of the services in the future?
	+ Branson confirmed that employees who pay the Health & Wellness fee will be eligible to utilize the Health & Wellness Center.
* How much money does the university receive for each degree conferred? Was any research done to see the money the university might actually lose due to a drop in enrollment from their employees and their dependents?
	+ Dr. Bowen is on the funding committee for the state and stated that she knows a lot about this topic. She added that the loss we would incur is miniscule compared to the cost of the scholarship against the university. Branson included that only 4% is based on enrollment and productivity.
* President Link shared that the Staff Senate proposes that staff members who are currently enrolled in courses be grandfathered in to the current policy. If not, we propose that all staff members are offered 6 hours for undergraduate and 3 hours of graduate tuition and fees be paid at 100% per semester, for a maximum of 18 hours per fiscal year. That way, students consistently stay enrolled in at least one class per semester and complete their degrees. Additionally, we would like for the one year waiting period to be removed from the stipulations completely.
	+ Grandfathering staff in is not an option.
	+ President Bowen said that the current agreement had already been approved by the Board of Trustees, that they had not considered other options such as the one we proposed, and that they wanted to see if it worked before considering anything else.

**Miscellaneous**

* Where did the report come from that shows how many employees have received the COVID-19 vaccine? How was this information collected?
	+ The Department of Health requested a list of employees and then compared ATU’s list of employees with the list provided to them from medical facilities across the state. A percentage was then sent to ATU based off of data from the beginning of March. Stolarz confirmed that the list they received from the DOH did not include names.
* Where is all of the CARES fund going?
	+ Guidelines restrict what it can be used for and must be COVID related. They are using it for updating our HVAC systems and purchasing hard/software to improve virtual learning.
	+ The CARES funds are a one-time source of funding and Branson shared that it would be financially irresponsible to use on recurring expenses, such as personnel.
* One Stop Shop
	+ How many people will be employed there?
		- Not sure.
	+ Who will staff it?
		- Student accounts, registrar, admissions, financial aid, advising, career services will be represented.
		- There will be several people up front and this will vary at different times of the semester.
		- Everyone will be cross-trained.
	+ Timeframe?
		- Hope to start implementation July 1st and everything be ready to go by spring 2022 at the latest.
	+ Who will supervise it?
		- It will be under Student Affairs and everyone will work closely together.
	+ What research was done to make this decision?
		- Branson noted that at the University of Tennessee, they reduced 50-85% of routine calls that were handled by One Stop.
		- Allows staff to focus on retention and other areas and increases customer service

**Budget**

* Did anyone on the Executive Board take a cut of their salary to save jobs? Did anyone offer to?
	+ Branson said that that was not considered, as their salaries needed to remain competitive with those across the country and added that many of the executive committee members make less in comparison to those at other institutions in the state. He also shared that he makes a third less at ATU than at his former institution in Ohio.

**Appendix A**

**ATU Staff Senate: Questions for Dr. Bowen & Executive Committee**

* **Layoffs/Restructuring**
	+ Why can’t those being laid off be notified sooner?
	+ When will non-contract employees be notified? For example, administrative assistants don’t have a contract. Will they still be given the 30-day notice?
	+ Will those who will be let go be told about open positions on campus before their end date?
	+ Why can’t supervisors be told of who will be laid off in their departments sooner so that they won’t post any openings in the meantime that could be filled by someone in their department or someone else on campus? They need plenty of time to distribute additional job duties.
	+ Is there a severance package for those being laid off?
	+ Will those who are laid off be covered on their health insurance policies for an extended period of time?
	+ Will there be a retention package for those who stay until the last day?
	+ Will people be paid out their sick leave?
	+ Will there be resources for those laid off like resume help, job fair, etc.?
	+ How will they be notified? HR? Supervisors?
	+ Will staff be eligible for the additional pandemic-related unemployment payment?
	+ If a current employee is laid off and re-hired at a later date, will their retirement benefits be honored or will they be under the new policies?
	+ Will the restructuring decisions be based upon seniority? If not, why are vacant positions being posted and filled?
	+ What research was done to support the decision of dissolving the Division of Enrollment Management and placing it under Student Affairs? What best practices and models were referenced? What guidance and consultation were sought from other universities that faced similar issues and/or implemented similar plans?
		- The consultant who came in just a few years ago said that we needed to add the Division of Enrollment Management. Why was this changed? Why even spend the money on consultants if we don’t follow their advice?
	+ How much money is the university saving by restructuring?
	+ How much will the restructure cost the university?
	+ What was included in that $9 million area that wasn’t discussed at the Board meeting?

We would like to propose that staff members are notified as soon as possible, or at the latest, 60 days prior to the end of their contract or employment. We would also like for the university to cover the health insurance premiums of those being laid off for 90 days after their employment ends.

* **Tuition waiver benefit**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| University | Undergraduate | Graduate | Eligibility | Notes |
| UCA | 80% tuition and most fees | 80% tuition | N/A | 6 hour max in fall and spring, 3 hours in each summer term (18 hours total) |
| UA | 90% tuition, 50% for spouses and dependents | 90% tuition, 0% for spouses and dependents | 1 semester | 11 hours for fall and spring, 6 hours for summer – 28 hours total) changed policy regarding taking policies at other campuses in May 2017 and grandfathered in current employees as long as they remained continuously enrolled |
| SAU | 100% tuition, 100% tuition for dependents | 100% tuition, 100% tuition for dependents | N/A |  |
| Henderson | 100% tuition and most fees; $10/credit hour for spouses and dependents | $20/credit hour | N/A | Part time employees too |
| ASU | 75% tuition | 50% tuition | N/A |  |
| ATU | 75% tuition, 50% tuition spouses and dependents | 50% tuition, 50% tuition for spouses dependents | 1 year | 18 hour max in fiscal year |

* + Can current employees be grandfathered into the tuition benefit at 100%, especially the people who have be consistently taking courses semester after semester?
		- Were the impacts on retention/graduation rates considered when deciding this?
	+ Can we get some clarification on the date that the waiver will take effect? We know that it says July 1st, but some were told that it wouldn’t go into effect until fall.
	+ Was any research done to see how this change will impact graduate enrollment?
	+ We aren't eligible for Health & Wellness services since we currently don't pay the H&W fees. Will those who take classes be able to take advantage of the services in the future?
	+ We have a newer employee that has been told she can take summer classes for 100%, but come fall she will not be eligible for the faculty/staff waiver at all because she has not been here a year. How does that make sense? The [press release](https://www.arkansastechnews.com/atu-takes-steps-to-ensure-continued-fulfillment-of-institutional-mission/) clearly says “*new* employees.”
	+ How much money does the university receive for each degree conferred? Was any research done to see the money the university might actually lose due to a drop in enrollment from their employees and their dependents?

We would like to propose that staff members who are currently enrolled in courses be grandfathered in to the current policy. If not, we propose that all staff members are offered 6 hours for undergraduate and 3 hours of graduate tuition and fees be paid at 100% per semester, for a maximum of 18 hours per fiscal year. That way, students consistently stay enrolled in at least one class per semester and complete their degrees. Additionally, we would like for the one year waiting period to be removed from the stipulations completely.

* **Miscellaneous**
	+ COVID-19/CARES Funds
		- Where did the report come from that shows how many members are vaccinated?
		- How was this information collected?
			* Insurance? Not everyone uses ATU’s insurance
			* Self-disclosure? Not everyone was asked where they work or had to provide an ATU ID to get their vaccine
			* What about people who got their vaccine out of state?
		- Where is all of the CARES fund going?
			* Why can’t it be used to fill the budget gaps?
			* Why can’t it be used to pay the salaries of those being laid off?
	+ Insurance
		- There’s a rumor that we had an opportunity to become part of the state health insurance that could have saved us money. Is this true? If we did, why didn’t we? Why aren’t we lobbying to do this?
		- Was the insurance committee presented with the information to consider the state insurance option?
		- Can we get more information about the self-funded insurance option?
			* Who will run this?
			* How will this be accepted at medical facilities?
			* More communication to staff is needed about this moving forward.
	+ One Stop Shop
		- How many people will be employed there?
		- Who will staff it?
		- Who will supervise it?
		- Where will it be?
		- What research was done to make this decision?
* **Budget**
	+ What does the university plan to do with the $2 million sale of Lake Point?
	+ Have they considered doing away with some of the upper level jobs that have been added on in the last few years?
	+ Did anyone on the Executive Council take a cut of their salary to save jobs? Did anyone offer to? Institutions across the country have:
		- <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/06/pay-cuts-university-presidents-coaches>
		- <https://www.khon2.com/coronavirus/university-of-hawaii-president-executives-will-take-pay-cuts-in-light-of-budget-shortfall/>
		- <https://www.thesetonian.com/2020/04/23/executive-cabinet-takes-pay-cut-as-university-faces-tumultuous-financial-future/>
		- <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-07-29/ivy-league-presidents-take-pay-cuts-up-to-25-in-covid-crunch>
	+ How do our Executive Council’s salaries compare to other institutions in the state?

**Appendix B**

**ATU Staff Senate: Follow Up Questions for Dr. Bowen and Executive Council**

**Need Further Clarification:**

* When will non-contract employees be notified they are being laid off?
* If a current employee is laid off and re-hired at a later date, will their retirement benefits be honored or will they be under the new policies?
	+ Christina said she would confirm about TIAA and let Margie know after the meeting.
* How much money does the university receive for each degree conferred?
	+ Dr. Bowen said that the loss we would incur is miniscule compared to the cost of the scholarship against the university, but we would still like to know this number.

**Follow Up Questions Submitted During Meeting:**

* Will the Career Service Award be affected?
* So how much money is moving the Division of Enrollment Management under Student Affairs actually saving then?
* Is early retirement going to be an option for the staff in FY22 as it was in FY21?
	+ Is there a specific percentage of faculty and a specific percentage of staff being let go?
	+ Where will the One Stop Shop be located?
	+ Who is the focus of this? Prospective students, current students, or both?
* In reference to spending money on faculty development of courses for virtual learning, we already have funds in place for faculty to develop their online courses with ATU instructional designers. Why would we then spend CARES money on hiring outside sources for this when we have the personnel in house? That would take other jobs away.
* If there are only 80 employees currently enrolled in courses, then why would it be hard to keep up with the handful of people who have not hit their one-year mark yet? Wouldn’t you have to check them anyways when they submit the form to see if they have been employed for a year? All you would have to do is see that they have been continuously enrolled and were employed before the change was announced? I just don’t see how that is so much extra work…
* If changing the tuition benefit is going to somehow save 2-4 jobs, then why doesn’t each member of EC not take a pay cut and “save 2-4 jobs” as well?

**Questions That Weren’t Addressed During Meeting:**

* What does the university plan to do with the $2 million sale of Lake Point?
* Have they considered doing away with some of the upper level jobs that have been added on in the last few years?
* Insurance
	+ There’s a rumor that we had an opportunity to become part of the state health insurance that could have saved us money. Is this true? If we did, why didn’t we? Why aren’t we lobbying to do this?
	+ Was the insurance committee presented with the information to consider the state insurance option?
	+ Can we get more information about the self-funded insurance option?
		- Who will run this?
		- How will this be accepted at medical facilities?
		- More communication to staff is needed about this moving forward.

**Proposals for Dr. Bowen and the Executive Committee to Consider:**

* Staff members should be notified as soon as possible of being laid off, or at and the latest, 60 days prior to the end of their contract or employment.
* Staff members who are currently enrolled in courses should be grandfathered in to the current policy.
	+ If not, we propose that all staff members are offered 6 hours for undergraduate and 3 hours of graduate tuition and fees be paid at 100% per semester, for a maximum of 18 hours per fiscal year. That way, students consistently stay enrolled in at least one class per semester and complete their degrees.
	+ Additionally, we would like for the one year waiting period to be removed from the stipulations completely.
		- If not, currently employed staff members who have not been employed a full year should not be penalized for an after-the-fact policy. An exception needs to be made for them so that they can continue to take courses in the fall.