Student Comment Period Proposal

Bryanna Miller, Student Member of the Board of Visitors 2017-2018

Introduction

In recent years, students have routinely called for the introduction of a public comment period to the standing agenda of the Board of Visitors (BOV). The most recent attempt to introduce a new forum for discussion between students and Board members took place in 2015. This plan allowed students who were selected through an intensive voting and auditioning process to present to the Advancement and Communications Committee. In the end, the presentations that were given to the Board were meaningful and representative of the concerns of the student body. However, the complexity of this process meant that it was not continued.

I encourage the Board of Visitors to introduce a student comment period to the standing agenda of the Academic and Student Life Committee. Not only will it allow students the opportunity to give direct feedback to the Board, but it will also give Board members the opportunity to learn more about specific issues. This is important for many reasons. Creating a regular opportunity for sustained engagement with the student body will allow each of us, as members of the Board, to develop a more nuanced view of our most proximal constituency. This new understanding will better inform our decisions and perhaps even our understanding of the University in its current moment. The ideal of student-self governance is near and dear to all of us, and the introduction of the student comment period will allow us to find more ways to “live” this ideal by strengthening the partnership between members of the Board and students.

Benefits

The primary benefits of establishing a student comment period are related to increasing communication between the Board of Visitors and the student body. These include:

1. Facilitating direct communication between the BOV and students.
2. Supporting the student member in bringing student concerns to the BOV.
3. Increasing student engagement and interest in the BOV.
4. Increasing the quality of BOV decisions related to student life.
**Path A:**
1. Proposals related to the BOV are presented at the Student Council Student Senate.
2. If a proposal passes by a ¾ majority vote of the Senate, it will be forwarded to the Student Member of the Board of Visitors (SMBOV) for review.

**Path B:**
1. Proposals which are not sponsored by a particular student organization may be submitted directly to the SMBOV.

After meeting with the SMBOV, proposals will be:

- Referred to a more appropriate body for consideration (i.e.: the Student Council Representative Body, an administrative office of the university, or a specific individual);
- Incorporated into the regular student report; or
- Added to the student comment period.*

Categorization of each proposal will be at the discretion of the SMBOV. Preference will be given to proposals that fulfill one or more of the following criteria:

1. Relate to an agenda item of the Academic and Student Life Committee
2. Pass the Student Senate with overwhelming support
3. Would be best presented by the proposal sponsors rather than the SMBOV
4. Have not been presented to or addressed by the Board of Visitors**
*The names of proposal sponsors that are added to the student comment period will be forwarded to the Secretary of the Board of Visitors at least five business days before the affected Board Meeting.

**Concerns which have been heard through the student comment period within the last calendar year will not be forwarded to the student comment period.

**Student Comment Period Rules**

1. The Student Member of the Board of Visitors will introduce each proposal and provide context for the discussion.
2. Students will be given 5 minutes to present to the Academic and Student Life Committee on their proposal.
   a. At the discretion of the Chair, the Academic and Student Life Committee can initiate a discussion of the student presentation.
   b. Committee members are encouraged to ask questions and to seek clarification about the proposals.
   c. The committee is not obligated to respond to student proposals.
3. The student comment period will be up to 20 minutes in length, with a maximum of two proposals per meeting.
4. Up to two students may represent a single proposal; no substitutions may be made once the names have been submitted to the Secretary of the Board of Visitors.
5. Visual aids and supplemental materials must be submitted to the Secretary of the Board of Visitors at least five business days before the affected Board of Visitors meeting.
6. The Board will not hear presentations on the following topics: issues under negotiation as part of the University's collective bargaining process; the employment status of any specific individual; statements concerning the private activities, lifestyles or beliefs of any individuals; grievances specific to individual students or employees; proposals or bids for contracts; or pending or threatened litigation involving the University.¹

**Risks**

There are some risks associated with establishing a student comment period. However, these risks have been significantly reduced through strategic structuring.

¹ Language from Pennsylvania State Board of Trustees: https://trustees.psu.edu/public_expression_guidelines.html
1. Meeting Disruptions: The exercise of free speech is a value that the University has consistently protected and encouraged. However, because meetings are open to the public, there is always the chance that members of the public will interject with speech that interferes with the normal conduct of a meeting. By providing a regular forum for student comment, the BOV will have an opportunity to engage with students in a professional and respectful manner.
   a. During the SMBOV’s discussion with students who submit proposals for review, it will be emphasized that presenters must adhere to the guidelines of the student comment period.

2. Repetitive Issues: There are several groups of students who have persistently advocated for the revision or introduction of university policies. With the establishment of a student comment period, there is a chance that these groups would monopolize the allotted time by bringing up perennial concerns.
   a. Several aspects of the proposal are designed to mitigate this risk:
      i. Screening proposals through an individual meeting with the SMBOV.
      ii. Instituting a rule that prevents concerns that have been brought up in the past calendar year from being raised again.

3. Awareness: The Student Member will use all resources available to ensure that interested students have an opportunity to participate. These include:
   a. Presenting at the Student Senate, Student Council Meetings, and other venues;
   b. Issuing a notice in the monthly SMBOV newsletters; and
   c. Publicizing results of the student comment period following each meeting.
Appendix

Peer Institutions with Public Comment Periods
Although this proposal is not a public comment period proposal, the following matrix describes the processes utilized by several of our peer institutions.

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| Pennsylvania State University| ● Public comment period built into the scheduled agenda.  
                               ○ 30 minutes in length, 3 minutes per speaker; time is managed by a timekeeper.  
                               ● Request is made by 8 am on the Wednesday prior to the meeting.  
                               ● Speakers are chosen based upon their relevance to agenda.  
                               ● Topics pertaining to an individual or any litigation involving the university are prohibited.  
                               ● [https://trustees.psu.edu/public_expression_guidelines.html](https://trustees.psu.edu/public_expression_guidelines.html) |
| University of Illinois       | ● Public comment period built into the agenda, after presentations and before voting sessions.  
                               ○ 30 minutes in length, 5 minutes per speaker; time is managed by a timekeeper.  
                               ● Requests to speak to the board must be made three business days prior.  
                               ○ Name and relevant position must be provided, as substitute speakers are not allowed.  
                               ● Where appropriate, responses to questions germane to the University will be answered within a reasonable amount of time.  
                               ● Speakers are added on a “first come, first serve,” basis. Once the requests have exceeded the time capacity, relevance to the agenda is used to determine who will be able to speak.  
                               ● Topics pertaining to an individual or any litigation involving the university are prohibited.  
                               ● [https://www.bot.uillinois.edu/public-comment](https://www.bot.uillinois.edu/public-comment) |
| University of Michigan       | ● Public comment session period built into the scheduled agenda.  
                               ○ The board does not respond to comments during this time. |
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| o Public Comments on agenda-related topics will be heard near the beginning of the meeting, prior to consideration of the regular business agenda. Public Comments on non-agenda-related topics will begin immediately after the regular business agenda has ended.  
  o A maximum of 10 speakers for no more than 5 minutes each are allowed; decisions are made on a “first come, first serve” basis, with no substitutions allowed.  
  * No more than 5 speakers can speak on the same topic.  
  * Individuals who have addressed the board within the previous two regularly-scheduled monthly meetings will be allowed to speak only if there is an available speaker slot remaining after the signup deadline has passed.  
  * [http://regents.umich.edu/meetings/addressing.html](http://regents.umich.edu/meetings/addressing.html)  
| o The time allotment for each person is flexible and can be changed at the discretion of the Chair  
  Requests to speak must be submitted to the Office of the Secretary and Chief of Staff 24 hours in advance for written communications.  
  * Individuals who wish to address the Regents are requested to place their name and the subject they wish to address on the speakers sign-in list posted outside the entrance to the meeting  
    o Speakers can pool their time if they represent a group.  
  * Submissions must identify the agenda item being addressed.  
  * [http://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/meetings/public-comment.html](http://regents.universityofcalifornia.edu/meetings/public-comment.html)  
| o Public comment period built into the scheduled agenda.  
  o Session is 10 minutes, with each speaker allotted 2 minutes.  
  * Sign up for public comment begins 5 days in advance and remains open until all slots are full.  
  * [https://www.washington.edu/regents/meetings-information/public-comment-period/](https://www.washington.edu/regents/meetings-information/public-comment-period/)  

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| ● Requests must be submitted to the secretary of the board specifying the agenda item they are addressing.  
  ● The request must be submitted three days in advance to be reviewed by the President and Board Chair.  
  ● Each speaker receives 5 minutes to speak with the board.  
  ● The Board Chair may decline to hear any matter determined by the President and Chair not to relate to a particular agenda item or that is outside the Board’s jurisdiction, or because it is not practicable for a particular meeting.  
  ● [http://trustees.ufl.edu/about-the-board/public-comment-policy/](http://trustees.ufl.edu/about-the-board/public-comment-policy/) | ● The public comment session will be video recorded, and the news media will be allocated space to observe and record the meeting.  
  ● A maximum of 15 speakers will be permitted to speak during the public comment session. Speakers will be scheduled in the order of sign-up on a “first-come, first-served” basis. If more than 15 speakers register, preference will be given to first-time speakers.  
  ● Each speaker is allotted 3 minutes, with no transfer of unused time allowed.  
  ● Speakers are asked to address topics relevant to the Board of Governors.  