

University of South Alabama

Faculty Senate – Annual Report

Senate Year: April 2024 – 2025

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Introduction:

This year has been an example of how an active, engaged and collaborative group of people can come together to impact the overall faculty experience at the University of South Alabama. The Faculty Senate has pursued multiple strategic initiatives while navigating significant external challenges, including the most recent Executive Orders as well as state level legislation (SB 129). Throughout the year, our focus has been on deepening trust both inside the Senate body and with our external stakeholders, advocating for faculty needs, and building collaborative relationships across the various university governance structures.

We have worked with a sense of urgency and purpose, particularly when confronted with the quickly shifting policy environments, the conversation around workload and compensation, a transition to a different research status, as well as the simple opening of the conversation for the structural shift of meetings to a format that offers the potential for more of our Senate colleagues to attend meetings. All of our actions have been designed to listen, to convene and create an example that can increase overall shared governance, protect the freedom offered through the academic 'life', and finally, advance a platform for success for all of the faculty at South Alabama.

This report is a snapshot of a year of engagement from each person on the Executive Committee, the Caucus Leaders, the Senate at Large, but also our elected Officers. For further detail, I would urge you to consult the individual ExComm Committee reports as well as the Caucus Reports that have been developed and submitted by each Chair and Leader.

And finally, I would like to thank each of the people who participated in all of this work for their help, thoughts and dedication. What you have done this year will be talked about for years to come.

Thank you.

Key Accomplishments and Initiatives

1. Advocacy and Development of Strategic Priorities

These efforts were built on a belief that faculty must be seen not only as contributors to the university's mission, but as strategic stakeholders in shaping its direction who should be actively included as key components of the university priorities when creating support and financial decisions. The work will culminate in the elevation of faculty needs into the institutional priorities.

- a. We initiated the effects to draft and propose faculty focused strategic priorities to be added to the University's primary Strategic priorities.
- b. We solicited stakeholders to identify model institutions as an initial guide for draft development.
- c. The initial draft was then presented to IPAC and ExComm for initial comments. These comments have been integrated and will be represented to IPAC on April 16, 2025. They will then proceed to FS, as well as other stakeholders. Further process information will be presented in May, 2025.
- d. The current plan is to present these priorities, once vetted by all stakeholders, to the BoT in either June, 2025 or Sept., 2025.
- e. It is important to note that the previous plan had been to focus on a March/June BoT timeline, but due to the Executive Orders and the needed response for that, the decision was made to defer these priorities. Further information will be presented on the EOs in later sections.

2. Executive Orders Response and Faculty Representation

This work underscored the need for measured, principled response amid ambiguity. The Senate became a point of contact for faculty navigating compliance concerns and for senior leadership seeking insight into campus-wide impact.

- a. The FS has participated in the university response to the Executive Orders affecting grants and funding related to DEI/DEIA and other 'trigger words' from the first day of announcement.
- b. We have advocated for transparency and faculty input, and have been integral in addressing both immediate and systemic structural impacts to faculty—including the areas of promotion, evaluation, funding, operations, and emotional support.
- c. We have clearly identified the notion of academic freedom as a deep concern for the faculty at USA.
- d. The executive orders and impact on the faculty were a core component of the FS Report that was shared with the BoT in March, 2025.

3. Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness (AHETEC Report)

The AHETEC process has become a case study in broad-based consultation, as we committed to surfacing diverse viewpoints and ensuring that evaluative tools reflected both rigor and fairness. This was accomplished through our first set of listening sessions, which took place in Fall, 2024.

1. The listening sessions were designed to gather input on the July, 2024 AHETEC draft report from across campus faculty stakeholders.
2. The results of that report were integrated into a formal FS response that was submitted to Dr. Kent and the committee.
3. The main findings from the report is that faculty noted that more definitional clarity was needed throughout the report, as well as clear and collaboratively created and agreed upon rubrics.

4. Additionally, the issue of increased workload for faculty and the potential for bias in evaluation was a reoccurring and dominant theme.

4. Promotion and Tenure (P&T) Survey

This survey was designed to collect a baseline of the general knowledge that faculty have about their P&T process. The results of the P&T survey highlight a need for greater clarity and equity across departments. It also clearly revealed both gaps in understanding and opportunities for faculty development and transparency across all divisions. Further information on this will be presented to FS in the coming plenary sessions.

- a. The Evaluation committee, in collaboration with others, developed and distributed a campus wide survey to main campus full-time faculty on the general topics of Promotion and Tenure. The response was more than 50% of the potential faculty respondents.
- b. The integrated feedback was presented to the President's Council on April 9, 2025 by Clay Davidson.
- c. Dr. Kent found the information useful and requested a more detailed presentation of the results in a separate meeting.
- d. Further surveys will be conducted to collect additional information over the coming year. The survey topics will be co-generated by FS/Faculty but topics have also been solicited from Academic Affairs.

5. Salary and Inversion/Compression Issues

- a. We have continuously advocated for a clear and transparent policy related to Inversion/Compression and other salary balancing issues.
- b. We have requested a dual salary benchmarking survey to be conducted as soon as the information can be downloaded (current timing is projected to be end of April, 2025). Of note, we have requested that two surveys be conducted, one with our non-R1 peers and one with R1 peers.
- c. We have continued to highlight examples of salary concerns for all faculty, including adjuncts and part-time faculty.

All of the salary discussions that take place at USA reflect broader faculty morale and retention challenges. While we recognize that these issues do not pertain to all faculty directly, the overall wellbeing and prestige of the university *is directly impacted by turnover, as well as other negative organizational behavioral outcomes that occur as a result of salary and compensation issues.*

The Senate will continue to work closely with Academic Affairs and institutional research to share out all salary information as we receive it.

6. Professional Development for Chairs

- a. Identified a need for, proposed and have supported the creation of a professional development program for department chairs.
- b. We facilitated the nomination and committee formation, and the curriculum development is now currently underway through the ILC. The decision was made to leverage currently created materials from around campus through various programs and

adapt those curricula to the unique needs of the chairs, while still cutting down development time.

- c. We have also engaged with CAD and Council of Chairs to ensure that the program has wide-spread buy-in and support in order to ensure program relevance and long-term sustainability.

This effort has been grounded in the idea that better-supported and trained chairs lead stronger departments, and that shared leadership must be nurtured through intentional training and reflection.

Engagement and Communication

1. R1 Transition – Listening Sessions

These sessions were among the most widely attended faculty forums of the year and surfaced critical questions about research capacity, teaching loads, graduate student support, and institutional identity.

- a. Various members of ExComm (TLT, Evaluation, Bret and Sandra) facilitated four faculty-wide R1 Listening Sessions in March 2025 with over 100 participants.
- b. The transcripts from the sessions were thematically analyzed for themes, and the report is currently under preparation for wider dissemination.
- c. The core finding(s) is that faculty almost universally are concerned with the structural and operational support for a transition, as well as some secondary but no less core questions related to evaluation, compensation, workload and hiring.

2. Board of Trustee Reports

- a. Over the course of the year, we delivered four reports to the BoT at their quarterly meetings. The following topics were covered:
 - i. Collaboration and shared governance (June, 2024)
 - ii. Faculty inclusion in strategic priorities (Sept. 2024)
 - iii. Progress report and additional openness from administration to FS related projects (Dec. 2024)
 - iv. Faculty concerns related to Executive Orders and academic freedom (March, 2025).

Primary Result: Our voice at the BoT meetings reflected your concerns as a faculty at large, as well as our developing role in longer term planning at the university. Our contributions to USA were increasingly acknowledged in specific occasions.

Secondary Result: BoT member Judge Mike Wyndham attended the March plenary and expressed appreciation for the candid faculty dialogue. He also shared those same sentiments with Dr. Kent in a phone call following that meeting and pledged to continue to try and attend more of our meetings.

3. Other
 - a. Continued to develop stronger cross-campus relationships with various stakeholders
 - i. Council of Chairs
 - ii. CAD
 - b. Participated in statewide Senate meetings, included as invited guests at Auburn University for learning sessions, as well as with the state level Senates from all Alabama universities.
 - c. Created and continued events designed to increase FS visibility such as: Huddles (implemented in previous Senate year) and “Friendsgiving”, which was open to all in the university community.
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Ongoing Faculty Concerns

The following are some of the most pressing and ongoing concerns for the faculty at USA. It is not a comprehensive list, nor is it organized in order of precedence, but is solely meant to be representative:

- Transition to R1 and impact on:
 - Workload
 - Compensation
 - PhD program capacity
 - Operational support for research activity
 - Two-class system
 - Evaluation
 - Etc.
 - Faculty workload clarity and balance
 - Timely hiring and engagement of faculty during the entirety of the hiring cycles (e.g. including non-contract periods).
 - Recognition and structural integration of adjunct and part-time faculty into the ‘life’ at USA.
 - Continued process improvement and adaptation for policy advancement through CAD and other senior leadership at USA. (progress made on this one on April 14th!!!).
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Faculty Senate Culture and Internal Growth

This year we:

- Shifted the format of ExComm and other meetings to a more conversational and action-oriented format.
- We more deeply involved the Caucus Leaders and their Caucuses as key channels for feedback and responsive information gathering/dissemination.
- Developed more rigorous communications and updates to keep faculty more informed and engaged (this is a continued opportunity).
- Finally, but **not** least, continued effort was and will be made to more fully integrate the WCOM faculty more tightly into the FS body, both through potentially modified meeting structures but

also continued collaboration with the college caucus leader to identify relevant topics for discussion and presentation.

A key component of the Senate this year was to model the type of activity that we would want to see throughout our interactions with university colleagues and committees. This means we sought to demonstrate transparency and agility in our actions and decision making—while also demonstrating a focus on collaborative conversations.

Faculty Achievements

We are continuing to collect highlights of faculty excellence in research, teaching, and service. Please send stories and recognitions to Christina Wassenaar, Bret Webb, or Alexandra Stenson to be featured in upcoming updates and reports.

My Gratitude

As we end this Senate year, I would like to reflect on what this group have accomplished, some of which is covered here but if I were to include everything, would end up being more like 50 pages, instead of four-ish. The work that each person has done has been formative, and I'm grateful. We have refocused on our faculty colleagues, and in so doing, we have increased the 'weight' we offer at each table we sit around each of our campuses.

Thank you.

I would be remiss, if I did not, just one more time acknowledge four critical people by name. Your officer team for this year has been tireless, hilarious, ironic and supportive. Donna, thank you for your wisdom, grace and continuous whispers of support. Bret, your integrity in collaboration has been focused only, always and exclusively on our faculty colleagues. Vicki and Sandra, you have been the repositories of knowledge, information and most importantly organization, which is the foundation that keeps the rest of us moving. Each of you have been amazing, and it's been my pleasure to work with you.

It has been my honor to serve this year as the FS President in this defining year. There are many things that have yet to be finished, and I look forward to being part of that in the future alongside all of you.