DATE: December 23, 2010

TO: Provost James V. Staros

FROM: Status of Diversity Council
Laura L. Lovett (Co-Chair, History), Sergio Breña (Co-Chair, Civil and Environmental Engineering), Lisa Harvey (Psychology), Hoang Gia Phan (English), Alice Nash (History), Ingrid Holm (ESL), Tobias Baskin (Biology), Mari Castañeda (Communication), Mathew Ouellett (Center for Teaching), Mzamo Mangaliso (Management), Ernest Washington (TECS), Doris Clemmons (Education), Nathaniel Whitmal (Communications Disorders), Beth Lang (Library), Arlene Avakian (Women, Gender, Sexuality Studies/ MSP), Byron Bullock (Student Affairs), Ernest May (Faculty Senate), Riki Hing (USA), Nahir Otano-Gracia (Graduate Student), Tiffany Yee (Graduate Student), Li Gu (Graduate Student), Samantha Lyon (Graduate Student), Davenal Canagasebey (Student), Philip Kim (Student)

SUBJECT: Report on Proposal to Change Tenure Standards

In his memorandum to the Chair of the Rules Committee, Provost Staros asked the Faculty Senate to “open a discussion” whose aim would be “to learn whether there would be sufficient support among the faculty to consider revisions in the formal criteria for tenure.” As indicated in the memorandum, the primary revision proposed is that the formal criteria for tenure would “emphasize research” first and foremost, such that the award of tenure at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst would require ‘convincing evidence of, and potential for continuing excellence in research, creative or scholarly activity’; as it does currently at the University of Massachusetts Medical School.

Provost Staros has asked the Senate to “open a discussion on this matter to learn whether there would be sufficient support among the faculty” for considering such revisions in the formal criteria for tenure.

The Status of Diversity Council (SODC) has considered whether or not the proposed revision of the criteria for tenure would have a major and far-reaching negative impact on tenure-track faculty from under-represented groups. We have determined that the revision will likely have a deleterious impact on the promotion and ultimately the retention of under-represented faculty members at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. Such an outcome is undesirable in that it clearly undermines the University’s strong commitment to diversity, a commitment shared by peer public research universities throughout the country. We are not claiming that underrepresented faculty do not conduct excellent research. We are concerned that this change in tenure standards does not adequately recognize the distribution of underrepresented faculty in different research
areas and the value of fostering a range of research areas for the University’s mission, the disproportionately high service demands normally placed on underrepresented faculty, and the paucity of fine grained tools and metrics for evaluation of research and teaching that are capable of addressing biases that may disproportionately disadvantage underrepresented faculty.

In addition, the proposed policy appears to have wider reaching implications beyond just those for tenure track faculty. Any negative effects on faculty diversity stemming from a change in the formal criteria for tenure will likely impact campus-wide diversity of students and staff, thereby undermining commitment to diversity campus-wide.

The SODC have proceeded in their deliberations with the understanding, as noted in the memorandum, that “the implementation of any changes that are recommended … will require negotiation with the MSP.”

SODC Deliberations

The SODC has initially considered the potential implications of the proposed tenure revisions on faculty from under-represented groups. It is the view of the SODC that the suggested revisions of the formal criteria for tenure would have negative implications for faculty diversity at the University, for several related reasons. Moreover, while this report will focus on the implications of the proposed revisions for faculty diversity, these implications cannot be wholly separated from the proposed revisions’ negative implications for the broader University faculty, and for the stated mission of the University as a public university.

The SODC discussed several concerns with regard to the proposed revisions of the formal criteria for tenure. Given the widespread potential implications of a change in tenure criteria, the SODC feels that a more in-depth study should be conducted involving the faculty at large. Initial observations by SODC members, however, are summarized below:

1) The language and criteria cited in the memorandum is drawn from the context of the Medical School, whose primary mission, aims, resources, and organization with respect to the balance of expectations concerning research, education, and service differ to a large extent from the stated mission, aims, resources and organization of the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. As a comprehensive flagship institution of the state university system, UMass Amherst has expectations of its faculty that are equally high for research as well as for teaching and service.

2) Statistics on faculty diversity at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, should not be considered comparable to statistics on faculty diversity at the Medical School; as their respective missions, aims, and organization with respect to research, education, and service differ. For instance, the faculty/student ratio at the Medical School is vastly different from the same ratio on this campus.

3) An emphasis on “excellence in research” as the primary criterion for tenure logically implies that teaching is of secondary concern; a shift in priority runs counter to the stated mission of the University with respect to diversity.
4) Evaluation and demonstration of “excellence in research” differs greatly among different disciplines, Departments, and fields of research. A uniform criterion for “excellence in research” may ignore these significant differences resulting in negative consequences on faculty diversity and scholarship.

5) There is a lack of clear metrics or rubrics for the evaluation and demonstration of excellence in research. For example, previous questions have been raised about current measures such as the Hirsch Index (especially in the Humanities and Social Sciences). The Hirsch Index works best for article-based fields with high publication rates, such as the sciences. The same metric undervalues research in book-based fields, such as history, with a slower rate of publication for much lengthier products, which are not included in many academic indices such as ISI’s Web of Knowledge database.

6) Research of faculty of diversity or minority status is often evaluated by peers unconcerned with research questions related to issues of diversity. The research topics by minority faculty may be in fields that are not recognized with the same weight as other areas. If these research topics are not as highly valued as other areas of research, they may be dismissed or rejected with negative effects to faculty in diverse groups.

7) The Status of Diversity Council has already begun to examine a preliminary study which suggests that student assessment of teaching by female faculty and ALANA faculty backgrounds may demonstrate serious biases. The preliminary study of SRTI Global Item scores by Ernest Washington and Jennie Traschen indicates that female faculty and faculty of color tend to receive lower scores than white, male faculty on summative questions in larger classes. If the same trend is not present in SRTI more specific items 1-9, then this may represent a bias in the summative items that would need to be taken into consideration in faculty evaluations. Washington and Traschen are working now to obtain data on SRTI items 1-9 to make this comparison and complete this analysis. Regardless of the result of this specific study, unfair evaluations of under-represented faculty, which are made by Personnel Committees that are often unaware of the inherent biases of students, may be compounded further by the proposed change in tenure criteria.

8) Reframing of priorities for tenure will have major impacts on the institutional goal of retention and recruitment of a diverse student and faculty bodies. For example, high demands of minority faculty on advising minority students, constituting service expectations, may cause imbalance in work/life issues, thus creating obstacles in minority faculty retention.

Concluding Remarks
The SODC believes that this should mark the initiation of continued dialogue about already existent faculty excellence in campus and that a careful study of the potential implications of a change in tenure policy should be conducted to avoid undesired consequences. We believe that we should be proud and broadcast widely the great accomplishments in research, teaching, and service of our faculty body.