A&S&E Committee on Budget and University Priorities
Annual Report, 2009–2010

The Committee on Budget and University Priorities met seven times during the 2009–2010 academic year. In addition, the chair met with representatives of Executive Committee and the administration. A set of recommendations to the deans based on our findings follows this report.

Three concerns dominated the committee’s agenda this year. The first of these focused on two specific budget areas deemed by the committee as topics on which its input would be both helpful and important, namely, information technology (broadly defined to include library issues as well), and undergraduate financial aid. The second set of concerns determining the committee’s agenda was its traditional review of general budgetary allocations. As was the case last year, this review was conducted in the context of the university’s need for continued sharp austerity resulting from the significant recession and fragile economic recovery. The third broad item on the committee’s 2009–2010 docket was simply a review of the progress made on the recommendations made to the administration in our previous annual report. In our final two meetings, issues of governance emerged that are also important and that are included in this report.

Library and Information Technology

The library system is a major component of the Tufts information infrastructure combining old, hard-copy storage and modern digital collection and retrieval facilities. Within this system, Tisch Library is by far the major component. Besides book and journal access, the library offers electronic classroom services, media lab activities, and faculty/student research support. While the administration’s commitment to maintaining and strengthening these functions seems clear, the fact remains that the Tufts library system still lags the capabilities of most of our peer institutions.

Changes in the library’s annual budgetary needs are driven by inflation, exchange rate movements, electronic hosting costs, and publisher pricing models. While exchange rate pressures have eased in the last year, cost pressure from the remaining factors has remained strong while, simultaneously, needed university austerity measures have limited available funding. The result is that the library’s resources have been under increasing pressure. Since FY06, journal prices have increased a total of 38 percent, while Tisch Library’s material budget has increased just 31 percent. Since FY09 two staff positions have gone unfilled. Increasingly, the library has been faced with the choice of buying no new books or reducing its journal collection or both. Ironically, these pressures come just as faculty demands for electronic journal back files and electronic primary source materials—both expensive items—are rising due to increased faculty and student research and as new technologies have made it possible for faculty to incorporate such items as data sets, historic newspapers, and digitalized manuscripts into their classes to a much greater extent.

Digital technology complements the information storage and retrieval work of the library. As noted, the committee spent considerable time discussing various concerns that have been raised regarding the status of computing and information technology at Tufts. Chief among the concerns expressed were: 1) limited access to wireless computing on the Medford campus; 2) difficulties with the main learning platform, Blackboard; 3) frustrations working with the Student Information...
System (SIS) that many deemed out-of-date almost from its inception; and 4) concern over inadequate academic support for faculty computers and classrooms.

To a large extent, the first three issues—wireless computing, the learning platform, and SIS—reflect infrastructure issues that fall under the purview of University Information Technology (UIT). Since UIT designs and implements the information technology systems for all the campuses and schools, its expenditures lie beyond the A&S&E budget process. Nevertheless, it is worth reporting the nature of the recent progress on these infrastructure issues.

At present, roughly 50 percent of the Medford campus is wireless and UIT is in the midst of a three-year plan that should extend wireless access to the remainder of the campus within two years at the latest. With respect to the learning platform, while initial progress on upgrading has been slow, agreement was made this spring to begin the implementation of a new, open-source platform, Sakai. A&S&E (and Fletcher) will be the first to move to the new system and this project should be completed within three years. Progress has been even slower on replacing SIS, although UIT now has a design plan that it hopes to present in the fall of 2010 to the Board of Trustees. If approved, implementation will start with the migration of the records and billings functions to the new system and the Medford campus will likely be first in this process.

One obstacle to change in both the learning platform and SIS has been the diversity of the existing infrastructure. For example, there are at least four different learning platforms currently in use across all the campuses. Similarly, with SIS there are numerous satellite applications across the various schools. In upgrading to new systems, UIT has been committed to implementing a common standard across all the schools and campuses and it takes some time to reach unanimity among the various constituencies.

Movement to a simpler and more modern system was also the motivation behind the migration to the MS Exchange 2010 email platform. Currently, Tufts has three separate (and aging) messaging systems that offer limited functionality such as calendars and mobile device synchronization. The adoption of MS Exchange 2010 will put all campuses on a common and widely used system that mobile device makers already include in their initial application designs. It should also work well regardless of computing platform, e.g., Windows, Mac, Linux, as well as provide a foundation for future applications such as integrated video conferencing.

For most A&S&E faculty, the face of information technology is the Information Technology Service (ITS). ITS is the school-based, front-line service organization that fits and maintains classroom technology and assists faculty with computer- and network-related needs. Currently, 126 classrooms on the Medford campus are fitted with technology. Six classrooms will be fitted with technology this summer (2010) and 18 are slated for upgrading. While some departments or buildings have a staff member assigned to classroom technology support, the vast majority of such servicing falls on ITS personnel. As more faculty have integrated technology into their teaching and as the diversity of applications has grown, the demands on ITS have increased substantially.

Demands for research-related computation support have also grown. Measured on a full-time basis, ITS service staff are currently responsible for an average of 225 computers each. This reflects a 22 percent cumulative growth in the past three years alone, yet there have been no additional staff hired to meet the increased demand. As noted, this demand is in addition to the rising need for classroom technology support.
Given the expense of the new infrastructure investments, the committee believes it is prudent to make a similarly strong commitment to supporting and servicing the library facilities, classrooms, and faculty that employ this technology. We therefore strongly recommend that the administration renew its commitment to library funding and IT service and support.

**Undergraduate Financial Aid**

Much like health insurance, the list price of a university education has risen steadily faster through the years than other items in the cost-of-living index. Tufts is no exception to this rule. Since 2005, the one-year Tufts tuition and fees charge has risen rather steadily at an annual percentage rate of 4.7 percent or a cumulative increase over these years of roughly 25 percent. While this rise is similar to that experienced at virtually all other universities, it does stand in marked contrast with aggregate measures of families’ well being such as median household income which, while not absolutely constant, has largely been flat during these same years. For the first part of the last decade, the resultant increased pressure on household budgets had been partially offset by a rise in the value of household financial assets and homeowner equity. However, the sharp decline in home and security prices over the last two years has removed this safety valve. Tufts students and their families now face greater financial need than they have in a long time.

Three aspects of these developments deserve special mention. First, while Tufts was (unofficially) able to practice a “needs-blind” admissions policy three years ago, it no longer can do so. The financial need of Tufts students is too great relative to the financial aid budget for admissions decisions to avoid some consideration of ability to pay. This is so despite consecutive large annual increases in the financial aid budget over recent years on the order of 12 percent or so annually. Second, a major reason that the increased aid has not been sufficient to achieve needs-blind admissions is that Tufts has taken seriously its commitment to current students. As the families of upperclassmen have faced reduced incomes and unemployment, Tufts has done whatever it can to make financially possible their continued attendance here. Supporting such families has used up a large fraction of the increased financial aid budget. Finally, it is of some importance that the decline in financial markets affects the college’s portfolio as well as the assets of our student population. That decline has reduced the resources that would otherwise have been available to offer additional assistance.

An additional complicating consideration in the undergraduate financial aid picture is the fact that many local and peer institutions have adapted some variant of merit-based aid as a means of attracting students from particular demographic groups. This has made Tufts less competitive in attracting undergraduate students. Thus, applicants from groups such as African-American students or women applicants to the Engineering program often decide to attend another school because that institution has targeted its aid to these groups without regard for achieving or maintaining a needs-blind status.

Both the overall level of financial need and the rise of rival targeted or merit-based aid programs pose a challenge for Tufts and its ability to recruit a diverse student body. The committee strongly supports the recent growth in the financial aid budget and the re-achievement of a needs-blind admissions policy. However, the committee also wishes to note that if the goal of needs-blind admissions is deemed unobtainable, Tufts may need to consider such targeted financial aid strategies that will enhance its ability to recruit a diversified student body.
Review of Last Year’s Recommendations

Three items shaped the committee’s agenda during the prior 2008–2009 academic year. These were: 1) Summer School financing and specifically the allocation of the surplus funds generated by the Summer School each year; 2) policy regarding graduate student financial aid; and 3) the criteria for awarding course releases. With respect to the first of these, we concluded that the formula used for allocating the Summer School surplus was little understood by faculty and provided little incentive either for cost efficiency or revenue enhancement. More fundamentally, we saw these problems as reflecting a deeper issue of how the Summer School organization fits within the larger A&S&E structure. We therefore recommended as a first step that that organization be reviewed. We are therefore very encouraged that such a review has taken place and that a reorganization of the Summer School administration is well under way.

Turning to graduate student financial aid, the committee supported the extension of health insurance benefits largely made possible by the adoption of a policy requiring grant proposals involving graduate students as research assistants to budget 15 percent of annual tuition of each graduate student for each year of the grant’s duration as well as to cover fully the student’s healthcare and health fee cost. That policy, already implemented in the School of Engineering, became required in the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS) this year. In the committee’s view, graduate education is vital to the maintenance and growth of Tufts’ research profile. Therefore, the need to adopt such policies—similar to those adopted at virtually all peer institutions—is vital.

GSAS policy on tuition scholarships for master’s programs has also evolved recently. In particular, GSAS has adopted the following rules regarding the award of such scholarships: 1) for academic master’s programs the average tuition scholarship must be no more than 50 percent; and 2) for professional master’s programs the average tuition scholarship must be no more than 40 percent. We noted last year that the now-consistent implementation of this policy has had a budgetary impact on a number of programs for which master’s-level students are the only graduate students. We noted then that the diversity of MA and MS programs across the university meant that a one-size-fits-all policy would not likely be appropriate and have been gratified that the GSAS has shown flexibility in its tuition policies across purely professional and academic master’s degree programs. However, we very much encourage both the GSAS and the Engineering administration to pursue experiments with the pricing of such programs with a view to providing the efficient revenue and cost incentives. The annual revenues from such programs—over $15 million—are sufficient that even a small percentage gain could generate substantial funds each year.

Finally, we noted last year that within A&S, the awarding of course releases to faculty is far from standardized. Among other reasons, such course reductions have been granted in return for participating in a workshop; serving on a committee; directing a graduate program; teaching a large class; and obtaining grant funding used to “buy out” course time. Perhaps most frequently, reductions in teaching load have been part of an agreement meant to attract or retain faculty. While none of these reasons for course-reductions are unreasonable, there does appear to be a problem in that these criteria have been applied very unevenly. The result has been that teaching loads differ even among faculty who may in all other professional respects be reasonably identical. Further, the precise duration or conditions of the course reduction have also not been fully articulated so that their future budgetary impact is difficult to gauge.
Since the committee’s last year recommendation that the administration begin to review the standard workload and policy regarding reductions from it, some small steps have been taken. In particular, the teaching load of full-time, non-tenure-track faculty has been regularized throughout A&S. In addition, the streamlining of internal promotion cases and of tenure cases more generally has made it possible to return the course release granted faculty serving on the Tenure and Promotion case back to one course per year. There is still however a very large need to develop general principles regarding the workload in A&S (the School of Engineering has made substantial progress on this already), and the committee strongly recommends that the administration work with the faculty to create such guidelines.

The 2011 Budget

Throughout the 2009–2010 academic year, the continuing budget pressures stemming from the overall poor national economy remain a concern. In the face of such pressures, the committee supports the administration’s commitment to maintaining those programs and policies essential to Tufts’ core educational mission. Since teaching, research, instruction, and academic support account for 50 percent of the Arts, Sciences and Education budget while another 22 percent is devoted to student financial aid; it seems evident that these expenditures reflect that core mission. The administration’s continued support for student financial aid has already been recognized. As we noted last year however, only limited progress has been made on the goal of moving Tufts faculty salaries into the 80th percentile of all institutions across all ranks. In the initial wake of the sharp economic decline, the administration strategy was clearly meant to maintain staffing while using salary freezes to control instruction expenditures. As the fragile recovery strengthens, the committee again strongly recommends that the administration give very high priority to insuring that Tufts offers the compensation necessary to compete with our peer institutions.

Governance Issues

Finally, the committee wishes to recognize the governance issue that has crept stealthily into this year’s discussions. Limited faculty time and membership turnover greatly limit the ability of faculty to participate as an equal with administration officials on broad allocational issues. Put simply, the committee operates in a framework that makes authoritative discussion of the significant complications and nuances that characterize the several-hundred-million-dollar A&S&E budget very difficult. Indeed, it was precisely this consideration that led the committee to focus on specific budgetary areas in recent years rather than to attempt an exhaustive annual review of the complete budget in detail. However, the difficulties increase when one recognizes that often specific policies with important budgetary impact, e.g., tuition remission for faculty and staff family, are university-wide policies and hence beyond the committee’s purview. Indeed, such challenges have grown in recent years as the School of Engineering and the School of Arts and Sciences have increasingly pursued separate strategies on a number of key issues. For example, the two divisions now employ very different billing policies for Summer School courses, and, the early retirement package offered this past year was for Arts and Sciences faculty only. Finally, the relation between the Budget and Priorities committee and other faculty committees has never been completely resolved. Thus, issues about both the strength and the scope of the committee’s authority have lately become more salient. We believe these issues need to be addressed as part of a continuing review of the overall committee system and faculty governance.
The committee wishes to thank both Cathy Doheney and Jillian Dubman for their continued role in assisting the committee with its meetings.

For the committee,

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