The Academic Initiatives Committee, The AIC, met throughout the fall as a group and reviewed work that had been done in the previous year. In the transition to the spring term, committee business was disrupted by a number of factors. First, the search for a new president presented a host of issues derived from the incompatibility between the position of the George Mason Board of Visitors about the viability of a public search for a president and the Faculty Senate’s position to follow the rules and explicit language of the Faculty Handbook. Events around this process of negotiation, which was successfully concluded in February 2020 displaced much of the focus of the committee. These events were followed by the announcement of Provost David Wu that he would be departing to take a university president position in the summer of 2020. This led to speculation between the chair and the provost representative about the best method for overseeing the academic initiatives of the provost once the future of those initiatives was now uncertain. It became clear that perhaps the Vice President of Research, the VPR, might the point of most consistent continuity in new academic initiatives through the transition, but before meetings with the VPR could be scheduled in the spring term, the Covid-19 crisis hit, and it became clear that it would be best to revisit issues of the committee in the Fall of 2020.

This being said, the general difficulty in specifying what the purpose of the Academic Initiatives Committee is, what its charge should be, and what kinds of oversight it should engage in warrant careful review in the coming year. In the past, various members have used the committee to pursue topics of interest that can be quite eclectic and which are highly dependent on the policy agenda of the sitting provost. Some of these interests are not handled by existing standing committees of the Faculty Senate, whereas other might be. Professor Brouse was interested in advising and its transition to University Life on the coaching model. Professor Davis was interested in academic community partnerships and our interests in the Carnegie designation for community engagement. Professor Rudes was interested in Undergraduate Affairs and the development of Mason Impact. Professor Falsetti was interested in the distributed campus and plans to concentrate academic activities in the Prince William campus. Questions were raised about the development of a medical school, how enrollment growth was affecting academic quality, and how we were managing research infrastructure.
As should be clear, committee members had a large range of interests and a broad sense of what the AIC might do to help to inform the faculty about the policies and plans of the provost. This last feature seems to be the main reason that the AIC exists: faculty in the past have been concerned about input with respect to fast-moving initiatives that would have implications for the management of academic affairs. Associate Provost Muir was helpful in working with the committee to help to direct members to points of decision making and momentum, but even with the help of this insider perspective, it was necessary to be creative in attaching the charge of the AIC with the interests of the members of the committee and even harder to identify what offices in the administration would be the best points of information and contact. These challenges, which are not specific to the disruptive nature of this academic year but more general to the language of the committee’s charge, suggest that it may well be time to revisit the charge of the committee and to clarify its relationship to the other standing committees of the Faculty Senate.

Recommendation from the Chair

As the representative of the committee from the Faculty Senate, Professor Simmons was made chair. One of the challenges of taking on the leadership of this committee is the committee charge itself, which can be found at:

http://www.gmu.edu/resources/facstaff/senate/UNIVERSITY_STANDING_COMMITTEE_CHARGES.pdf

Some of the language of the charge for the AIC remains germane. For example, although it may be useful to have a committee specifically assigned to exercise its curriculum oversight for new ventures, especially those that involve some type of public-private partnership, it is less clear why the Vice President for Global and International Strategies or its functional equivalent should be administrative liaison for the committee. This charge is is clearly focused on initiatives of a previous administration and is sorely out of date. Moreover, much of the current charge is directed to initiatives in a specific domain, namely international education and the various creative institutions that might be designed to promote it. These concerns of a previous senate were perhaps stimulated by the creation of a campus in Songdo South Korea, the use of a public-private partnership to facilitate international student recruitment, and other less successful initiatives like an effort to stand up a campus in The United Arab Emirates. Both the George Mason University Korea campus and the INTO Mason unit are well established parts of the university and might no longer be thought of as active initiatives, and there is little evidence that major global education projects involving distinctive contractual obligations are in the offing. Instead, new energy is being directed to an online completion college, the development of the Arlington campus in relation a new computing school, and a medical school, among other things, and there is little evidence yet about how a new administration will organize the governing structure to pursue these objectives.
In our opening meeting, AIC Committee members agreed that it would be prudent to revisit and clarify the charge of this committee to make it more effective in the future. Although the committee did not come to a conclusion about the best method for this revision process, it is clear that care should be taken to make the charge general and robust to changes in administration. For example, George Mason now has a new interim provost and will have a new president as of July 2020. The charge of the AIC should be adapted so that it can build effective partnerships with and oversight of the new administration but in ways that do not reproduce or conflict with the charges of other standing committees of the senate. Any revision to the charge should allow for proper engagement with this new interim administration, but also for the permanent administration that will follow it, and preferably for those that will come later as well. In order to produce a general charge that will enable this flexibility, it will be necessary to engage the senate and its existing committees in a creative way. This process might be conducted in concert with the Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate or in open discussion with the full body. Given the detailed nature of the process, the former option relying on smaller number of coordinated writers might be preferable.

These considerations lead to a recommendation from the chair of the committee: The Faculty Senate of George Mason University should engage a process to revisit the charge of the Academic Initiatives Committee to address the problems of 1) the excess specificity and dated nature of the committee’s charge and 2) the ambiguity of its span of duties with respect to the overall committee structure of the Faculty Senate. This revision process should take place over the 2020-2021 academic year, and the committee should be reconstituted (assuming there is a decision to continue it) on the basis of the decision of the senate by the end of that year.