

# Hunter academic freedom survey

By PETER HOGNESS

A survey of faculty and staff at Hunter College found that respondents reported many problems on academic freedom issues. Sixty-two percent said that outspoken dissent on important college policy issues could provoke reprisal from President Jennifer Raab. Most also said that the president and top administrators do not value shared governance, and do not respect the opinions of faculty and staff.

"These results are an acute reminder of the dangers posed when faculty are worried about retaliation for expressing their opinions," said Steve Leberstein, chair of the PSC's Academic Freedom Committee, which conducted the survey. Leberstein is also a member of the AAUP's Committee A, on academic freedom, and the PSC is the AAUP's CUNY chapter. Leberstein said the survey questionnaire was based on two instruments previously developed by the AAUP.

## RAAB & REPRISALS

"The administration, including the president, should be engaged with the results of this survey and should work to figure out how these problems can be changed," said Tami Gold, chair of Hunter's PSC chapter. "This is an opportunity for faculty, staff and the administration to start a serious dialog about how to create an environment that's conducive to open communication. Let's have dialog without fear."

"The President and I take our responsibility to protect and promote academic freedom very seriously," Acting Provost Vita Rabinowitz told *Clarion*. "We have repeatedly said that if even one person is unsatisfied with the state of academic freedom at Hunter, then we are concerned. Over the past several months, we have been meeting with various groups in the college about how best to safeguard academic freedom and improve the campus climate."

The questionnaire was distributed to all 1,615 members of the PSC bargaining unit, including both full-time and part-time faculty and professional staff. The response rate was 18% overall, 33% among full-time faculty and 42% among those with tenure. Some at Hunter argued that the overall response rate was too low for the results to be meaningful, while others said it would be a mistake to dismiss such strong complaints from a relatively large share of full-time and senior faculty.

Responses were analyzed by the Research Department of New York State United Teachers, which concluded that "the survey revealed a high level of dissatisfaction." If they expressed views on controversial institutional issues, "more than 60% of the respondents would expect reprisal from President Raab...and just over one-half

## Results show concern over retaliation

would expect it from senior administrators." Sixty-three percent said that faculty and staff could not express dissenting views on governance without reprisal, and 70% said that the president operates in a way that is not consistent with shared governance.

When asked whether President Raab respects the decisions of faculty committees on educational matters, 58% of respondents said she does not. By a 46% to 34% margin, a plurality said she does not respect faculty recommendations on promotion and tenure. Senior administrators fared a bit better on tenure and promotion issues, with 42% saying they did respect faculty recommendations and 40% saying they did not.

The Hunter Senate has complained in the past about not being given adequate information by college administration, and 61% of respondents said that faculty and staff do not have "timely access" to information they need on institutional decisions. A majority said that the administration does not foster participation in college governance, and only 11% said that faculty and staff have "an influential role" in developing Hunter's budget.

"These results are serious and require further discussion," said Joan Tronto, outgoing head of the Hunter College Senate. "I expect there to be an interesting discussion about the nature of academic freedom and to what extent a 'chilly climate' for free expression is itself an academic freedom question."

"Academic freedom very much depends on shared governance," commented Leberstein. "If faculty and professional staff do not feel free to voice their views on significant matters of educational policy, then their academic freedom has been breached."

"I received many calls from people who said they were not comfortable responding to the survey," Gold told *Clarion*. "Despite the assurance of confidentiality, they were concerned that their identities could be found out and that they would suffer as a result. When I asked if I could meet with them in person, they said no, they had to remain anonymous."

## FUNDS AT RISK?

Among those who did respond, concern about retaliation for dissent was not limited to those without tenure – it was as or more common among senior faculty, whose positions are more secure. "The fear that exists is not only individual," said Gold. "It's also that departments need money to operate – they could lose lines, adjunct positions, OTPS funds. There is a concern among fac-



Members spoke about academic freedom at a December 2005 meeting of the Hunter College Senate.

ulty that if they don't buy into the administration's decisions, then their department can be at risk."

At the same time, Gold noted, "The survey shows some diversity of sentiment. Not everyone feels the same about these issues." This underscores the need for dialog on the findings, she said.

Ken Sherrill, department chair in political science, took a different view. "The response rate is so low that it's a pretty worthless sample," said Sherrill. "If this were of great concern to the college community, more than 18% overall, and more than a third of full-time faculty, would have responded." He added that the results are not presented in a way that would allow comparison of response rates within schools or divisions, but that the rate appeared to be higher among arts and humanities.

"Given the sampling problem and the response rate, I'm not sure

that any valid analysis can be done," Sherrill said. Overall, he told *Clarion*, "I think the low response rate reflected a lack of concern with the issue."

"The overall response rate of 18% is on the low side," said Stuart Ewen, a distinguished professor in media studies. "But the 33% response among full-time faculty is quite respectable, particularly without any follow-up, and the 42% response among full professors is quite significant."

"When 62% of the full-time faculty in this survey believe that dissenting views on 'controversial institutional issues' will lead to reprisal – that's fairly significant evidence that something is wrong in the college," said Ewen.

Ewen chaired a College Senate committee on academic freedom that conducted an initial inquiry into these issues at Hunter last year. The committee received various re-

ports of problems with free expression among Hunter faculty and staff, and said it was concerned about "perceptions of a climate of fear" on campus. (Its report is available at [www.hunter.cuny.edu/senate](http://www.hunter.cuny.edu/senate).)

"This whole debate has brought to the fore the fact that there are different groups that feel very differently," said Jason Young, head of Hunter's Faculty Delegate Assembly. Like Sherrill, Young cited the overall response rate and said the results could not be seen as representative. But he added that the survey raised "some very valid and justified concerns" that should not be dismissed.

Both Young and Sherrill said that the data should be released to others at Hunter who might want to do further analysis. "We would be happy to entertain reasonable requests for further analysis," said PSC First Vice President Steve London. "We're as interested as anyone in a full understanding of these problems." Gold noted that participants had been given a strict assurance of confidentiality, and that some had raised concerns about being identified through cross-referencing responses on race, gender, title and department.

## IMPROVING

Leberstein said that he had received a letter from CUNY central administration, "in essence threatening an investigation because there had been no record of an Institutional Review Board approval of this survey." IRB approval is required for research using human subjects, but Leberstein said that these rules have nothing to do with the PSC consulting its members on academic freedom issues. "This attempt to use IRB protocols against union activity that uses no university resources was not called for," he said, and he was glad that CUNY decided to back off.

"We've discussed the survey results with the leadership of the AAUP," said Leberstein, "and we're encouraged by the vigilance they have shown." At last year's AAUP meeting, he noted, the group's general secretary was instructed to inquire into what appeared to be a pattern of abuses of academic freedom at CUNY. "He has done so," Leberstein said, "and reported that the AAUP will conduct some kind of an investigation this year, the details to be decided in consultation with the PSC."

For its part, the Hunter PSC chapter aims to sponsor a broad discussion. "Our first chapter meeting in September will be open dialog on the results of this survey and what people think it means," said Gold. "After that meeting for union members, on a separate occasion we will invite the administration to be part of that discussion. That's important, because this is not about us versus them – it's about how to improve Hunter College."