



**ILLINOIS STATE
UNIVERSITY**
Illinois' first public university

Office of the President

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Date: April 19, 2021

To: Dr. Susan Kalter
Professor of English
Chair of Illinois State University Academic Senate

Re: **Academic Senate Vote on New Engineering College and Site Plan**

Dear Chairperson Kalter and Members of the Academic Senate,

This letter is in response to the Academic Senate's vote on Wednesday March 24, 2021, on two proposals regarding the creation of a College of Engineering at Illinois State University and a capital and site plan for the new College. The vote on creating the new College failed with a tally of 22 in favor, 18 opposed and 11 abstentions. The vote on the capital and site plan also failed with a tally of 22 in favor, 17 opposed and 12 abstentions. Significantly, of the 29 individuals who voted against or abstained on the creation of the new College, 16 are on record stating that they did so to express solidarity with the graduate teaching assistants and not that they were opposed to the creation of the new College.

It is worth mentioning that on March 3, 2021, the Academic Senate approved both the academic curriculum plan and the fiscal plan for the new engineering program with a strong majority. The final votes were respectively 36-0 in favor with 9 abstentions for the academic curriculum plan and 31-0 in favor with 14 abstentions for the financial model. I am grateful to the Academic Senate for these votes. I especially appreciate the efforts of you and other Senate Committee leadership members who dug deep into the planning and modeling documents and raised important questions that helped to improve the final recommendations.

Illinois State has a long and cherished history of shared governance and the valuable contributions of Academic Senate to our decision-making are highly respected. Illinois State is better and stronger when decisions are made together as part of the shared governance process. That belief underpins every action that has been taken with respect to the engineering initiative. Indeed, the idea for an engineering program at Illinois State first emerged in 2016 in the Planning and Finance Committee of the Academic Senate during a discussion on long-range institutional goals and strategies in response to the demographic cliff predicted to occur around 2026. The Academic Senate gave its first affirmation to the engineering program when it accepted and approved the report of the Planning and Finance Committee in 2017. Subsequently, the Academic Senate again endorsed the vision for an engineering program in 2018 and, in fall 2020, elected members to the Engineering Planning Taskforce as well as participated in two open forums facilitated by CannonDesign, the consulting firm hired to help guide the process of creating a College of Engineering. The aforementioned votes endorsing the engineering program were preceded by two

presentations. Provost Tarhule gave a detailed presentation on the academic curriculum plan followed by an equally detailed presentation on the fiscal model by Vice President for Finance and Planning, Dan Stephens.

My purpose in recounting this brief history is to show that the engineering program plan has been a very collaborative and transparent project and, until the last votes, has enjoyed broad and strong campus-wide support. The reasons for the excitement and support for engineering remain as valid and relevant today as ever. A new College of Engineering at Illinois State will be the most impactful and transformational development this institution has experienced in decades. It will allow Illinois State to contribute to workforce development needs in Illinois; help insulate the University against long anticipated demographic declines; strengthen our efforts in internationalization; create access to new students; and, allow Illinois State to become a more comprehensive university. Furthermore, as Vice President Stephens showed convincingly in his fiscal model, the engineering program will not take resources meant for existing programs but will instead generate revenue to fund engineering and support other units across the entire university.

While understandable at some level, I believe that the votes cast in opposition to the engineering program are misguided. First, it conflates a short-term union labor concern with a long-term strategic imperative. This development is problematic for several reasons. A major and complex entity like Illinois State cannot be expected to do only one thing at a time. As a respected faculty member and Senator put it after the vote, “we can chew gum and walk at the same time.” Indeed, even while managing a once in a century challenge like the COVID-19 pandemic, Illinois State continued to work on several other important initiatives, including the engineering program and negotiating with the graduate teaching assistants. We know from experience that different constituencies often have important concerns or demands at the same time and we have always found a way to address them without putting other initiatives on hold. To do otherwise will hurt the university’s viability and progress given the many different challenges that we, like any other university, face each year.

Second, the vote ignores the reality of how labor negotiations work. No matter how quickly and expeditiously we might want a resolution, there is a formal and systematic process at work. In this case, that process is being facilitated by an experienced federal mediator and the negotiating teams are making progress, albeit slowly.

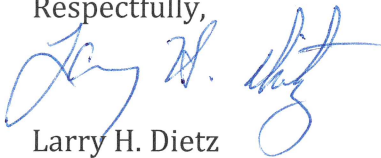
Third, the actions of the Academic Senate appear conflicting when, on the one hand, the body approves the academic curriculum and fiscal model for the engineering program but, on the other, rejects the site plan and organizational unit that will house the academic curriculum. Taking a longer view still, there is a degree of dissonance in the Academic Senate initiating a plan, supporting it continuously over nearly five years and then rejecting it for totally unrelated reasons when the challenges that originally necessitated the plan persist.

Finally, by failing to act proactively now on what most people agree is a transformational project, Illinois State risks being unprepared to deal with the enrollment and financial

impacts of the predicted demographic shift and would appear unwilling to help the state of Illinois address workforce needs.

I am of the opinion that it is irresponsible and a dereliction of duty on my part if we fail to act to prepare Illinois State for future challenges that have long been predicted with high confidence. Therefore, I must take a position different from the Academic Senate on this matter. I plan to seek authorization from the Board of Trustees for approval for the new College of Engineering. Finally, I restate, again, my commitment and respect for shared governance. As such, we will continue to engage with the Academic Senate on this matter comprehensively and frequently. I believe that this divergence of opinion is an aberration. I look forward to continuing fruitful cooperation with the Academic Senate on matters of important university strategy and policy.

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Larry H. Dietz". The signature is stylized and cursive.

Larry H. Dietz
President

Cc Aondover Tarhule, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs