

I am Abby Cohn, a professor of linguistics for the past 32 years and one of two faculty elected members of the Cornell Board of Trustees. I am happy to speak in support of Bill 248. I have been an active member of our faculty senate and thought that at some point running for faculty-elected trustee would be a very interesting opportunity, this being a very special aspect of shared governance at Cornell. I am in the second year of a four-year term, having agreed to run for the position in February 2020. (Little did I or any of us know what laid in store, so this has been a more eventful time than I imagined serving as a member of the board.)

Cornell has a very large board (64 total) including 5 constituent elected trustees – two faculty, one staff member and two students – all elected through direct vote of their respective constituencies. Cornell has had constituency elected trustees since the 1970s and on the whole, there is very strong consensus that this strengthens the effectiveness of the board to make informed decisions in representing Cornell as an institution.

Once we are elected, we are first and foremost members of the board, just like other board members whether appointed or elected (there are also eight alumni elected trustees). We function as full voting members of the board with the fiduciary responsibility to represent the best interests of Cornell as an institution. We also hold ourselves to the highest level of confidentiality. Thus while we can and do offer the perspective of the constituency we are elected by, we are not there as advocates for that constituency, nor to be report back in any direct way. Though we can certainly raise issues voiced by our constituencies.

The most important role we play, I believe is to have a voice at the table and to be ears in the room. How does a particular policy or decision affect our shared goals from the perspectives of students, staff, and faculty? We can also facilitate communication in a number of ways, giving voice to ideas or concerns that faculty might have and also helping board members connect with the faculty and learn more about what we do as faculty. As a faculty elected trustee, I serve as an ex-officio member of the senate and through this role, keep in touch with the current issues of concern to the faculty and can also share the board perspective with the faculty senate when appropriate.

Much of the work of the board is done by committees and there are certain standard assignments for constituent-elected trustees. I serve on the Committee on Academic Affairs, the Committee on Student Life, the Committee on University Relations, and the Trustee-Community Communications Committee and I am currently chairing the Committee for Campus-Constituency-Elected Trustees.

Through each of these committees and as an attendee at full board meetings, I have brought my own experiences as a long time faculty member (32 year) to bear while also learning a lot about Cornell as an institution and how it functions in each of these spheres.

From the Cornell University bylaws:

(c) Two trustees shall be elected from among and by the University Faculty at Ithaca and Geneva for terms of four years each, at least one being

elected every second year. The University Faculty shall determine the electorate.

(d) Two trustees, one undergraduate and one student from the graduate/professional schools shall be elected from among and by the relevant

constituent membership of the University's student body at Ithaca for terms of two years each, one being elected each year in alternating years.

(e) One trustee shall be elected from among and by the nonacademic staff and employees of the University at Ithaca and Geneva for a term of four

years.