# University of Utah faculty voice concerns over senate bill and governance changes



Faculty members at the University of Utah have raised serious concerns regarding the impact of a new state law, Senate Bill 192 (SB192), on faculty governance, alleging that it has empowered university administrators to suppress dissent and weaken traditional shared governance structures. The tensions have come to a head amid blocked resolutions, contested tenure decisions, and a growing climate of apprehension within the academic community.

The controversy centres around the invocation of SB192 by University President Taylor Randall in February 2024, when he abruptly halted a debate in the Academic Senate concerning allegations against Provost and Senior Vice President of Faculty Affairs Mitzi Montoya. The discussion pertained to a resolution introduced by English professor Katharine Coles and supported by 23 senators, which accused Montoya of improper conduct in tenure decisions and mistreatment of faculty members.

President Randall defended his decision to stop the meeting, telling The Daily Utah Chronicle, “It is very difficult for me to see a body bring claims into a public meeting without allowing someone the right to take a look at these claims and discuss them.” However, faculty leaders contend that SB192 undermines the principle of shared governance by granting the university president broad unilateral authority. Key provisions in the law stipulate that “a president may, in the president’s sole discretion, seek input from the institution’s faculty, staff or students,” and restrict faculty jurisdiction to matters explicitly delegated by the legislature, trustees, or the president.

Academic Senate President Harriet Hopf acknowledged that the February discussion involved confidential material, which was prohibited under SB192. Yet, she argued that existing university policy, not solely the new state law, precipitated the intervention. She told The Chronicle, “We got to a point where confidential things were being spoken in a public meeting, and that was really when it went too far. I don’t know that we needed to invoke 192 to do that, right? Like, that’s against all kinds of university policy.”

The university administration issued a statement affirming its support for the Academic Senate’s right to free speech and debate but pointed out that SB192 limits the impact of faculty votes. The statement clarified that “Utah’s elected leaders, not university leaders, have reduced the impact of faculty actions,” and that while the president may expand faculty jurisdiction, it must be done through “a thoughtful and deliberate process.” University officials indicated ongoing efforts to update policies in alignment with the new legislation.

Legal experts and faculty governance advocates have noted that although SB192 does not explicitly restrict the Academic Senate’s ability to discuss any issue, it narrows the faculty’s official decision-making powers, leaving significant authority with the president. David Frakt, a Florida-based lawyer specialising in higher education law, explained that the term “jurisdiction” in the bill denotes the faculty’s formal rule-making powers but does not prevent the Senate from debating topics outside its jurisdiction or making recommendations.

Faculty members strongly dispute the law’s effect on their role. Professor Hopf observed, “What are the situations when the president, in the president’s sole discretion, is seeking input?” highlighting the ambiguity in the bill’s language.

In parallel to the governance issues, a prominent case has fuelled concerns over academic freedom at the university. Dr. Michael Vershinin, a physics and astronomy professor, was denied tenure despite initial support from his department and the former College of Science Dean Peter Trapa. Vershinin’s tenure application was re-evaluated following a request from Provost Montoya, which led to the reversal of earlier endorsements.

Vershinin described the process as “railroading” and asserted that the tenure denial “violates academic freedom.” After receiving backing from the Academic Senate’s faculty committees during an appeal, the final tenure denial was signed by President Randall mere days before Vershinin’s contract expired, effectively limiting his ability to respond. Vershinin told The Chronicle, “It looked like yielding to pressure from above. They stretched it until the last second, probably to give me no time to respond.”

Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs Sarah Projansky responded that the tenure process involved multiple levels of review and that neither the president nor the provost opposes tenure when early reviews are positive. She also clarified that only the president has the authority to dismiss faculty members and only after due process.

Separate faculty accounts depict Provost Montoya as having a punitive and retributive management style. An unnamed professor described Montoya’s conduct as “psychologically abusive” and referenced prior allegations of discriminatory remarks regarding members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The university disputed these claims as “not corroborated.” President Randall stated, “I would not hire anyone who is explicitly biased against any individual or group, particularly Utah’s dominant faith and my own religion.”

Faculty also highlighted a shift in university culture under Randall and Montoya, perceiving a move away from collegial shared governance towards a more corporate, top-down model. Professor A, who requested anonymity, commented, “There’s something fundamentally different about a public institution of higher education. This is the problem, when you have business people running academic institutions; they treat it like a corporation.”

Mitzi Montoya issued a statement acknowledging the financial pressures faced by the university and justifying nearly $20 million in budget cuts and resource reallocations as necessary for improved efficiency. She asserted the university's commitment to “academic freedom, shared governance and the mission of the university,” and called on faculty to participate in “reinventing” the institution.

Many faculty members expressed frustration that their ability to influence university policies and working conditions had diminished. Professor B explained, “They want to consolidate power to manage us. But they treat us like workers who don’t want to be here, when most of us work 60 hours a week and do everything we can for our community.”

Long-serving faculty recalled the past environment as more receptive to open dialogue and mutual respect. Dr. Anne Jamison, professor of English, reflected, “I’ve had friendly relationships with the administration my entire time here. [Former university president] Ruth Watkins knew all of our names ... She would never have scolded us for speaking our mind.”

The atmosphere now, according to Jamison and other colleagues, is marked by fear, with concerns that speaking openly could impact tenure decisions, sabbaticals, or programme funding. “It’s not even comparable to other years how afraid people are,” Jamison said.

Despite these concerns, President Randall voiced his confidence in Provost Montoya’s leadership. He stated to The Chronicle, “I have full faith in Provost Mitzi Montoya. I selected Dr. Montoya to be the university’s provost because I trust her intelligence, insights and instincts. She has implemented essential initiatives to boost student success, increase efficiencies and set the university’s academic enterprise on a course for continued and growing excellence.”

The ongoing situation at the University of Utah highlights a contentious debate over governance, academic freedom, and administrative authority following the enactment of SB192, with faculty members and university leadership offering divergent perspectives on the direction of the institution.

Source: [Noah Wire Services](https://www.noahwire.com)

## Bibliography

1. <https://le.utah.gov/~2024/bills/static/SB0192.html> - This URL provides the full text of Senate Bill 192 (SB192), detailing the legislative changes to higher education governance in Utah, supporting the claim that SB192 amended governance structures and faculty jurisdiction at the University of Utah.
2. <https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2025/04/23/utah-faculty-say-new-law-and-leadership-have-jeopardized-academic-freedom/> - This article from The Daily Utah Chronicle reports on faculty concerns about SB192 empowering administrators to suppress dissent and weaken shared governance, including specific incidents such as blocked resolutions and tenure disputes involving President Randall and Provost Montoya.
3. <https://attheu.utah.edu/law-politics/new-state-law-transforms-academic-senates-role/> - This source explains how SB192 narrows faculty jurisdiction, confirming that the law restricts the faculty to matters explicitly delegated by legislative or university leadership, and describes President Randall's call to review university policies to align with the new law.
4. <https://attheu.utah.edu/tag/sb-192/> - This page provides updates on how the University of Utah and Academic Senate are working to implement SB192, highlighting administrative efforts to align university governance policies with the legislative changes.
5. <https://le.utah.gov/~2024/bills/sbillhtm/SB0192.htm> - This detailed legislative document supports specific claims about SB192’s amendments affecting faculty governance, university funding, and administration powers, giving legal context to the controversy described.
6. <https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2024/02/15/u-president-halts-academic-senate-meeting-invoking-new-state-law-sb192/> - This article covers President Taylor Randall’s invocation of SB192 to halt an Academic Senate discussion in February 2024, corroborating the claim about the blocked debate concerning Provost Montoya and the tensions around faculty governance and free speech.
7. <https://dailyutahchronicle.com/2025/04/23/utah-faculty-say-new-law-and-leadership-have-jeopardized-academic-freedom/?utm_source=rss&utm_medium=rss&utm_campaign=utah-faculty-say-new-law-and-leadership-have-jeopardized-academic-freedom> - Please view link - unable to able to access data