Minutes[*]

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, February 15, 2012
2:00 – 4:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Thomas Brothen (chair), Emily Combs, John Cwodzinski, Eva von Dassow, Robert McMaster, Kristen Nelson, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Leslie Schiff, Henning Schroeder, Elaine Tarone, Cathrine Wambach

Absent: Kirsten Barta, Barbara Brandt, Lee-Ann Breuch, Norman Chervany, Amanda Koonjbeharry, Alon McCormick, Peggy Root

Guests: none

Other: Tina Falkner (Academic Support Resources); Emily Lawrence (Office of the President)

[In these minutes: (1) Graduate School fund distribution model; (2) Turnitin.com; (3) the Wednesday before Thanksgiving]

1. Graduate School Fund Distribution Model

Professor Brothen convened the meeting at 2:00 and turned to Vice Provost and Dean Schroeder to lead a discussion of the quality metrics plan for FY13 and beyond.

Dean Schroeder began by commenting that Provost Hanson's views on implementation of the plan will be very important. He reviewed the contents of a memo to the deans, sent last November, about how the former block-grant funds would be distributed using a system of quality metrics. There previously were three pools of funds (dissertation fellowships, first-year fellowships, and block grants); the fellowship funds have been distributed to the colleges for allocation to the programs in order to allow them more flexibility in tailoring offers to prospective graduate students in their fields.

The block-grant funds, $4.5 million, were divided into two components, $2.6 million allocated on the basis of program evaluation and $1.9 million ("transition grants") allocated to ensure that no college had more than a 15% reduction from the previous level of block-grant funding. [Dean Schroeder had to step out of the meeting briefly at this point.]

Professor Wambach reported that the criteria used were developed through analysis by Institutional Research and correlated with outcomes to see if the variables were related to outcomes. What are the outcomes, Professor Tarone inquired? Ideally, placement, Professor Wambach said, but there are intermediate outcomes that can be measured, such as completion and retention (when does a program lose students? At the dissertation stage or at the first year?). They also looked at whether

[*] These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes represents the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

those intermediate variables correlated with NRC rankings; they did, so Institutional Research essentially validated the NRC results (for Ph.D. programs, not for Master's programs).

Professor Nelson said she has heard that some programs provided data but some did not. Professor Wambach said that the Graduate School already had a great deal of data on all programs on completion, student satisfaction, and so on. Ms. Combs related that the programs were asked to provide a narrative and placement data but that some did not provide any narrative.

[Dean Schroeder returned to the meeting.] They used the metrics for the first time in FY13, he reported, and used metrics that are considered discipline-independent measures of program efficiency and quality (time to degree, retention, completion, etc.). In terms of time to degree, they did not look at how long it took students and conclude that X years is good and Y years is bad; they looked at a 10-year period to see if there were changes in time to degree. If the rate was constant or declining, that was seen as good; if the time to degree was increasing over the ten-year period, then a discussion with metrics team was warranted. So each program is its own control. They had information about placement records via the annual program profiles in the Graduate School through 2009 and they also received a narrative in response to data sent to the colleges in order that the programs could put the data in perspective. In doctoral education and in master's education with a research component, they look at both quantitative and qualitative measures because they want students to take risks, be innovative, allow failure in first attempts, and they do not just want speed in achieving a degree.

Because the indicators used for FY13 are not the entire story of program quality, Dean Schroeder said, they used the $1.9 million as a buffer against cuts greater than 15%. He commented that he doubted program quality could ever be measured solely by numbers.

The block-grant system took into account program scale, Dean Schroeder recalled. The allocations based on quality metrics does not, for a number of reasons. The Metrics Review Team (Associate Deans Rothman, CLA, Bartlett, CEHD, and Gladfelter, CSE, Vice Dean LeBien, Medical School, Regents Professor John Sullivan, and Peter Radcliffe, Office of Planning and Analysis) believes that size is not considered a metric to evaluate quality, but at some point in funding decisions size must be taken into account. Size does not equal quality, although programs do need to be a minimum size in order to function effectively. The $1.9 million allocations did take size into account and there are ongoing discussions as to whether more refined scale metrics should be included in future funding cycles.

One thing is different in FY13 compared to the previous year, Dean Schroeder said: The funding for intercollegiate interdisciplinary programs is provided by the Graduate School. Last year the funds were allocated to the deans that co-owned the programs, and then they had to convene meetings to talk about putting the money into the programs; after talking to the deans, there was agreement that that was a waste of time and that this was a case where decentralization did not work well. The FY13 allocations from the quality metrics pools to intercollegiate interdisciplinary programs were discussed with the co-owning deans and there was overall agreement.

They included Master's programs in the quality metrics (M.A., M.S., and M.F.A.) but not professional Master's programs because they do not have a set of metrics for the latter. However, colleges with professional Master's programs received funding from the $1.9M transition grant, because professional Master's programs had received funding from the Graduate School in the past. It is planned that metrics for professional Master's programs will be used in future funding cycles.

Dean Schroeder said he was not certain that it would be worthwhile to use the quality metrics annually; perhaps biennially would be sufficient. The cycle needs to be a topic of conversation both with Provost Hanson and with the deans.

Dean Schroeder and Committee members held a discussion about the accountability of the deans for the use of the funds to support high-quality graduate programs and mechanisms that could be developed to protect such programs. He noted that it has been the case since the last administration that if the deans are provided more flexibility and autonomy in local decision-making, there will be an annual accountability process (the compacts) and there will be transparency. There is need for central access to the numbers not only for monitoring but also reporting. They do not propose to "police" at the input level but there will be review of outcomes.

Ms. Combs asked if will be possible to track fellowship dollars. Students would like to know but have not been permitted access to the compact process. Dean Schroeder said he did not know how the compact process will work in the future; Provost Hanson must decide. Mr. Kallsen in the Office of Budget and Finance has indicated that they can track fellowship dollars and that colleges will need to report on the funds they received and the fellowships they awarded. The question has been asked whether, since fellowship funds are now part of the college budget, if the college budget is cut because of budget constraints, will the fellowships be cut as well? The answer is "no." Colleges received a defined amount of money and that is what is expected to be spent on fellowships. The money the colleges received was based on a five-year history in obtaining fellowship funds, in accord with a decision made by President Kaler.

Vice Provost Schroeder reviewed the categories into which programs had been placed (1, 2, 3). They do not use qualitative terms to describe the categories, he said; there are 11 programs in category 3, which does not necessarily mean low quality but does suggest there is need for a conversation about small numbers, dropouts, etc., or (in 3 cases) that the program is too new to be evaluated on quality metrics. New programs would have had a difficult time receiving money under the previous algorithm and block grant system, he pointed out. Now deans can use the funds they receive from the quality metrics pool and invest in new programs because they believe the programs will become productive in the future. He said he is an advocate of local decisions on funding, and deans are not required to follow the assignment of numbers that were used in evaluating programs, but they will be accountable for how they spend the money. The programs were evaluated by the metrics review team that consisted of a group of associate deans and faculty members.

Ms. Combs said she has heard there have been strong arguments that quality should be independent of size, but why not use a multiplier? It does not make sense not to incorporate size. Dr. Schroeder said it was difficult but that if local flexibility is sought, the case must be argued there. He also noted that over half of the money ("transition grant") was not attached to the quality metrics and incorporates a size component. They went through many ways of counting and how credit for quality should be awarded, including size, and all the options would have led to huge discrepancies in funding to the colleges. That is why they adopted the 15% rule in order to ensure no reduction would exceed 15% from one cycle to the next.

Ms. Combs asked if the cost pool is funded per student. (It is.) So this approach allows colleges to subsidize each other, she said. That is correct, Dean Schroeder said. But the process is not set in stone and there remains the question about incorporating a measure of program size. Every committee and group that looked at the measures, however, was adamant that size should not be included because the measures are about quality—and it should not be assumed that large programs are always high-quality. It could be that there are excellent programs that should grow.

It is true that a number of large programs are large because they have large grants that fund graduate students, Professor Wambach said, and they receive a lot of money. And it may be that some programs are larger than they should be and should not be rewarded. That is where it gets tricky, she observed. Dr. Schroeder agreed. Many funding arrangements within colleges also take care of size differences; if the quality metrics process rewards size, that could hurt other programs.

What also came up in discussions was how to put time to degree and completion rates and so on in Master's program metrics, Dr. Schroeder related. And how to ensure that programs that legitimately have part-time students are not penalized. In this round programs were measured against themselves, but in the future that could be difficult (e.g., programs who have working professionals as students). It is perhaps possible to incorporate some kind of FTE measure in the metrics.

Professor von Dassow commented that she was glad to hear Dr. Schroeder say that not only the numerical measures would be used, because it looks like the rate of production is thought to capture the quality of education. Speed is not fundamentally defensible as a measure of quality; efficiency is not a value in academic work. She said that elimination of the outside-field requirement undermines integration and assumes that disciplines are independent. She suggested that one aspect of quality that could capture her point is how well different graduate programs are integrated with each other. Dr. Schroeder agreed. Once one talks about numbers, people try to meet them, and doctoral education is clearly about more than how long it takes. Students need to take risks. And they should have license to fail, Professor von Dassow pointed out. Dr. Schroeder agreed that students could reach a dead end; the question is whether they can pick themselves up and continue their work. If a program has a large number of students who drop out after 3-4 years of work, that is not good. They may not get to the research phase early enough to find out what getting a Ph.D. really means, and the numbers do tell one something about the program and its curricular structure. The numbers are not an absolute value, but if students are taking longer and longer to obtain their degrees, it is appropriate to inquire what they are doing and if all the work is necessary. Professor von Dassow agreed that the numbers could represent problems, but how will they account for quality that is inherent, for example, in letting student take risks? That is why they asked for narratives, Dr. Schroeder responded; they were used to move some programs from category 2 to category 1. They are not data-driven or data-obsessed, they are data-informed, and he agreed that graduate students should have the freedom to pursue what they are curious about and fail in the process.

In terms of integration, he agreed that one could consider how they are linked and how interdisciplinary they are, Dean Schroeder said. Professor von Dassow said she chose the term "integration" because it includes the possibility that students could experience more than one discipline through courses or research, which would increase the strength of the education of the entire program. Dr. Schroeder said he has informed Provost Hanson that budget cuts over the past year had a particularly strong impact on interdisciplinary and intercollegiate programs. He said it would a good idea to measure how well programs work together and whether students take classes outside the program, but measures also need to capture when students are visible in their fields at conference, publishing, and so on. That is the quality measure that is closest to where graduate education should lead. Professor von Dassow said she would question that assertion; she has seen cases where students were pushed to present papers before they were ready; that is gaming the metrics. Dean Schroeder commented that any metrics system can be gamed and that students should have the opportunity as soon as they are ready to make presentations.

Professor Wambach said this issue gets to the problem of how the University claims to be a top research university. The NRC uses metrics to rank programs; the alternative was faculty/administrative reputational rankings, which the NRC tried to move away from. The NRC was criticized for its rankings but it tried to base them on data. Now one is seeing new data sets (citation index data, alumni productivity, etc.) and it's the way the world is going. It is moving away from reputational rankings. If the University is to be considered a top research university, it must decide how to invest its money and how to measure programs and to give feedback to them on how they are doing with respect to their peers by using national data (such as time to degree). It is these national trends that are causing the University to use more data-oriented metrics; "it is not something we cooked up." There is no escaping it, she concluded.

In terms of "what we are expecting from graduate programs," Dean Schroeder said, they must decide on what they consider to be good outcomes that are student-centric. What represents student visibility in a specific field - publication, exhibit, conference presentation? Where should the graduate go? What characteristics should they have when they leave? When it comes to defining discipline-specific metrics, this cannot be a top-down process; this discussion has to happen within the programs, with the Graduate School as a facilitator. There are elements of programs that can be measured centrally and there are measurements that differ across disciplines.

Professor Brothen thanked Dr. Schroeder for the discussion.

2. Turnitin.com

Professor Brothen reported that the Faculty Consultative Committee had passed along to this Committee a question raised by a faculty member about why Turnitin.com was no longer available. He raised the question with the appropriate offices and received this response:

> Thank you for bringing this concern forward. We've been working with Turnitin for quite some time, and I'm happy to report that we completed negotiations on a three year service contract in early December. The contract includes Turnitin's Originality Check, GradeMark, and PeerMark services and covers all five University campuses. Detailed information about each of these services is available here: https://turnitin.com/static/products/index.php
>
> The initial implementation of the service will be through a Moodle 2 integration as a "Turnitin Assignment". We're working with Turnitin to schedule on-site training in late February -- the earliest available date for their trainers. In the meantime, we are considering enabling the functionality in Moodle prior to that training so that early adopters can begin using the service. We are working with central and local support staff to gather feedback

about the pros and cons of this approach, and would welcome any feedback from you or your colleagues as well.

So there have been negotiations occurring and the issue may be resolved, Professor Brothen concluded. Committee members had no comment.

3. The Wednesday Before Thanksgiving

Ms. Phillips raised with the Committee the question of whether the Twin Cities campus should close early on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. She provided data on peer institutions in the Big Ten (some have a break that entire week, some treat the Wednesday as normal, and some close early), observed that many students leave anyway and some instructors do not hold class, and proposed that the campus try an experiment by closing at noon on Wednesday. She maintained that the campus is pretending it's open when it really is not, in effect.

Vice Provost McMaster said Ms. Phillips' proposal is not a bad one but the schedule for fall semester, starting after Labor Day, is so tight that the end of the semester already comes late into December. To take out another half day of classes would make it even worse.

Dr. Falkner reported that many faculty members do hold class on Wednesday and hold students accountable for the work of the class. She said she had no data but worried that this is a slippery slope; why hold classes in the morning on Wednesday? She said she did not like the precedent of lopping off chunks of class time.

Professor Wambach said she would think that the classes most inconvenienced by closing early would be the large biology and chemistry labs. They already don't hold labs on that afternoon, Ms. Phillips reported; they cannot do Th-F so they don't do M-T-W unless the class is only M-T-W. Similarly, in fall and spring semesters, because Monday is missing (Labor Day and MLK Day, respectively), since they cannot hold Monday labs they omit appropriate lab meetings in the first week in order to keep all lab sections on the same week-by-week schedules.

Is there a minimum number of class meeting days, Professor Ng asked? (There is, 70, Dr. Falkner reported.) Is fall semester now at 70 days, Professor Ng inquired? It is, Dr. Falkner said. About five years ago the decision was made to stay at 70 days for fall semester (the number of class days used to fluctuate due to the fact that Labor Day fluctuates).

Professor von Dassow pointed out that there is a policy requiring a certain amount of instructional time but no policy that bars faculty members from cancelling class the Wednesday before Thanksgiving. There is no policy barring cancellation of classes, period, Ms. Phillips pointed out. There is a policy that outlines the obligations of instructors, which includes holding class, Dr. Falkner said, but there is nothing specific that says an instructor cannot choose not to hold a class. The policy is here: http://www.fpd.finop.umn.edu/Policies/Education/Education/INSTRUCTORRESP.html.

Professor Nelson said she agreed with Ms. Phillips. She holds class, to honor the students who can be there, but she does not penalize those who are not present. She said she does not want to reduce the amount of time available to students for class.

Professor von Dassow said she had a Wednesday seminar that she held because all of the students could be there. If they had not been available, she would have made up the time elsewhere. She said she does not want 1/15th of her class time taken away.

If there is local control, there isn't a problem, Ms. Combs commented.

It is the professional responsibility of faculty members to deliver the classes they are charged to teach, Professor Brothen pointed out. Professor Wambach said that enforcement is carried out by students; if an instructor is constantly late or cancels classes, the students go to the department chair or the criticisms show up on the evaluations. That could lead to disciplinary action in the department because such performance would be a serious dereliction of duty. Cancelling one class on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving would not likely fall in that category.

The policy says nothing about cancelling class the Wednesday before Thanksgiving, Professor von Dassow observed, and instructors are permitted to cancel classes if they are ill or have to attend a professional meeting. The rule is that students are to receive what they paid for.

The Committee concluded it would take no action on Ms. Phillips' proposal. Professor Brothen observed that the campus is held prisoner by its schedule in the fall. And by the Senate policy requiring 70 days of instruction, Ms. Phillips added. Professor Wambach said it would be good practice for an instructor to note on the syllabus that class will be held on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving; Vice Provost McMaster disagreed and said it is not a special case, and that students must assume class will be held.

Professor Brothen adjourned the meeting at 3:30.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota