

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, February 29, 2012
2:00 – 4:00
300 Morrill Hall

Present: Thomas Brothen (chair), Lee-Ann Breuch, Emily Combs, John Cwodzinski, Eva von Dassow, Alon McCormick, Kristen Nelson, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Leslie Schiff, Henning Schroeder, Elaine Tarone, Cathrine Wambach

Absent: Kirsten Barta, Barbara Brandt, Norman Chervany, Amanda Koonjbeharry, Robert McMaster, Peggy Root

Guests: Professor Nita Krevans (chair, graduate education policy review committee); Assistant Vice Provost Suzanne Bardouche (Office of Undergraduate Education), Tina Falkner (Academic Support Resources), Angela Bowlus (College of Liberal Arts Advising), Amy Gunter (College of Science and Engineering advising)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) new graduate-education policies; (2) award winners; (3) policy changes; (4) grades in context]

1. New Graduate-Education Policies

Professor Brothen convened the meeting at 2:00 and welcomed Professor Krevans to present four new graduate-education policies: Master's Degree: Completion; Doctoral Degree: Completion; Master's Degree: Performance Standards and Progress; and Doctoral Degree: Performance Standards and Progress.

Professor Krevans began by explaining that this set of policies is broken up the way it is for the convenience of students. She highlighted the elements of the policies that are new.

-- All doctoral programs that were under the aegis of the Graduate School were required to have written annual reviews for each student; that requirement continues, but doctoral programs that were not bound by Graduate School rules in the past must now also complete written annual reviews with reports communicated in writing for their students.

-- There are similar requirements for Master's programs but they are not as rigid; reviews must be performed but written notification is required only if there is a problem.

-- Doctoral programs will now have a GPA floor (3.0 or program requirement, whichever is higher) for a student to remain in good academic standing, and the minimum GPA for Master's programs will continue (2.8 or program requirement, whichever is higher). One cannot graduate from a Master's

* 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.

program without meeting the floor—it is an exit requirement. If one is below the floor, the student must switch out courses or take new ones. The floor is not an exit requirement for the doctoral degree, it is for good academic standing and can be used for advising; a student can be barred from taking preliminary exams if not at the floor (but a program may allow a student to take prelims even if he or she is below the floor of 3.0).

-- They have changed the wording on the procedures for submitting archival copies for Master's theses and Ph.D. dissertation because the technology changes so rapidly. The policy refers students to a document that will be constantly updated. There is still an embargo problem: Some work may involve patents and the student and adviser may require an embargo until the patent is obtained, and the legitimate need to embargo must be balanced against the Board of Regents' policy declaring that these works are public. The policy language is a compromise, allowing an embargo "for a limited period of time." Typically this would be 6-12 months, Professor Krevans said, and they said "no" to requests from some who argued for much longer embargo periods.

-- There have always been time-to-degree rules under the Graduate School, and the colleges had them for non-Graduate-School programs. The Master's degree time limit is the same as before, completion within five years of initial enrollment in the program. One can meet that requirement by taking one course per semester, Professor Krevans said, but because some Master's programs have distinctive, populations they have created an easy exception process for programs that have, for example, many students who are working full time and cannot take a course every semester: A department may request an exception for an entire program. So, for example, the students in that program might only have to take one course per year. Such programmatic exceptions must be approved centrally so that the Vice Provost for Graduate Education and the Provost can keep track of them.

In the case of doctoral programs, under current policy the time starts to run when oral prelims are completed: The degree must be completed within five years. When students encounter problems, the prelims are pushed back. That has created problems for the University in measurement (nationally, the start date for the clock running is when a student enrolls in a program, not from the time that prelims are finished). Moreover, there is a University-wide initiative to improve time to degree, both for the sake of the student (many of whom are tuition-paying), for the sake of the student's placement, and for the reputation of the program. As a result, Professor Krevans said, the proposed policy requires degree completion (for the doctorate) within eight years of enrollment, and students may obtain an extension of 24 months, and (with central approval), a second extension of 24 months. Dr. Falkner pointed out that a student may also take a leave of absence if the circumstances warrant it.

The timelines do create a disadvantage for some students, Professor Krevans observed. If a student enters and completes a Master's program, leaves the University to work or teach for four years, and then enrolls in the Ph.D. program in the same field, the clock stops and then starts again. If the student does not finish the Master's degree, leaves and returns to the Ph.D. program, the clock has been running the entire time. There are competing imperatives here, Professor Krevans commented: It is not good for students leave with their degrees uncompleted; they should take a leave of absence or get the degree done.

Ms. Phillips pointed out that a student who obtains a Master's degree at another institution and then enrolls in a Ph.D. program at Minnesota would have eight years to finish the Ph.D., whereas a

student who obtained a Master's degree at Minnesota and then enrolled in the Ph.D. program would have eight years from the time of the initial enrollment in the Master's program. Professor Krevans agreed and said there is simply no way to even out the rules so they are fair to everyone; on the other hand, students with external master's degrees can only transfer a limited number of credits to their University doctoral program.

-- One additional issue is whether committee members for a doctoral examination must be physically present, Professor Krevans related. The committee went back and forth on this with the constituent groups. The current policy requires that the candidate be physically present but that faculty members can make arrangements if they cannot be physically present. The Graduate School staff wanted a rule that requires the doctoral candidate to be present and no more than one member of the committee not physically present. After working with the deans, her committee concluded that such a rule would be retrograde, given the technology that is available and likely to be available in the future and given that airline prices continue to increase. The compromise is that the examinations must satisfy a set of requirements that would look something like this (which is only a draft):

1. All participants must be able to hear each other at all times;
2. Identical versions of all visual or text materials (slides, videos, handouts) must be available to all participants;
3. The integrity of the examination process must be guaranteed by some form of proctoring if the candidate is not physically present on the University campus;
4. Provisions must be made for secret balloting during the votes by examiners and for signing the examination report form;
5. For doctoral final orals, arrangements must be made for a public presentation by video link, with opportunities for question and answer from the audience;
6. The chair of the examining committee must recess the examination immediately if any technical problems interfere with the proceedings for more than a few moments;
7. All participants must be notified ahead of time of the options for recessing the examination; and
8. The chair of the examining committee must guarantee that all the above conditions have been satisfied.

All committee members and the candidate must agree to the arrangements, Professor Krevans added.

So a technological troglodyte could prevent the use of technology and insist that everyone be physically present, Professor Tarone asked? That would be possible, Professor Krevans said. But in some cases there may be problems with visas and someone might not be able to be physically present, Ms. Phillips said. Under existing policy the student must be present, Professor Krevans said; she will check on what happens when visa problems arise. In response to a subsequent question from Professor Tarone, Professor Krevans said that it is always possible to replace a troglodyte committee member with another faculty member if that were the only way the student could complete the examination.

Ms. Combs said there would need to be a proctor if only the student is on campus. Professor Krevans agreed, and said that if this Committee believes this change could present too many potential problems, her committee would revisit it. Professor McCormick said he thought the policy should be more liberal about what "present" means for a doctoral final oral examination and commented that he is in a department that has faculty members who travel a great deal. But this may be too far too fast;

what is the disincentive to allowing more participation by electronic connection? Arranging such an exam would require a lot of advance work, Professor Krevans said, including a mechanism for a secret ballot, proctoring the student if not on campus, and the ability to make legal signatures on the examination forms. That would create a lot of work for staff, Professor McCormick agreed; what is the disincentive for faculty members? If the arrangements do not work, the examination will have to be rescheduled, Professor Krevans said, which would cause a lot of trouble for the faculty; as one dean commented, this sounds fine as long as everything goes well, and if not, it will cause a lot of problems.

It would be possible to develop some best practices, Professor Krevans suggested, and one recommended best practice could be that all but one of the examining committee members should be in the room. Would these arrangements require approval by the Director of Graduate Studies or the Associate Dean for Graduate Education, Professor McCormick asked? Professor Krevans said she believed her subcommittee would accept a requirement that the DGS approve but would likely resist requiring collegiate approval. Professor Nelson agreed that DGS approval should be required and that the candidate (or someone) should be required to file a memo a month in advance indicating what the arrangements would be so that the DGS would know. The DGS, in turn, could track the number of these kinds of meetings and identify circumstances where they did not work, and could also identify norms and expectations (one could not participate via cell phone from the desert).

This also opens the possibility of including faculty members at other universities, Professor Wambach commented. A faculty member may have left the University of Minnesota during the course of a graduate student's career but might be willing to serve on a committee if not required to travel back to the University of Minnesota. There are many interesting possibilities. Professor Nelson said she's been on five committees that included someone who had left and participated remotely.

Vice Provost Schroeder said, apropos of Professor Wambach's comment, that the college representatives for graduate education have started to see opportunities to open up the possibilities for examining committees, and it may be that advances in technology will make the process even more simple—and less likely that bad things will happen. So his view is that as much as possible should be left up to the examining committee. Sometimes it delays the process significantly when trying to get faculty members together in the same room; with the right oversight, this flexibility could be an important improvement for students.

Professor von Dassow inquired how one proctors a student who might be in a remote location in Africa, for instance. Professor Krevans replied that her department has conducted language examinations from abroad a number of times and they are proctored by a staff member from the local department. That assumes there is a faculty-equivalent at the location, Professor von Dassow commented, and if so, then the policy should include a statement on proctoring. Professor Krevans said that the DGS and the examining committee chair should have a strong incentive to prevent cheating so she would prefer not to write that into the policy, and they don't know what technology will be available that could preclude cheating.

When would the new policies go into effect, Professor Breuch asked? Professor Krevans said that the admissions policy being taken up at the Senate tomorrow would have a lag time in order to give programs the opportunity to make decisions about the system they will use. The policies today would probably go into effect in a year; as with all policies that affect students, they would only apply

to students entering after they have been adopted and are enforceable (students already in a program could choose to be bound by them).

Ms. Combs asked about counting time for the Master's and doctoral degrees. Vice Provost Schroeder said that the clock runs when someone is pursuing a Master's and doctoral degree in the same program. There are definitional issues about what the "same" program is, he added. Students who are applying for readmission would be provided the information, Professor Krevans pointed out.

Professor Tarone observed that she has had students who were gone a long time and had to retake some courses. The first request for an extension is decided at the program level, Professor Krevans noted, and it could perhaps be taken care of in advance when the student is readmitted—and told then to file a petition for an extension. Eight years plus a leave plus 24 months' extension sounds reasonable, Professor von Dassow said, and she as a single mother could probably have squeaked by, because it took her eleven years. Where did the eight-year figure come from? National norms in the humanities and social sciences for students who are funded, Professor Krevans said, which are about 7.5 years. That assumes the fantasy that the students are all supported, Professor von Dassow responded, which is not true. If it is a program in which the students almost all tend to be in that situation, it could seek a program exception, Professor Krevans said, although that then calls attention to the fact that students in the program have a long time to degree. There is a difference between tailoring to an entire student population and tailoring to individual students, Professor von Dassow pointed out. Professor Krevans noted again that there are individual exceptions and that a student can get up to 12 years if needed.

Do they plan to help programs that have a median time to degree that is longer than eight years, Ms. Combs asked? They are convening the DGSs and college representatives and others from those programs, Dr. Schroeder reported. Professor Krevans commented that she is the DGS for a program in which students take a long time because they must learn ancient languages and often master two fields, neither of which is available to undergraduates. They are only meeting, during FY13, with programs whose time to degree or attrition rate has been increasing over the past 10 years or so, Dr. Schroeder clarified.

Professor Wambach said that more and more the expectation is that departments will find funding for its graduate students—rather than admitting students and letting them loose to try to find funding. Departments are being told they must have a plan to fund their students and get them through. That is another factor converging on this question: Departments are to admit only the number of students it can support. Professor von Dassow recalled that the last time Dr. Schroeder discussed these issues with the Committee he spoke about time to degree; what Professor Wambach has alluded to suggests that another measure of program quality should be whether it provides financial support to its students. Dr. Schroeder agreed and said there are a number of metrics that might cause programs to be flagged, including a lack of funding for students.

Professor Krevans reported on a few additional small items that will be included in the new policies. Professor Brothen thanked her for her report and said the Committee would expect to see the revised policies whenever she was ready to bring them back for action.

2. Award Winners

The Committee welcomed Ms. Ronning from the Office of the Provost, who presented the nominations for the Morse-Alumni and Graduate-Professional teaching awards. Professor Ng asked how many candidates and nominations there were for each award. Ms. Ronning reported that there were 11 candidates for the Morse-Alumni award and 5 winners; there were 15 candidates for the Graduate-Professional Award and 8 winners.

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the nominations and to extend its thanks to the nominating committees that evaluated the dossiers and made the recommendations.

3. Policy Changes

Professor Brothen turned now to Ms. Bardouche and Dr. Falkner to present two policy changes. He also welcomed Ms. Bowlus and Gunter from CLA and CSE.

Ms. Bardouche turned first to a clarification related to counting grades toward the major and minor. The handout she provided noted that "currently the policy on *Credit and Grade Point Requirements* states that no D grades may count toward a student's major program. In practice, colleges do not allow D grades to count toward minor programs, either, but this is not explicitly noted in the policy." So, in order "to align policy language with the current practice," the Office of Undergraduate Education recommends updating the language in the policy by adding "or minor" in the policy language (and to add Rochester to the policy coverage), as follows:

[Twin Cities and Rochester only] D grades not permitted in major or minor courses. Required courses for the major or minor in which a student receives a D grade (with or without plus or minus) do not count toward the major or minor (including transfer courses). All other courses, including courses in the major or minor field that are not required to complete the major or minor, will count toward a degree if the student earns a D or better.

Note: Morris and Crookston currently allow varying amounts of Ds for courses in the major. Rochester does not, and Rochester has asked to be included in the language above to reflect current practice.

The Committee voted unanimously to approve this policy interpretation, which will be presented to the Faculty Senate for information.

The second matter is a policy change to Declaring an Undergraduate Major: Twin Cities, Crookston, Morris, Rochester (which can be found at <http://www.policy.umn.edu/Policies/Education/Education/DECLAREMAJOR.html>).

Ms. Bardouche noted the explanatory language on the handout:

Currently if an undergraduate student has not declared a major or been admitted to a program by the time he or she has completed 60 credits, colleges will place a hold on the student's record that stops the student from being able to register for courses. For some colleges, the 60-credit mark is too late in the student's career; many of our undergraduate students reach the 60+ mark after spring semester of their sophomore year. Colleges have requested the flexibility to apply the "major declaration hold" to student records earlier in the credit total,

when programmatically warranted. This would force students who may be off track (either through course choices or GPA) for their desired major to meet with an adviser to discuss alternative plans.

The proposed changes, she explained, are these:

- Amend the current policy to allow colleges to apply this hold to student records before the 60-credit mark, when programmatically warranted.
- Clarify that this policy applies to all degree-seeking students.
- Reinforce the expectation of timely graduation.

Proposed policy language changes are outlined below, using highlighted to show additions and ~~strike-through~~ to show deletions.

Declaring and Pursuing an Undergraduate Major: Twin Cities, Crookston, Morris, Rochester

POLICY STATEMENT

All degree-seeking undergraduate students are required to declare a major or be admitted into a program before or upon the completion of 60 semester credits. Once a student has completed 60 credits, or earlier if programmatically warranted, an “adviser hold” will be placed on the student’s record, preventing the student from registering for additional classes until the student has declared a major or been admitted to a program.

1. Colleges determine how the process by which students declare a major or gain admission to a degree program.
2. Departments set the academic standards for being allowed to enter declaring a major in the field.
3. Department standards are subject to college review and approval. Department, college and campus standards for declaring a major are subject to review and approval by the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost or the Vice President for Health Sciences, as appropriate.
4. ~~All freshmen admitting colleges will have available a student status of “undeclared.”~~

REASON FOR POLICY

Undergraduate degree-seeking students are admitted to the University to pursue and complete an undergraduate degree. The University expects students to complete their degrees in a timely manner, defined here as four years, and declaring a major is a foundational part of this progression. To make the best use of students’ resources, as well as University resources, students are not allowed to continue registering for courses indefinitely without having a formal plan for completing a degree.

This is a policy change that advisers have asked for, Ms. Bardouche reported. They want to be able to catch students earlier if programmatically warranted. An adviser can put a hold on a student's record any time but want the option to apply this particular hold to emphasize the "declare and pursue" the major issue. The policy change also clarifies that it applies to degree-seeking students—that they

need to pursue and complete a degree. Ms. Gunter explained that this change would allow advisers to direct students away from programs that do not fit for them.

Ms. Phillips noted that the number is based on semester credits, and some students come into the University with a considerable number of credits. They could reach the 60-credit mark quickly. Although the policy says the hold "will be" placed, it can be also removed quickly if appropriate, Ms. Bardouche assured the Committee. So why not "may," Professor von Dassow asked? So a student cannot say to an adviser "you don't have the authority to place this hold on my ability to register, and by doing so you are treating me unfairly or differently than other students are treated" Ms. Bardouche replied. They are looking to do what is in the student's best interest, and that includes the option of directing a student to the services now provided by CAPE (the Center for Academic Planning and Exploration), which works with many undecided or overly decided students to choose a major and career path. Advisers want to intervene earlier and direct students toward those services sooner in the student's academic career. CAPE is a very helpful option, which was not available just a few years ago.

Professor Wambach said that if a student is at 70 credits after one semester, he or she is eligible to declare a major, and it is worth it for the student to talk to an adviser to plan the process—if he or she is to graduate with 120 credits, not 180.

Professor von Dassow said she had no objection to the policy changes and permitting programs to do what they believe they should do, but she objected to the language in the "Reason for Policy" provision. For many students, while it is true that they enroll with the intention of completing a degree, this proves not to be the right path. She said that she believes it devalues a degree if everyone is expected to obtain one.

Professor Brothen commented that Vice Provost McMaster would say that students are admitted for the purpose of pursuing a degree. The implication is that the University admits students and expects them to get a degree. And it admits students to a degree program to get a degree, Ms. Bardouche amplified, not simply to take 120 credits without having a major or degree plan. The University admits students on the basis that they can and will get a degree, not just hang around and randomly enroll in courses.

Is there a category for non-degree-seeking students, Professor Tarone asked? There is, Ms. Bardouche said; it is used by many people who enroll through CCE and take credit courses.

Professor von Dassow said she also objected to the University's pressure to increase completion rates. In principle it is not a bad idea, but in these discussions the term "improve" is used as a synonym for "increase," which results in manipulating milestones, including who is admitted, to increase the graduation rate, which is not good for students or the institution. She said she did not believe in using such metrics as indicative of the quality of the educational experience. The University should admit students who want a degree, but some may decide to hang around, change plans, or drop out, and policy should not enforce the expectation they will get a degree. Then students only take courses they can pass. Students only take courses they can pass and teachers only give work that students can complete, so there is less and less rigorous education in order to meet expectations.

Professor Schiff said that this policy relates to pursuing a major; in her field, there are a limited number of seats in classes and labs and they want to give those spaces to students who are working on a

degree. She said she sees the policy change as a positive move that allows an adviser to intervene when needed. Professor von Dassow said that is why she supports the policy change but not the additional language describing the reason for the policy.

Professor McCormick, from the College of Science and Engineering, said he would couch the policy change as active advising to get students into a suitable degree program, not one that emphasizes getting a degree at any cost. One that is more suitable. Students sometimes believe they will go a certain direction, no matter how unsuccessful they are, and not listen to an adviser; this change helps to arm advisers to help the students.

But the reason for the policy is primarily to allow timely intervention by advisers to guide students to degree programs that will suit their talents and interests, Professor von Dassow pointed out.

Ms. Gunter said that they (advisers) need the language about timely completion. Advisers work with students to find the best programmatic fit but they do expect timely progress on the part of students because of space and finances. Maybe the student could get into Chemical Engineering after ten years of trying, for example, but that kind of effort is not good for students, so they need the timeliness element in the policy. Professor McCormick (Chemical Engineering) related that he has known of students who keep banging themselves against the wall, trying to succeed in Chemical Engineering, when it is clear that they need advising intervention.

Professor Wambach said she has looked at a lot of transcripts and seen students who start to fail on their trajectory, and two things can happen. One, there is an abrupt change in courses being taken and degree objective, or two, they leave the University. It is better to try to help a student make a transition to a second choice and succeed than to have him or her leave the University.

Dr. Falkner said that she works with a group of advisers that meets every other week, and they found that there are not enough teeth in the current policy to permit advisers to force students to make a choice when they are failing in their intended field. Right now there's nothing in the policy that allows advisers to intervene in a timely manner—and students can figure that out. The change is intended to help advisers help students to be successful. They are seeing course-taking patterns where students keep on repeating foundational courses and hoping something will happen, and that behavior has to be stopped.

Professor Ng made two points about the reason for the policy. One, the University's message must be consistent and clear about the four-year graduation rate; per Professor von Dassow, the University should value learning, but it is sending the message that students should get through in four years and that additional time taken to obtain a degree is a significant financial burden on the student. Two, degree-seeking students should look at this as advisory, not punitive—they need to think about the target and their goal.

Professor von Dassow commented that the way the language is phrased now, it is punitive and sounds like it boxes a student in. She suggested editorial revisions in the "Reason for Policy" language that were later endorsed unanimously by the Committee, as follows:

Undergraduate degree-seeking students are admitted to the University to pursue an undergraduate degree. The University expects students to complete their degrees in a timely

manner, and declaring a major is a fundamental part of this progression. This policy exists to promote timely intervention by advisers that will guide students toward majors that suit their talents and interests. To make the best use of students' resources, as well as University resources, students are not allowed to continue registering for courses indefinitely without having a formal plan for completing a degree.

The Committee approved the policy changes unanimously and forwarded the revised policy to the Faculty Consultative Committee for action by the Faculty Senate.

3. Grades in Context

Professor Brothen asked Committee members to consider again the issue that Professor Cramer, chair of the Faculty Consultative Committee, brought earlier in the year: Adding information to the transcript about a grade earned in a course. He reported that Professor Cramer has asked him when this Committee will take action on the proposal. Professor Brothen also noted two pieces of information that had been provided to the Committee. One is a statement from the Student Senate Consultative Committee:

To: Members of the Senate Committee on Educational Policy

From: Adam Matula, Chair, Student Senate Consultative Committee

Date: 2/15/12

Re: SSCC Discussion 12/08/11

On December 8th SSCC had the privilege of speaking with Dr. Cramer about his proposed Resolution on Transcripts. Many questions were asked on behalf of students and answered by Dr. Cramer. For information purposes, the remainder of this document outlines SSCC's discussion on the subject.

The primary concern students had regarding the resolution had to do with the potential that such a policy could change the spirit of the classroom from one of collaboration to one of competition. However, it was noted that grades in many classes are already scaled based on the class's performance and no significant loss in collaborative learning tendencies had been observed. Further, the very nature of a grade is to evaluate a student's performance, which is often most easily done in relation to other students. Overall, it was decided that the proposed policy would not significantly undermine classroom educational ethos.

Another concern students expressed was in regard to applications to professional and graduate programs. It was decided that this proposal would not undermine the efforts of those applying to such programs, rather, it would benefit strong students seeking admission to equally strong programs.

Finally, exclusions from the proposed policy were discussed. It was agreed upon that while the exemption of classrooms of under ten students was necessary, as a general policy, exemptions from the policy should it be implemented must necessarily be limited. If a significant number

of classes were exempted (besides the aforementioned classes under ten students in size), it would undermine the policy's intention while potentially provoking a host of negative student behaviors that it would be best to avoid.

Although no formal language in favor of the proposed resolution was ever drafted, the committee on balance received the proposal warmly and would support the proposal should SCEP move it forward.

The second was a message from an absent member of this Committee, Professor Root:

I have serious reservations about the value of the "grades in context" option on transcripts.

Argument One: Norm-referenced versus criterion-referenced grading

My first concern is that we're comparing apples to oranges if it is not clear which classes used norm-referenced grading and which used criterion-referenced grading. Norm-referenced grading (grading on a curve) assumes that every class has a normal distribution of students such that most are average students and a very few will excel or fail. This may be true in large courses early in the curriculum, but as students progress through their degree program and earn the opportunity to be in more and more difficult classes, they are undergoing a selection process such that there is no normal distribution in higher-level courses or courses that require specific instructor approval. We really cement this in programs with rigorous admissions requirements where, again, we are selecting against those at the end of the spectrum. To assume that a certain percentage should flunk is, in my mind, a manipulation of teaching that is a weeding-out tool to maintain class size (and eventually, number of individuals able to enter a profession) rather than a recognition of what was learned in the course.

Criterion-referenced grading uses contracts or detailed descriptions of competencies to guide learning objectives, course content, and assessment tools. It is not impossible for a whole class to exceed expectations and earn an "A" if they all happen to be highly motivated and capable. Of course an instructor could artificially set the bar low, but that amount of instructor variability is going to exist in any system. In professional programs, criterion-referenced grading is the norm and, in some professions, it is mandated by accreditation. This leads to my second argument –

Argument Two: Base rates

Daniel Kahneman is a Nobel Laureate who studies how people think. If you want to learn more than you ever wanted to know about how you and others come to decisions, I'm happy to lend you his book, Thinking, Fast and Slow. In that book, he describes how all people come to decisions by comparing the data in front of them with things they already know. This "base rate" is the standard we use to make decisions about this new data. Putting on the transcript a number or percentage of students in that class who got a given grade is presenting a causal base rate ("He got an A because they all get As") when what we really need is a statistical base rate ("He got an A because he demonstrated the necessary competencies as do X% of students in that course every time"). Without enough data to give the reader a chance at a statistical base rate, the default causal base rate makes the reader assume an incomplete story that is

probably not always in the best interest of the student, either because the reader does not have the data or will not take the time to find and interpret the data.

I think giving readers of the transcripts of our graduates some data is worse than giving them the limited data we do now. I cannot support adding this limited information to transcripts for undergraduate students and vigorously argue against its use for graduate and professional students, for which the problems are likely to be exaggerated.

Ms. Combs said that criterion-referenced grading is used in Europe and the Bologna process requires reporting of some sort of average/median grade on the transcript; surely they have struggled with and found a solution to this issue. Professor von Dassow said that the Bologna process was modeled on the U.S. higher-education system, so in emulating the Bologna process "we would be emulating ourselves (at second hand)." Ms. Combs responded that there is a committee at the University looking at how to implement the Bologna process here now.

Professor McCormick asked if there had been communication with Provost Hanson on the idea. Professor Brothen said there has been; she recently joined a meeting of the Faculty Consultative Committee for the first time and Professor Cramer brought it up. It was the practice at Indiana but is not any longer because of software issues, but they still use the information for internal purposes.

Dr. Falkner said she invited Ms. Bowlus and Gunter to the meeting to talk about the issues; Professor Cramer spoke with the advisers, after he met with this Committee, so she asked the two of them to communicate issues the advisers see.

Ms. Bowlus said that in her view, the proposal does not seem to be the fairest or most equitable way to proceed unless the colleges can agree on a standard grading scale, because at present there are large discrepancies across colleges. There is no good scale on a transcript to provide information to consumers (e.g., people in human resources departments), and it could disadvantage University of Minnesota students when applying for jobs because it will not be possible to educate all the possible users of transcripts. She agreed that there is merit to trying to better define grades; it might be possible for example, to put information on a website to which a student could direct potential employers who were interested, and graduate schools would have access to it as well. But she said she did not believe it a good idea to put statistical or other such information on the transcript. One could neutrally define what grades mean at the University, but if one puts percentages on the transcript, that assumes the consumer is educated enough to know what they mean, and they might interpret them in a way they want to rather than in a way that is accurate.

Professor von Dassow agreed that the University should not put its students at a disadvantage, and that data could be misinterpreted if employers received many transcripts where all the students receive an A and students put at a disadvantage, but the additional information would allow those who use transcripts to differentiate among students and allow different grading practices to continue. She said that she supports Professor Cramer's proposal because it offers a way for very good students to shine through on the transcript—which right now is not meeting its purpose.

Professor Nelson said that she supported the views expressed by Professor Root in her message to the Committee. She said grades are a blunt tool and are only a small component of what she does. She has thought about this over time and believes it might be useful to look at European

practices. Professor Tarone agreed with Professor Nelson but asked what the remedy is for the problem Professor von Dassow identified. Professor Nelson said that Professor von Dassow writes a letter for the student.

Ms. Gunter said that many CSE students could be disadvantaged by their GPA because there is the expectation in the College that it may be that strong students receive a B or a C, and the University should not roll out something that gives an advantage to stronger students and disadvantages others. They work with employers and tell them about grades, but the employers want to know more about programs.

Ms. Phillips said, apropos of criterion-referenced grading, that she has taught many courses in which if a student does certain things, he or she will receive an A. And they will be expected to keep doing those certain things until they learn it so that she is releasing competent students. Even reporting grades in norm-referenced grading only works if, in all norm-referenced grading, 15% receive an A (for example), but there is no agreement across colleges and departments. This proposal says there is a standard practice.

Professor Wambach said that the proposal compares people across fields, but hiring is done within fields and grading standards are likely consistent within fields. Professor McCormick disagreed and said that grading standards vary even within a given field from place to place and sometimes even from department to department. Professor Wambach commented that recruiters, for example, then learn what grades from different schools mean.

Ms. Combs reported that she had talked with graduate and undergraduate students about the proposal. The ones who favored it did so only if all schools were to do so. If it is standard practice in the country, that would be fine.

Professor McCormick commented that the Committee is worried about making the information public because it is unclear how it would be interpreted and the Committee itself does not know what that data would look like. The Committee should have discussions and should look at what is going on at the University. (It was noted that grading data are already available.) Professor Tarone said she would be more interested in talking about grading practices within disciplines. Dr. Falkner suggested talking with representatives from the Carlson School, which changed its grading practices a few years ago and has set certain percentages for each grade. The Committee could learn how the faculty came to that decision, how students view it, and how the career-services staff look at it. So they enshrined norm-referenced grading, Professor Brothen observed. (Professor Ng reported data from the Carlson School: At the 1XXX level, 28% of grades are A/A-, 40-50% are B, and 0.2% are F.)

Professor McCormick repeated his point that the Committee needs to know more about what is going on.

Professor von Dassow said that it did not seem to her that Professor Cramer's proposal presupposes any particular grading model, and in fact it presumes there is not a model, and it provides contextual information about grades across departments. But one cannot tell if the instructor was using criterion-referenced or norm-referenced grading, Ms. Combs commented, and that is not made clear with Professor Cramer's proposal.

Professor McCormick suggested that a subcommittee be appointed to look at the grading data. Professor Schiff said it would be interesting to ask the colleges to have a discussion because people are "all over the place" even within colleges. She said she was not sure what would be obtained by mining the data.

Professor Breuch commented that there would be so much room for misinterpretation if percentages were attached to grades.

Professor Wambach said she can recall large classes that used norm-referenced grading that were trying to sort out the top students. That approach does not say much about the middle of the distribution. If one wants to sort out the top end students, one can, but what about those in the middle? This question gets to assessment theory and how to design a test to sort out A and B students and provide feedback to students in the middle of the distribution. The percentage alone does not provide information about the assessment design used in the course. This is a big topic, she concluded.

Professor McCormick said that is why he is in favor of learning and thinking before coming up with a plan. For one reason, because of academic freedom—because this is up to the instructor, but it would be helpful to know what instructors are doing (norm-referenced, criterion-referenced, etc.). The Committee could learn a lot and assess how grading is being done.

Professor Brothen reported that Professor Cramer was also concerned about grade inflation but that Provost Hanson said that the system at Indiana did not solve that problem.

Professor von Dassow suggested that the topic be brought back to the next meeting so the Committee could decide how it wished to act on Professor McCormick's suggestions. Professor Brothen agreed and asked for volunteers for serving on a subcommittee, if one is to be appointed. He adjourned the meeting at 4:05.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota