

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, November 15, 1995
1:00 - 3:00
Room 626 Campus Club

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Anita Cholewa, Paul Cleary, Elayne Donahue, Megan Gunnar, Darwin Hendel, Jeffrey Larsen, Judith Martin, Glenn Merkel, Ryan Nilsen, Helen Phin, Mark Schuller

Regrets: Avram Bar-Cohen, Robert Johnson, Thomas Johnson, William Van Essendelft

Absent: Gayle Graham Yates

Guests: Provost W. Phillips Shively; Associate Dean Robert Leik; Jane Whiteside, Halil Dundar, Cynthia Macaluso, Rob Toutkousian (Academic Affairs; Office of Planning and Analysis)

[In these minutes: Critical measures; grading policy, policy on degrees with distinction/with honors, and new data on grade inflation; preparation standards]

1. Critical Measures

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Dr. Whiteside to discuss the last set of critical measures to be adopted. Dr. Whiteside introduced other individuals involved in the development of the measures and then turned the attention of Committee members to the discussion outline.

She noted that SCEP is identified as the "lead committee" for reviewing the measure dealing with the reputation of undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. She explained the process they are using to review the proposed measures and said they would hear from a large number of groups. A revised discussion draft will be prepared for feedback, and then the measures will be taken to the Board of Regents.

The measure for which SCEP is the lead reviewing committee, program reputation, is the "judgment of relative quality as perceived by others." Dr. Whiteside reviewed the various external measures that exist--the NRC rankings, the U.S. News and World Report (USNWR) ratings, the MONEY magazine ratings--as well as the internal and professional association rankings. It is clear that the NRC rankings have credibility within the academic community while the others do not.

There are a number of ways to think about reputation, she said. One could try to measure all undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs, which would be difficult. Or one could be more selective and rank programs in categories, acknowledging that the rankings are not complete.

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

This process is at the very beginning of asking how the University should value itself as it considers reputation, Dr. Whiteside stressed, and she invited Committee guidance.

Several points were made.

- In any set of rankings, it is implicit that an institution will not be good in all categories. Is there a conflict between quality and "best buy"? Are there rankings that go together?

Quality and cost will be different, and it is hard to look at both at the same time. The intent is to look primarily at measures of quality and of the educational experience. There is no evident way to combine measures. The primary source of ratings for undergraduate institutions is USNWR; the professional schools can use both USNWR and professional association ratings. And one can look at whether programs are accredited, although all programs at Minnesota that COULD be accredited ARE accredited. They are committed to having the measure reflect all parts of the institution.

- Is this a case of trying to look good or will the critical measures show deficiencies that can be remedied?

One principle used in the development of the critical measures was that there should be room for change. They are a balance; on some, the University will do well if it can stay where it is; on others, there is room for improvement. The measures do NOT only show where things are going well (e.g., the five-year graduation rate). The measures may also represent areas where the University is good but could be better. They also want to be sure the measures focus on the right things, so that they do not take the University in directions it does not want to go.

- Can there be different weights given to the measures? For example, the University has a wonderful Child Development department, but for an undergraduate looking for a good liberal education, that may not be as important as having a good English department. If one is a student who wants a Ph.D., however, different information would be needed. There will be different questions from different people; it may not be useful or wise to boil everything down to one or two outcome measures.

This is connected with the discussion about the "footprint" of each campus; who one is affects the weighting one puts on different measures. Whatever they come forward with must be true to the institution and reflect all three levels of education--which will be difficult.

There should be a "landscape"; where one stands means one will see different areas or have different perspectives. Movement of the whole landscape will be dependent on institutional funding priorities. One must be careful, in considering these INSTITUTIONAL measures, not to assume that the University will move on all of them. It is not realistic to make progress on all of them; priorities must be identified. The Committee should give thought to the broad categories set out in the report from Dr. Brenner on the NRC rankings; do they make sense?

- Where do the libraries and similar activities fit in? They may be included in the program rankings.

They are not in the NRC rankings, although there are separate rankings of libraries. They are an important piece, in the broader picture.

It is important to realize which variables correlate highly with specific rankings. In the case of the USNWR ratings, selectivity is very important--which one can say that is related to quality and reputation.

- It will be important to divide the rankings in ways other than by groupings of fields, such as by the campuses. The chancellors have raised this point; what they do is not the same as the Twin Cities with respect to reputation.

In the case of graduate and professional programs, it is program reputation that brings students to the University. With undergraduates, it is the overall perceived quality of the undergraduate experience, one piece of which is program quality. The University knows, from surveys of Twin Cities students, that they come because of location, cost, and the quality and diversity of programs. Generally the University has high quality programs, and a wide range that gives students more choices.

Professor Koch thanked Dr. Whiteside and Dr. Hendel for leading the discussion and said the Committee would discuss the measures with the other committees charged with a "supporting review" role. Dr. Whiteside said they would welcome individual comments from Committee members; Dr. Hendel agreed and said they wish every opportunity to receive comments. He expressed appreciation to SCEP for facilitating discussion of the reputation critical measure.

2. Policy on Grading and Degrees with Distinction/with Honors

Professor Koch first asked Dr. Engstrand to review the voluminous materials that were distributed to the Committee, including: a set of tables setting forth the grade point averages for graduates from 1987 to 1995 for the several campuses and larger colleges; a report on grade trends from Dr. Hendel to Senior Vice President Infante last year; excerpts from a report on collegiate grade averages from 1955-1974; responses received to the grading policy and semester standards proposals; commentary from faculty members on the distribution of graduates' GPAs, and possible amendments to the grading policy that might be considered by SCEP in light of the grading data made available to it.

Professor Koch pointed out that the intent of obtaining the grading data was to determine if there was a stable GPA that could be identified as the level of achievement necessary to obtain a degree with distinction. The data demonstrate that there is not now a "stable" GPA such that the number of students achieving it would constitute the upper 10% of a graduating class: such a GPA in 1987 would have been 3.7; in 1995 it would have been 3.8. These data (demonstrating a steady rise in the percentage of students graduating with higher GPAs and a corresponding decline in the number of students with less than a 3.0 GPA) have implications for the grading policy, she told the Committee, and invited comments on the materials.

Committee members had a number of responses to the information.

- The question of grades and inflation is a significant one; an implicit question is whether they are

intended to reflect RELATIVE performance or meet a predetermined criteria. One could say students who achieve a certain GPA will receive a degree with distinction, regardless of the number who achieve it, or one could say that degrees with distinction should be restricted to some percentage of students, with a GPA cut-off that could change over time. All faculty face this question in teaching: on what basis are grades to be awarded? Given that question, the patterns of these data may or may not be disturbing.

- The number of A's has increased while the number of C's has decreased, according to the data gathered by Dr. Hendel.
- The students who are not doing well are not being "helped" by grade inflation; it is those who are doing well who are receiving higher grades.
- It appears that IT may use a more standard set of criteria for grading than liberal arts, which is "more mushy," and IT GPAs have shifted up less than those in CLA. Is it possible University students are better than average? CLA students are not likely better than IT students.
- Faculty know colleagues who ONLY give A's, as a matter of policy; these data are due in part to the fact that some faculty do not adhere to University grading standards--and nothing is done about those faculty.
- With CLA in particular, with the switch from the three to four credit module in the past, and no increase in work, it is frightening to think what is happening with students.
- Degrees with distinction must be determined by college, and need to be a percentage. Otherwise students in colleges that have lower GPAs will be discriminated against.
- When this is discussed by the Senate, it must be made clear that there are a lot of violations of Senate grading policy occurring; there should be a clear message delivered to faculty who turn in grade sheets for undergraduate courses that have only A's and B's.
- The Senate should be informed of the grade inflation data and that there appears to be widespread disregard of the grading policy--and that is the responsibility of faculty, not students. One question the Senate could consider is whether the plus/minus system would help get the faculty to be more responsible.
- One would not argue that students are getting better in their academic work, but there is no discussion of the possibility that students are doing a little better because they recognize the competition for jobs and graduate/professional school places, and that there are a lot of students in college seeking them. But how does this account for IT students doing less well than other students? How does it account for the decline in the number of graduates with less than a 3.0 GPA from 44% in 1987 to 30% in 1995?
- SCEP should look at the SAT cutoffs for admission to the University for a period covered by these graduates; if students are better, that should show up in the scores. One surmises, however, that SAT scores went down while grades went up. The new preparation standards cannot be

responsible, because they did not go into effect until 1991, so the first effects on graduation GPAs would not begin to show up until 1995 or later--and even in 1995, there would be only a minor effect, given the small percentage of people who graduate in four years. In addition, in contemplating the change in the grades awarded, if one hypothesizes that 1/4 of the population changes each year, the increase in performance by those incoming students must be extraordinary if it is to raise the average level of performance of ALL students.

- The admissions standards of the University are rising constantly, and if one included the performance of students who did not graduate, the numbers would not be so high. But that does not account for the 9-year increase in GPAs of GRADUATES.
- One can be concerned about the grades in IT, apparently giving a fairly fixed percentage of grades. One expert many years ago said that the only justification for a bell curve in grade distributions is that the test is invalid; one should be hesitant about fixed standards.
- If the University were to adopt fixed standards, it would reduce the competitiveness of Minnesota students in applying for graduate and professional schools.
- When everyone has a high GPA, it means graduate and professional schools must look at other factors, which makes the admissions process even less certain.
- One possibility might be to include class rank on the transcript; that used to appear on some transcripts, but institutions were pressured to take it off because it was too bold a comparative statement. One problem with that proposal is that graduate and professional schools need transcripts before a student has graduated, so computing class rank would not be possible. And how would the rank be calculated--by college, campus, provostal area? There would also be difficulties in using high school class rank.

With respect to the proposed policy on degrees with distinction and degrees with honors, it was moved, seconded, and voted (with two abstentions) that degrees with distinction should be awarded to those who were in the top 10% of their class, by college.

The vote on the amendment was preceded by discussion of whether those who graduated with honors but who also met the GPA criterion for a degree with distinction would be counted against the 10% who could receive the degree with distinction; the Committee concluded that they would be. Students should know, it was said, that if only 10% of the slots were available for a degree with distinction, but that some of them would be unavailable because students graduating with honors counted against them, that they should go into an honors program if they want to be certain of obtaining a notation of merit on their diplomas. It was also agreed that if a student qualified for both a degree with distinction and a degree with honors, the student could choose which to receive (but no student could receive both).

The Committee then took up a possible amendment to the grading policy calling for an annual report identifying the classes that included more than X% A's and B's and D's and F's. Should such a report go to the department chairs and deans? To SCEP?

One Committee member said that a recommended curve should also be included in the grading

policy. This idea, and the proposal that reports of grade distributions be produced, provoked several comments.

- In small classes, there is enough variability between them that a curve would not make sense; in which case, the report could be for a longer period.
- The faculty should have to defend their grades to their chair.
- It is part of academic freedom that faculty should not have to defend their grades.
- One drawback to the proposal is that faculty might feel compelled to grade on the curve, because the policy requires it, even though it may not be appropriate in all classes.
- What would this mean for honors seminars? One would expect higher grades in those courses, it was said, and that is why they have the "H" notation on the transcript.
- Will chairs have or take the time to consider every grade report, when in some departments there are hundreds of such reports? Does the Committee think the idea valuable enough that it wishes it to happen?
- The bell curve is not appropriate if there is a truly good teacher who is doing the job well; grades SHOULD be higher if the students are learning. Is there any way to avoid making such an instructor feel bad about awarding higher grades?
- The idea is objectionable, even if the policing is only at the level of the department chair and not SCEP. There is wide variation in the backgrounds of faculty, even in small departments, and department head may have no experience in a particular subfield, so review would be inappropriate. One result might be that faculty would require all grades in their classes be S-N.
- One can also have a terrible teacher who gives all A's. This problem goes to the first amendment proposed: someone looking at a transcript can evaluate it and see the mean grade in a course. Instructors would be free to give more A's and B's if they wished, but the transcript entry might serve as a check.

It was moved, seconded, and unanimously voted to approve one of the proposed amendments to the grading policy, as follows:

Add a new section (IV) 2 (to the existing draft, and renumber subsequent sections), as follows:

2. In those instances when a student has enrolled for a course under the A-F grading system and has received a grade on the transcript, the transcript shall also show, for that course, (1) the number of students who were enrolled on the A-F system at the end of the grading period and (2) the mean grade awarded. (That is, the mean grades reported shall be based on those grades turned in at the end of the term in which the course was offered and would not take into account grade changes or Incompletes that may later be changed to letter grades.) The "mean grade" shall be

the sum of the honor points awarded divided by the number of students who received grades on the A-F scale, and shall not include students who received an I.

It was also agreed that the possibility of a cumulative weighted ratio of a student's grade to the mean grade awarded be explored with the Registrar's office; this would be similar to class rank, summed over all the classes for which a student enrolled and received a grade. If such a measure is possible, a further amendment to the grading policy could be considered before the policy is presented to the Senate.

It was agreed that the grade data, and possible amendments to the policy, would not be brought to the Senate meeting on November 16--there was insufficient time to prepare the information and amendments and an explanation of them.

3. Policy on Preparation Standards

Dr. Donahue then presented to the Committee information about the existing policies with respect to preparation standards, and noted that the original standards, adopted in 1986, have been incorporated into the joint preparation standards adopted in 1995 by the University and the State University System. What is lacking in the 1995 policy is an implementation date; should one be added?

Provost Shively said he would learn the status of the 1995 report; discussions about implementation have been held in abeyance while the two other public systems form the Minnesota State College and University system. He said he would get back to the Committee with information.

One Committee member inquired how students are informed of the standards. Within the state, it was said, the standards are widely known by the high schools; how students in other states learn is less certain. Students in their junior year, observed another Committee member, begin to look at schools and learn what they need to do, and they can also make up deficiencies in their first year at the University.

Professor Koch adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand