

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
April 25, 1991

Present: J. Kim Munholland (chair), Joanne DeMoss, Edward Foster, Karen Karni, Karen Seashore Louis, Marvin Mattson, Clark Starr, Susan Wick

Guests: Donald Bell (CSOM), Robert Hammel (Office of the Registrar), Gerald Rinehart (CSOM)

1. Report of the Chair

Professor Munholland reported that he has had additional conversations with the Assembly Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics, which has indicated it accepts the view of SCEP on the scheduling of events during Finals Week. There remain uncertainties, but it was agreed that when questions arise ACIA can seek exceptions to the policy. It is also understood that SCEP would be the body which would grant exceptions.

Professor Munholland then distributed two items for action by the Committee related to the Task Force on Liberal Education. One was a draft resolution for the Twin Cities Campus Assembly which, if approved, would adopt the Task Force report; the other was an amendment to the Assembly by-laws creating the Council on Liberal Education called for in the report, to be presented if the Assembly adopts the report. The Senate Consultative Committee has asked that SCEP review and act on these proposals before SCC takes them up.

There will be modifications in the report, Professor Munholland told the Committee, which will respond to the many comments the Task Force has received since the draft was circulated.

The issue of priorities, Professor Munholland noted, are not addressed in the resolution of adoption. The Task Force will take up priorities, once the report is adopted; it will try to order the recommendations so that they are not necessarily implemented on a "cheapest first" basis. While it cannot issue a mandate, it can advise the administration.

It was pointed out that the Council, as proposed in the by-law amendment, will be unusual; it will be the only Assembly Committee recognized and charged by the Assembly but appointed by the Provost (with the advice of the Faculty Steering Committee). There is, however, no requirement that Assembly committees all be appointed in the same manner. The reason for chartering it as soon as the report is adopted (if it is) is because the Council will be the instrument of implementation and it is seen desirable to begin as soon as possible to begin enacting the recommendations.

It was moved, seconded, and unanimously voted to approve the resolution of adoption.

With one modification to the charge to the Council (advising the Provost on questions of priority

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and means of implementation of the recommendations of the Task Force), **it was moved, seconded, and unanimously voted to approve the by-law amendment creating the Council on Liberal Education.**

2. Plus/Minus Grading in the Carlson School of Management

Professor Munholland next welcomed Assistant Dean Donald Bell and Mr. Gerald Rinehart to the Committee to discuss the proposal for the experimental adoption of a plus/minus grading system. The Committee, Professor Munholland reported, does have the authority to authorize experiments in grading; it was delegated that authority by vote of the Twin Cities Campus Assembly in 1977.

Messrs. Bell and Rinehart explained to the Committee the kinds of data which would be gathered and evaluated. There will be continued discussion with both the faculty and the students. They propose to report to the Committee three times during the five-year period of the experiment. The Committee discussed at some length various elements of the proposal with Mr. Rinehart.

Mr. Bell then told the Committee that he had been involved with a similar change at the University of Washington; after the change had been in place for three years, for the entire campus, the aggregate undergraduate GPA change had been 1/100th of a grade point. At the graduate level it was even less. Some had thought GPAs would go down substantially; others had thought it would go up. "Basically, nothing happened." Washington State, at about the same time, changed to the exact same policy being proposed by the Carlson School; the results after four years were the same as at Washington: The aggregate student GPA was within 1/100th of what it was before. What impact there is affects those at the very top of the scale: Some will get a 3.95 average rather than a 4.0--which, it can be argued, is of no import at that end of the continuum. It may also have some impact at the other end of the scale, but in the middle it seems to make no difference.

Asked whether that phenomenon of no change was used to argue for or against retaining the new system, Mr. Bell said it was evidence to retain the change. Both faculty and students agreed, he noted, that the extra refinement was meaningful on an individual basis. It allows better discrimination among students. This point is encapsulated in the difference between two hypothetical students, one of them 1 point away from an "A" and the other 1 point away from a "C" in a course; under the ABCDF system, they both receive the same grade.

It was suggested that grades from more than one year should be used as baseline data; there is variability between years, and several years' information may be important if there are trends that have started before the experiment is begun. Messrs. Bell and Rinehart concurred.

One Committee member observed that if the expectation is that there will be no overall change in the grade point averages, then the Carlson School will use other information to decide whether or not it will request a permanent change in its grading system. Messrs. Bell and Rinehart agreed that these data will serve as a control rather than as evidence for or against the change. The arguments, it was said, will rest on questions of justice; others agreed.

It was moved, seconded, and voted unanimously that the Committee "not impede the progress of science." (This was interpreted by all present as an affirmative motion approving the five-year experiment.)

It was agreed that this experiment, and SCEP's approval, would be reported to the Assembly for information.

3. Grade Inflation

Two sets of data were next presented to the Committee, one covering grades awarded from 1955 to 1974 (by undergraduate college) and the other covering the period 1970 - 1990 (also by undergraduate college). Trends in the data were highlighted for Committee members.

One clear trend, during the 20 years 1955-1974, was a significant increase in the proportion of "As" awarded and a significant decrease in the proportion of "Cs" and "Ds"; paralleling that trend was a significant decline in student enrollment in courses on the A-F scale. This, Dr. Foster observed, is what is known in the insurance industry as "adverse selection": Those who did not expect to get an A or B grade enrolled on the S/N grading system. This suggests, said another Committee member, that the inflation may not have been quite as dramatic as believed; it is in part a result of the additional grading options to students. The bottom half of the scale, in part, fell out.

The rate of non-completion (I, N, or F), however, also increased over the same period. Those data are harder to interpret, suggested another; one theoretical possibility is that the number of "Ns" increased, rather than "Is" or "Fs".

It is probable, said one Committee member, that some grade inflation did occur. Even more important is the matter of perception; the faculty has a clear perception that there has been grade inflation.

Another Committee member commented that at some colleges and universities the use of the pass-fail option has declined in recent years; the data for the University on that point are not available. Students are tending more on their GPAs. Mr. Hammel was asked if he thought such a decline had occurred at Minnesota; he said it probably varies with the course. Major field courses tend to be taught more on the A/N scale only. Choices by the faculty may have as much to do with the phenomenon as student sophistication. There may also have been minor or subtle changes in policy which could have affected use of the S/N alternative or in obtaining an Incomplete or a Withdrawal. Faculty attitudes may also have become "hard nosed" on permitting variations from the policies.

The Committee then examined the data for the 1970-1990 period, which consisted of undergraduate college "grade point averages," a total of the grades awarded each year. (There were no data for 1971, the year of the student strike and complete disarray in the grading system.) Over the twenty years there appeared to be very few significant trends or changes. A slight increase in some grades in IT was noted, but that was understood as a reflection of the increasing difficulty of gaining admission to IT. Looking at the 1970s and the 1980s separately, it also appears that lower division grades actually declined slightly. Morris grades have gone up, but Morris has become much more highly competitive in admissions; it would have been surprising if their grades had not increased somewhat.

There appear to be no huge irregularities, it was commented; another expressed surprise that there was so little difference between freshman and senior grades--especially at an institution where the attrition rate is so large. The numbers may also reflect a stabilization in the rate of use of the S/N option,

or even slightly declined.

Professor Munholland summarized the discussion by saying he "would report that the Senate Committee on Educational Policy took up the problem of grade inflation and reached the conclusion that there was no problem." The Committee concurred. Now, he inquired, where is the legislature when you want them?

4. Transfer Policies

Professor Munholland next turned the attention of the Committee to the memorandum from Dr. Foster concerning transfer credits and asked Dr. Foster to comment.

Dr. Foster reported on a proposal that had been developed at a meeting earlier in the day and solicited the reaction of the Committee. He first reported that he had received a letter from John Howe concerning the relationship between the transfer issue and the report of the Task Force on Liberal Education. There is not a significant difference in view between the two of them. Dr. Foster then told the Committee that he had recently learned of a bill in one legislative committee which specified a lot about transfers, including a uniform numbering system for Minnesota higher education (what are lower division courses, upper division, etc.) and a mandate that all the systems--including the private schools--agree on the general education components of an Associate of Arts degree and that, once agreement is reached, those general education requirements would satisfy baccalaureate degree requirements if the general education component is to be satisfied in the lower division. He said he did not know if the provisions were adopted. One Committee member expressed doubt that the private colleges would accept such a directive.

Dr. Foster then explained the work of an inter-system committee working on transfer agreements that had met earlier in the day. The proposal they developed, he said, is in line with the report of the Liberal Education Task Force; it contains the following elements. The systems will try to reach agreement on a set of competencies or goals--and competencies will not be things for which tests are administered but rather things like critical thinking and clear writing. Once agreement is reached, there will be the institution-by-institution task (similar to the responsibilities that would be assigned to the Council on Liberal Education recommended by the Task Force) of approving a curriculum which will achieve those competencies and goals.

Once the various curricula have been approved--with considerable inter-institutional "looking over each other's shoulder"--the institution where a student has completed the lower division general education requirements certifies that completion. Other schools will then not go back and examine what the students did but will accept the certification by the other institution.

This essentially says that every school is permitted to devise its own curriculum intended to achieve the competencies and goals and that every institution signs off on them. There is then no course-by-course audit of the lower division general education portion of the transcripts for students who transfer from one of the schools in the agreement.

Very few students, Dr. Foster said, wait to complete all of their lower division general education requirements before they transfer. This agreement would not affect a large percentage of students--but it

is the group of students for whom it is probably easiest to reach some kind of inter-system agreement.

If implemented, one Committee member observed, more students may complete their first two years at a community college. Dr. Foster agreed that such behavior would be encouraged. It would not, however, interfere with the Task Force recommendation that part (1/3) of the liberal education requirements be completed during the upper division; Dr. Foster agreed that students would still be obligated to fulfill that requirement, if adopted. Nor would it interfere with the University's ability to design a curriculum which says a student can pick up skills either by "something-across-the-curriculum" or through specific courses. For those students who had not completed their general education requirements before transferring, the University would have to go through the same process that it now does--the course-by-course review of the transcript.

Dr. Foster, in response to questions, told the Committee that the proposal does not call for approval of transfer of credits from unaccredited institutions (such as vocational/technical institutes/colleges), for transfers of credits in major fields, or for participation of the private colleges. Except for two technical colleges which provide their own general education, all of them have their general education requirements provided by a State University campus, a community college, or the Crookston campus of the University. Those general education credits would be counted as coming from an accredited institution. Nor does the proposal address the acceptance of credits outside the general education requirements; that, however, is not really a problem. The proposal also, of course, does not deal with transfer students who come from out of Minnesota, which is a very large group; for those students, there would continue to be a course-by-course review.

The State Universities, he also reported, are very interested in moving in the same direction in general education as that already proposed by the University. The faculties of the State University campuses, according to the system chief academic officer, are pushing in that direction. The result, Dr. Foster observed, is that the four year institutions--the University and the State Universities--would be "twisting the arms" of the community colleges to change the general education component of their Associate of Arts degree.

Presumably, Dr. Foster said, the next topic of discussion will be about those students who have completed only part of the lower division general education requirements--of which there is a much larger number. It is here that the friction occurs.

This proposal, Dr. Foster commented, does not do a great deal to address the public policy issue about which the legislature is concerned. What it does do, however, is serve as a basis for inter-system faculty discussion; it is the easiest problem to define and work on. It is also a powerful vehicle for reforming the general education programs of the other systems in the State; it permits the University to provide leadership.

One Committee member pointed out that one legislative concern is costs; the non-transferability of courses means that the State is funding more education than it apparently should. But there is a "cost" in transfer that cannot be avoided, it was argued; there will always be majors and prerequisites and so forth that will require additional work on the part of a student who transfers. It will be nearly impossible to solve the problem completely.

If the goal is acceptable and reasonable, Dr. Foster said, there are some complicated process questions about how it can be achieved. If there is to be inter-system agreement on the components of lower division general education, there will have to be discussion and a draft developed, presumably along the lines of the Liberal Education Task Force report, but by an inter-system group. That group would then have to return their campuses and sell it internally. The proposal includes a recommendation that there be an initial set of meetings this summer, with faculty participants to be paid, and which should develop something to be presented to the systems. The State University System has a logical group to participate--the academic affairs committee of their faculty union. For the University, the natural group would be SCEP except that it does not include representation from Duluth. It may be that a Duluth representative could be asked to join the group. Dr. Foster suggested it would be useful if SCEP could endorse the appointment of faculty members.

Dr. Foster observed that the University, in this regard, may not have very much to do, now that the Task Force on Liberal Education has produced a report. The University's job may be one of persuading the other systems of the wisdom of the Task Force recommendations.

Any additional requirements in general education that the University might wish to impose would have to be at the upper division level if an agreement on lower division can be reached, Dr. Foster affirmed in response to a question.

The issues raised will be of more import for the State University System, Dr. Foster said, because they have more transfers from the community college system than does the University. They also have a considerable number of intra-system transfer students as well as transfers between the State Universities and the University of Minnesota. The State University System now has an agreement with the Community College System, but they are not happy with it. They take the Associate of Arts from the community colleges as satisfying their general education requirements; they want to change the requirements. The existing community college general education requirements are the old-fashioned distribution requirements and do not address issues of diversity and writing across the curriculum. The State Universities, in this respect, will be natural allies of the University, he agreed.

The potential conflict with the recommendations of the Task Force on Liberal Education is if the other systems do not accept exactly what the Task Force has done and the Assembly votes on. Even if the other systems accepted the recommendations in their entirety, one Committee member inquired, can they do they have the resources to restructure their programs? It will be a tough job for the University, let alone other systems. It will, another observed, give the other systems a nudge, and the University in any event will implement the plan in stages.

Is the reaction of the other systems to the Task Force report known? Dr. Foster said that as far as he can tell they like it. He said he had no sense of the internal University view of the report, except for the views of administrators. There is some nervousness about what will happen to engineers and to transfer students, but apart from those practical issues there appears to be support for the recommendations.

Professor Munholland reported that the Task Force had taken up one concern expressed by another SCEP member: How will people who already have a baccalaureate degree be treated? The Task Force has taken the position that those individuals should not be subject to the requirements.

5. Twin Cities Calendar

It was agreed that a small group would be assembled to propose a calendar for the Twin Cities campus. [Following the meeting, a 1993-94 calendar was developed, approved by Professors Karni, Lehmberg, and Munholland, and will be presented to the Assembly Steering Committee for placement on the docket of the May 16 meeting of the Assembly.]

The Committee adjourned at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota