

Minutes\*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy  
Wednesday, November 14, 2012  
2:00 – 4:00  
238A Morrill Hall**

- Present: Alon McCormick (chair), Thomas Brothen, Lee-Ann Breuch, Megan Chock, Robert McMaster, Nic McPhee, Thomas Michaels, Kristen Nelson, Tim Olson, Jane Phillips, Leslie Schiff, Cathrine Wambach, Susan Wick, William Ziegler
- Absent: Barbara Brandt, Emily Combs, John Cwodzinski, Charlene Ellingson, Henning Schroeder, Elaine Tarone
- Guests: Tom Dohm (Office of Measurement Services), Assistant Vice Provost Ole Gram (Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs); Professor Paul Ruden (chair, ROTC Subcommittee)
- Other: Tina Falkner (Academic Support Resources); Assistant Vice Provost Suzanne Bardouche (Office of Undergraduate Education); John Kellogg (Office of Institutional Research)

[In these minutes: subcommittee reports; (2) initiatives in undergraduate education; (3) grading issues; (4) student-release questions; (5) annual report from ROTC subcommittee]

**1. Subcommittee Reports**

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:00 and asked each of the subcommittees to make a brief report.

-- Graduate program reviews: They are essentially looking for Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs) for graduate programs; the provost has made it clear that program reviews will include both graduate and undergraduate programs; there are undergraduate SLOs that can be individualized at the college level but there are no defined SLOs for graduate programs; the NRC did much work assessing graduate programs and presumably what the University does will reflect what the NRC did.

-- Advising Students on Financial Issues: The University is already doing a great deal but there are some additional things it can do; there is need to identify how faculty can help (e.g., on transferring courses when changing majors); Professors Brothen and Wambach and Mr. Ziegler agreed to join Ms. Chock on the subcommittee.

-- There has been nothing further done on flexible classroom/hybrid courses.

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\* 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.

## **2. Initiatives in Undergraduate Education**

Vice Provost McMaster reviewed briefly the initiatives occurring in undergraduate education, many of which the Committee has heard about previously: admission and orientation and Welcome Week; advising; financial aid; curriculum; messaging. In admissions, they are bringing students who can graduate in a timely manner, students who have stronger academic profiles, while also incorporating ethnic, economic, geographic, cultural, and social diversity with scholarship efforts. They have fine-tuned orientation and Welcome Week has been hugely successful; first-year retention data for the University are similar to those of its peers. In admissions they have a program that reaches out to sophomores in high school to build relationships with the University. The A+ advising tool has been a game changer; it provides real-time information as well as notes that can be shared among advisers. They are building up the services of CAPE (Center for Academic Planning and Exploration) while avoiding duplication with college advising and looking to expand the A+ system to the coordinate campuses. They have developed a set of financial aid principles to guide them in their work. They have worked with departments to reduce the number of credits required for graduation in majors where they exceeded 120. The messaging from the University and colleges has been strong; there is need for faculty to help with the message about graduating in four years. Vice Provost McMaster invited SCEP to consider ways to support the messaging, to encourage students to plan for timely graduation.

## **3. Grading Issues**

Professor McCormick reviewed the annual report to the Senate of grade by college and course level, the proposal from the Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) from November 2011 to modify the transcript to provide context for grades, the grading data available on myedu.com, and the grading data (grade distributions by course) provided publicly by one of the University's peer institutions. One question in considering the FCC request to make recommendations on the grade context proposal is whether this Committee wishes to recommend that the University follow the example of its peer and simply publish for students the data itself at some appropriate level of detail (to be worked out)

Committee members debated the merits of publishing some form of grade data for students and whether the Committee wishes to bring such a proposal to the Faculty Senate for discussion. One question is whether the grade-context proposal from FCC is to provide information that students and others need and would use (is there evidence they would?) or is this a way to address grade inflation by trying to influence behavior by faculty members? The Committee should be clear about which it is. The grading data are already available to students through myedu.com; if the idea is to influence faculty behavior, a different approach will be needed. One suggestion for grades is to produce an expected GPA for students who took certain courses and let people compare them with a particular student's GPA. One suggestion from the Committee on Faculty Affairs was to simply let myedu.com continue to provide the data.

Committee members discussed concerns about changing the transcript to provide context, the difference between criterion-referenced (competency-based) grading and norm-referenced (on the curve) grading (in the former, students may be required to master the materials and so will all receive an A), and the role that grades play in decisions about post-graduate admissions and hiring. Committee members expressed opposition to changing the transcript because of cost and difficulty (with PeopleSoft), lack of clarity about who the consumer of information is and whether it would

disadvantage UMN students (when almost no other universities do this), and because it would not change faculty behavior (if that is a goal). The debate is about norm-referenced grading and competition ("Are you a better student?"); the University definition of an A ("represents achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements") does not take into account criterion-referenced grading.

The Committee voted unanimously to endorse the general idea proposed by the Faculty Consultative Committee to provide contextual information about grades, but not to endorse the specific idea of changing the transcript. Committee members spoke about the need to distinguish between providing information to students and trying to influence faculty behavior. The Committee also agreed it was not ready to bring the issue to the December Faculty Senate meeting, wanting instead to explore various questions (out of time today).

Professor Wambach provided a set of draft questions the Committee might ask Vice Provost McMaster to send to associate deans with a request that they ask departments to discuss them and report back. The questions were prepared after discussion with the Academy of Distinguished Teachers and reviewed by Professors Schiff and Wick. Committee members suggested that departments need to be provided information about the issue, why there is a problem, and what is spurring the questions, and it should be noted that the Faculty Consultative Committee has asked to consider grades in context and the undercurrent is that there is a problem the University needs to address. The questions from the Committee could be a learning experience for the faculty rather than simply a directive from the administration. It also needs to be made clear that the problem is institution-wide, in case some colleges look at the numbers and conclude they don't have a problem.

#### **4. Student-Release Questions**

Professor McCormick welcomed Drs. Dohm and Gram to the meeting to provide an update on encouraging faculty members to release the data from the student-release questions on the student ratings form and on making the process easier.

Dr. Gram recalled that the Committee had pointed out earlier that it was difficult to find and approve the release of the data; he provided screen shots of the revisions to the web that are intended to make it easier to do so. Dr. Dohm reported that the release rate is now about 16%, an improvement over past rates, and they no longer receive as many calls complaining about the lack of availability of the information. Dr. Gram said that Vice Provost McMaster will also talk with the undergraduate associate deans about encouraging the faculty in their colleges to release the results. The percentage of faculty members who release the information varies by department and campus; some have cultures of not releasing it. Committee members discussed the differences, including the possibility that some departments may not want to release the information for TAs for lab courses.

Committee members also discussed how to get more faculty members to release the information; there was doubt expressed that the percentage would get much higher.

Ms. Phillips reported on discussions underway to reword the student-release questions so the results do not fall under the provisions of the Minnesota Data Practices Act. Their ad hoc subcommittee has the information provided to SCEP from the General Counsel presentation early in the semester and will meet with undergraduates to discuss changes.

Dr. Gram said that it may be time to revisit the student-rating-of-teaching questions that are used in personnel decisions. They have learned a lot from five years' use and it might be appropriate to adjust them for online use and to consider adding back a global question. Action on the student-release questions could be premature if there is to be a new, online form.

Any new electronic system would not entirely replace the paper system, Dr. Falkner reported, and an online system would require considerable discussion before it is implemented. One question for vendors of online systems is making them less labor intensive; right now the paper system is more efficient than electronic ones because of the high-speed scanners they can use, Dr. Dohm said. It will also be important to retain written comments and the ability of instructors to add questions of their own, Committee members suggested. The capability to administer early-semester evaluations, at the discretion of the instructor, is also being sought. Instructors will continue to be able to see the results of the surveys before deciding whether to release them.

#### **5. Annual Report from the ROTC Subcommittee**

Professor McCormick welcomed Professor Ruden to provide the annual report from the ROTC Subcommittee (held over from last spring).

Professor Ruden reported data on participation in the three ROTC programs (Army, Navy, Air Force) and changes in personnel assigned to duty at the University (there has been more rapid rotation recently). Things are going well in the three programs, students are graduating on time and receiving commissions, and they have impressive GPAs.

Professor Ruden reported on the membership of the subcommittee (four regular faculty, three students, and ex officio the three commanding officers and Vice Provost McMaster). The subcommittee reviews nominations by the military for individuals to serve as faculty in the ROTC programs and makes recommendations to Vice Provost McMaster; it also becomes involved in other issues as they arise. The three commanding officers serve as department heads for Army, Navy, and Air Force programs. Vice Provost McMaster serves as their dean.

Committee members discussed with Professor Ruden the commissioning rate for graduates of the ROTC program, the academic load of ROTC students (very high), comparison of the Minnesota program with others around the country (it ranks very highly), and faculty turnover in the program.

Professor McCormick thanked Professor Ruden for his report and adjourned the meeting at 4:00.

-- Gary Engstrand