

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, February 7, 1996
1:00 - 3:00
Room 626 Campus Club

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Anita Cholewa, Paul Cleary, Elayne Donahue, Darwin Hendel, Jeffrey Larsen, Judith Martin, Glenn Merkel, Mark Schuller, W. Phillips Shively

Regrets: Gayle Graham Yates, Megan Gunnar, Robert Johnson, Thomas Johnson, Ryan Nilsen, William Van Essendelft

Absent: Avram Bar-Cohen, Helen Phin

Guests: Vice Chancellor Samuel Schuman (Morris)

[In these minutes: Semester conversion standards and standards for students at the University during the transition; grading policy; Twin Cities Undergraduate Course and Curriculum committee; grading again.]

1. Semester Conversion Standards

Professor Koch called the meeting to order at 1:00 and welcomed Vice Chancellor Schuman, who is interested in the business SCEP conducts. She noted that the Morris campus is ably represented by two SCEP members.

DISCUSSION WITH VICE CHANCELLOR SCHUMAN FROM MORRIS Dr. Schuman said the main reason he joined the meeting is because after much electronic communication, he wanted to see real faces. He referred to a document that had been distributed earlier to the Committee, in which he expressed his thoughts on which semester conversion standards ought to be a matter of campus decision and which should be system-wide. He emphasized that the sooner the decisions about the standards are made, the better off everyone will be.

He then commented that he has learned, since coming to Morris, that it has a dual perspective in its relationship with the Twin Cities campus: they pound on the door of the Twin Cities, asking for recognition and attention--except when they do not want the attention!

Dr. Schuman described briefly the process being used on the Morris campus to superintend the conversion to semesters, noting they have a committee that parallels SCEP in its responsibilities, and that most campus decisions will go to the Campus Assembly. Both the committee and the assembly are predominantly faculty.

Provost Shively as well as members of the Committee complimented Dr. Schuman on the

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identification of issues for campus and system decision; one Committee member urged that it be presented to the Senate for information. Dr. Shively said that it could be changed as events moved along, but as a first cut at identifying a desirably locus of decision-making, it makes a lot of sense.

TRANSITION STANDARDS Professor Koch distributed a revised version of draft standards to apply to students at the University during the change from quarters to semesters. It is a broad statement, she said, that says students should be neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by the change, and in preparing it she drew on documents from other institutions that have made the change. What was most important, she said, was advisor training and active advising. The draft read as follows:

Policy Relating to Students Enrolled at the University of Minnesota during the Transition between the Quarter System and the Semester System

The Senate at the University of Minnesota confirms that each degree seeking student enrolled at the University prior to September, 1999, shall neither be disadvantaged nor advantaged due to the change from a quarter system to a semester system.

To insure that this will happen the Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP) requires that each (*CAMPUS) **college submit to SCEP a plan of how it will advise and assist students in transition. These plans shall include, but not be limited to the following:

- *Advisor training program
- *Proactive advising
- **Requirements for all majors and their semester and quarter equivalents and/or substitutions
- **Plans for disseminating to all students enrolled in the college of college-wide and programmatic materials related to the change to semester and the impact on current students and past students
- **Plans for assisting students whose programs cross collegiate or provostal units
- **The steps necessary for students to appeal unfavorable decisions related to programmatic changes due to the change from the quarter system to the semester system
- *Names, addresses and phone numbers of persons students can contact with specific questions and/or problems
- **Provide students with information regarding changes in policies or procedures that affect that college
- **Time lines for students to make changes in programs and the length of time quarter courses will be allowed for programs (THIS MAY BE AN ALL-UNIVERSITY POLICY, OR SCEP MAY NOT WANT TO DEAL WITH THIS AT ALL)

- **A listing of all quarter and semester CLE courses, (for undergraduate programs only) in the colleges and how the CLE requirements can be met with semester courses only (MAYBE THIS SHOULD BE A POLICY RELATED TO CLE)
- **A timeline of institutional deadlines and requirements for programs that require outside accreditation
- *Provide a sample program showing how students with 45 quarter credits, 90 quarter credits, 135 quarter credits can graduate in 3 years, 2 years and 1 year, respectively
- *Plans for the possibility that a large number of students may try to complete programs before the actual conversion to semesters (How will advising, registration and enrollments be handled if large numbers of students intend to take classes to graduate within four years to avoid being "caught" in transition?)

Collegiate plans are due to the Senate Committee on Educational Policy no later than 4:00 PM on November 30, 1997. (THIS DATE MAY NEED TO BE CHANGED.)

The list of items in the proposed standard, she said, are things that need to be addressed; it is intended to let the colleges know what they must think about and to let students know, as the University is recruiting, that the transition will not be a problem for them.

The advisor training and advising comes after all the rest of the things have happened, one Committee member said. It might be helpful to have a timeline so that all could see what will occur when; people would be reassured if they could see a schedule. Another Committee member pointed out that students entering this fall will be affected, so advising preparation needs to start now. That is true, it was conceded, but they must be told what the plan is for conversion to semesters. Professor Koch said she would prepare a year-to-year plan.

One Committee member said that in addition to the list, there should be a faculty-student committee within each discipline to work on degree requirements in the field, so that all would know what is coming. The decision should be made at the level of the department and discipline.

Committee members made a number of additional comments and observations about the proposed standard.

- When a department offers core courses that other fields rely on, the "remodeling" of those courses for the semester system should be completed earlier than others.
- Will students who began under the quarter system be held to the requirements of the system they began under? Yes, but there will need to be some flexibility.
- Most institutions that have made the change to semesters did not offer a regular summer session the summer before semesters went into effect. They had a special summer session that offered a lot of required courses (and a lot of required courses were also offered the spring quarter before) so that

students could fulfill requirements under the quarter system. They also allowed students to take PART of a course, where courses had been condensed and a student may have taken one part of the course under the arrangements that had prevailed with quarters.

- The disciplinary and degree changes can best be made in departments; these standards are only intended to let departments and colleges know what information must be available to students.
- Providing a sample program is a way to ensure that students who have done what they are supposed to, who are on the right track, will not be held back. It should be made clear that this refers to students who are making normal progress. The reality of this is that it will be difficult, by 1997, for a department to fill out a program for students unless it has figured out what its requirements will be.

The deadline is October, 1997, but materials have to be reviewed by the Twin Cities Course and Curriculum Committee beforehand, so the effective date is more like April, 1997.

- The most efficient way for SCEP to review the transition plans would be for departments to submit them to college and for SCEP to then review the college plans. Review of these plans will take place at a number of levels, but there are items SCEP will be interested in, and SCEP will likely want an overall description of what colleges and units plan to do. Elements of the plans may also be useful in identifying the steps that must follow.
- The specific guidelines on the transition will come from the Implementation Task Force, not SCEP.
- No one is specifically charged with developing these transition standards; the proposal today is a first draft; the Change to Semesters Committee has, however, identified it as an issue that must be dealt with, and it is appropriately something for SCEP to take up. There will be a committee on advising, but establishment of the standards is for this Committee.
- Transition standards for juniors and seniors might be different from those for freshmen and sophomores. What other institutions have done varies. Some converted all semester credits to quarter credits for students who began on the quarter system. Others did it the other way. Some set a point at which student records would be on the semester system while others remained on quarter credits.

If all major requirements have a listing of semester equivalents or substitutes, why should not all students be on the semester system, recognizing that faculty may be more flexible with seniors than with freshmen? The problem will be with students who have filed their major/graduation plans and those who have not; that is where the critical distinctions will have to be made.

- Another complicating factor will be the calculation of grade point averages for students in transition so that students are not placed at an advantage or disadvantage. A straight conversion of quarter to semester credits will not work; there will be a problem with the ratios in calculating the GPA, and there should be a series of simulations run to evaluate the changes. It would be awkward if a student were to qualify for honors under one system and not under the other, for example. Professor Koch said she will be involved in a meeting in the near future about this issue. At other

schools, when the change was made, any rounding of the grade point average was made in the student's favor.

- Some students will finish their degrees more quickly in order to avoid the problems of changing to semesters; SCEP should think about principles that would use the transition as an opportunity to encourage students who are not proceeding as quickly as they should to finish their degrees. This will happen naturally, but students could be encouraged even more. This will put a strain on registration and the structuring of courses, and perhaps even more so at the University than at other institutions.

To the extent the University encourages students to finish early, to avoid "being caught" in the transition, is that not sending a message that "being caught" is bad, and discourage students from enrolling at the University? The Committee should talk with people who transfer from semester systems to the University. This is something the University will have to think about.

- How would a change from a grading system without pluses and minuses to one that had them affect students?
- The reductions in courses in departments should be changed year by year, with a gradual scaling back.

This would be a problem for majors that are accredited; they cannot change like this.

Professor Koch then inquired of the Committee if it wished to adopt a policy or statement with respect to a reduction in the number of courses; she distributed a handout with calculations by a member of the Change to Semesters Committee outlining issues related to credits and courses in the change. She said this would be on the agenda of the meeting next week.

2. Grading

Professor Koch next reported on meetings and conversations she has had with students about the grading policy. It appears that students support a uniform grading policy but not the pluses and minuses. Part of the concerns of students may arise from the fact that they had an earlier version of the policy, where use of pluses and minuses would have been option; that is no longer the case, in the version of the policy now being proposed.

One argument made by students, Professor Koch reported, is that there is not as much latitude as exists without pluses and minuses. In reality, when students is under pressure, and has a B in a course but will not be able to get an A, they will let that course slide and put their efforts into a course where their work will get them an A. Students do, no doubt, make choices about where to put their efforts--between courses and between life and their education.

Another argument students make is that there will be too much variation. But that ALWAYS exists; a B+ in one course might be an A- in another. No matter the grading system, there will be variations, and that happens now.

What impact will there be on students already at the University--will they be able to convert earlier grades to the plus/minus system? The Committee believed that would be a nightmare and could not be done. It would also not be possible for students who are at the University under the system with no pluses and minuses to finish their work under that same system, even if that work came after the adoption of pluses and minuses. The administrative burden on everyone would be too great.

What happens to an I during the transition; is the grade finally awarded under the old system, without pluses and minuses, or under the new? The view appeared to be that whenever the student completes the course, the faculty member awards a grade on the basis of the grading system in place when the student took the course.

One Committee member said that faculty in one college support a uniform grading system but not the plus/minus system.

The Morris Campus Student Assembly has done a survey of students on plus/minus grades; the results will be reported to SCEP.

One Committee member reported that students are of a divided view on the pluses and minuses, but were concerned that the policy would not be uniform from one course to another. Professor Koch pointed out that technically ALL courses would be on the plus/minus system, but no one could FORCE a faculty member to use pluses and minuses. If students in a course are given only whole letter grades, is the faculty member in violation of the policy or is that where the grades fell? The proposed policy, however, establishes only ONE grading system. Faculty cannot NOW be forced to use any particular grade. If one could force faculty to give Cs, observed one Committee member, there would be no grade inflation.

Asked about multiple offerings of a required course in one unit, and the possible lack of consistency in grading between them, several Committee members pointed out such inconsistency exists NOW, and the plus/minus grading system will not make it more or less inconsistent. Were he the chair of the department, one Committee member observed, he would insist that the course be taught and graded the same way for all students.

A greater concern than multiple offerings of a single course is how faculty read papers, said one Committee member. There are great disparities in reading papers no matter what grading system is used, because there is so much subjectivity. Some faculty believe no one should get an A; others believe most should.

It is clearly the responsibility of the faculty to assign grades, observed one Committee member, and there are extensive reports on how they are awarded. It is the responsibility of deans, department heads, and the provosts to look at the reports and raise questions about outliers or about discrepancies that are disruptive. But there is no way to control the grading a faculty member uses.

What does one say to a faculty member who, being told he or she must be on the plus/minus system, says he or she cannot discriminate to that level and that all students will receive whole letter grades? Some faculty might tend to award almost ALL plus and minus grades; others might award them rarely. Is that unfair? Everything evens out.

There is also concern about the policy passing if students are strongly opposed to it. One Committee member said that the more students are aware of the proposal, the more they believe the policy should not change. Another Committee member reached a different conclusion, reporting that students are divided about 50/50.

Another Committee member pointed out that the difference between giving an A and a D is three full grade points, while the difference between a plus and a minus grade is .33. When there can be wide fluctuation in letter grades awarded, it is not worth worrying about variations in pluses and minuses.

In terms of repeating a course, the policy now provides that only the first grade, if a C or S or better, will count in the grade point average. CLA students report, Professor Koch said, that CLA now averages the grades. Some believe that a student who receives a C or S or better in a course would not be permitted to take the course again; that is not true. Any student can retake any course, assuming other policies permit it; this grading policy does not prohibit anyone from re-taking a course.

The unanimous opinion of students is that they do not want the first grade they receive in the course, said one Committee member; they want the grade they received the last time they enrolled in the course.

One issue that will be a sticking point in the policy for the Morris faculty, Dr. Schuman reported, is the F grade. He said he is in the position of representing the views of the Morris faculty but that he does not agree with them; he said he personally believes the F should be part of the grading system. There was a consensus decision, however, that students should not fail a course. The majority of Morris faculty support the use of the N rather than the F.

Professor Koch then reported that she has been told that in CLA, one can use the "get out of jail free" option to withdraw from all but one course in a term, so could be used to withdraw from three or four courses. She noted that any student at any time can petition for withdrawal because of hardship; the question is whether or not students realize that. Some know the ropes, others do not. The advice she has received, from one of the units that now uses the "get out of jail free" card, is that the policy should not include it.

One possibility, it was suggested, is to let the Senate vote separately on that issue. SCEP does not have strong feelings about it, and the Senate could decide.

At present, it appears that the policy on the W varies by college, and the use of the option is determined by the student's college, not the course. That means five different students in a class could obtain five different Ws. Nor, she reported, is there any consistency in the policy on the S grade.

The "get out of jail free" option contributes to grade inflation, said one Committee member, because it permits students to avoid a disaster. One has to be concerned that no one watches the use of this option. Another Committee member expressed a different view, maintaining that students can learn from the experience of making a mistake, but that they should not be permitted the option more than once. One can be a generally good student but make a mistake; they should not be penalized for a one-time mistake with an F. Another Committee member concurred with this view.

Do surrounding institutions permit this kind of withdrawal, asked one Committee member? The Committee had no information. If only two or three colleges permit this option, it was said, eliminating it might be one way to slightly tighten up standards. One would like to believe that students can learn from a mistake, but the evidence of transcripts is that they drop courses late when they are working 40 hours per week.

One Committee member said he could support the proposal if there was assurance that it could only be used once. It was said the Committee should speak with Mr. Lewis, the Registrar, to learn if the computer systems could be programmed to reject any second attempt at a late withdrawal without college permission. Unless it can be tracked in this way, said one Committee member, the proposal would be a disaster.

In terms of the provision on repeating a course, said one Committee member, the grade point average should be based on what the student knows. If a student earns a C and then an A, the GPA would not show that the student had learned the material. All of the grades earned in a course would be on the transcript, it was pointed out.

One Committee member said a persuasive argument against the last grade counting is that students who have money could buy a higher GPA by repeat enrollments in a course to obtain better grades; those who are struggling financially could not. Students who take a lot of courses, added another, delay their graduation.

Those who review transcripts look at the overall GPA, but they also look at patterns by term. Others who are considering applicants to a graduate program will be more concerned about particular grades as much as the GPA. If a better grade is on the transcript, it is not important that it be included in the GPA.

What a student gets out taking a course a second time, it was said, is knowledge; that would be reflected on the transcript, said another, but not in the GPA. Giving a student two opportunities, and giving him or her the higher grade, does not respond to the concern about differences in student income.

3. Twin Cities Curriculum Committee

Professor Koch distributed copies of a revised proposal for a Twin Cities campus course and curriculum committee. The membership would still include six deans, but rather than two from each provostal area, there would be three from Arts, Sciences, and Engineering, two from Professional Studies, and one from the Academic Health Center. It would also include three students and eight faculty, the latter of whom would be appointed by SCEP. The chair will be a tenured faculty member, to be appointed by the President (in his untitled capacity as chancellor of the Twin Cities campus). For 1996-97, the committee members would have a summer stipend, and the chair would be a funded half-time position through September 1, 2000.

The Committee discussed the proposal briefly, and Professor Koch agreed to make a few additional revisions to the proposal. It was reported that both the President and the Consultative Committee are interested in the proposal.

4. Grading

Committee members returned briefly to the topic of grading. One inquired if the Committee had ever discussed grading on the curve versus criterion-reference grading; one faculty member in a unit will not give an A unless the student achieves a 97% on tests. The Committee has not discussed this issue, and it is unlikely it would ever come to a consensus, said one Committee member; this is an issue of academic freedom. A different concern, said another Committee member, is the class where the highest grade is 49%, so students who achieve 45-49% receive an A.

This does get to an issue the Committee HAS talked about in the past, recalled one Committee member: that people are NOT following existing policy in terms of awarding grades. A C is supposed to reflect completion of course requirements, but there is wide disregard for that standard.

Existing practice makes all faculty independent entrepreneurs, said one Committee member, which creates problems for students. That is why the N versus F is important, and why the C rather than the C-minus for an S is important.

It was recalled, on the latter point, that one student member of the Senate Consultative Committee had argued that if a C- is acceptable for credit on the A-F system, why is it not acceptable on the S-N system?

Will this policy, however amended and revised, be taken less seriously than before? To the contrary, argued one Committee member; colleges have assumed (erroneously) that they could act differently from Senate policy, and this is intended to correct that assumption. Right now everything seems haphazard.

Professor Koch then adjourned the meeting at 2:45.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota