

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, February 6, 2013
2:00 – 4:00
238A Morrill Hall**

- Present: Alon McCormick (chair), Karla Hemesath (for Barbara Brandt), Thomas Brothen, Lee-Ann Breuch, Megan Chock, Janine Grebin, Robert McMaster, Nic McPhee, Thomas Michaels, Kristen Nelson, Leslie Schiff, Elaine Tarone, Eva von Dassow, Susan Wick
- Absent: John Cwodzinski, Charlene Ellingson, Henning Schroeder, William Ziegler
- Guests: Ron Huesman and Peter Radcliffe (Office of Planning and Analysis); Tom Dohm (Office of Measurement Services); Susan VanVoorhis (Academic Support Resources)
- Other: Suzanne Bardouche (Office of Undergraduate Education)

[In these minutes: (1) St. Paul campus student opinions; (2) report of the chair; (3) policy revisions; (4) memo on grading; (5) subcommittee reports]

1. St. Paul Campus Student Opinions

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:00 and welcomed Drs. Huesman and Radcliffe to discuss St. Paul campus student opinions. He recalled that the Faculty Consultative Committee, in a broader discussion of St. Paul campus issues, had asked this Committee to consider student needs and views on the campus. He asked Drs. Huesman and Radcliffe to join the meeting to describe the kinds of information they already have on hand.

The question is, what issues does the Committee wish to address, Dr. Radcliffe said. They can track enrollment patterns and they have survey data on some topics. They also have to define a "St. Paul campus" student—e.g., setting foot on the campus versus spending a lot of time there—but most campus surveys are global and it could be difficult to separate St. Paul student responses, however those students might be defined. They have much more data on graduate students who complete the Ph.D. because the completion rate on surveys for them is very high—but those are also all the successful students. They also have the ability to design and administer a survey but would prefer not to be asked to do so in the next few months. If the Committee, for example, wishes to do a short survey on amenities on the St. Paul campus, they could do so. (Or, more appropriately, the Office of Measurement Services could do so.)

Professor McCormick asked if there is any subset of the data that would be related to educational policy, the focus of this Committee. They do have data on classroom experience, access to faculty, and so on, Dr. Huesman said. Committee members discussed with Drs. Huesman and Radcliffe the various kinds of data that exist.

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The Committee agreed it would discuss the issue further. Dr. Radcliffe said that if the Committee informs them what it wishes to zero in on, they will help gather information. Professor McCormick thanked Drs. Huesman and Radcliffe for joining the meeting.

2. Report of the Chair

Professor McCormick reported that he brought the memo to the Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) that responded to FCC's proposal for a change in the transcript to provide context for grades. There was some disagreement but FCC voted to accept this Committee's recommendations. FCC was interested in two specific questions: Whether there are more institutions considering providing contextual information and would this Committee provide information about grade inflation, perhaps updating the 1999 data.

Professor McCormick also reported that FCC said it would like this committee to do more on the issue of providing context. What it could do is categorize and compile the options and provide them to FCC—or it could do that plus get consultation from multiple constituents on them, digest the information (including information beyond the scope of the charge of SCEP), and come to one coherent recommendation for FCC to judge.

Ms. VanVoorhis said that one can drill down into grade distributions in various ways. She looked at what other public institutions do in the way of displaying grades; they provide different displays, and some are accessible by the public. None of them though provided a synopsis of grades over a period of years.

Committee members deliberated over what approach to take to gathering and evaluating information and preparing it for FCC.

Professor von Dassow returned, for a bit, to the FCC transcript proposal (discussed at the last meeting) and said that she thought the proposal from FCC was delightfully simple and she did not concur with a number of this Committee's objections. FCC sought to give meaning to grades, which is understandable. The directive to departments to discuss grades is quite vague, and she would not be satisfied with it were she a member of FCC because it kicks the can to a different level, the college or department, which is likely to annoy people and to go nowhere. She said she was not surprised that FCC asked the Committee to do more. It may be that PeopleSoft makes the original FCC proposal impossible, but the Committee can look at what was sought, what the goal was.

Committee members explored related matters for a time, including whether a U of Minnesota student would be disadvantaged by the provision of contextual information, whether students would wish to take an S/N criterion-referenced course when an S would require that the student do all the work in the course, whether moving criterion-referenced-graded courses to S/N would conflict with department regulations about major courses and with requirements for honors courses.

The Committee agreed to prepare a document summarizing the various options it had discovered for providing contextual information, along with some of the rationale (pros/cons) for each. For scheduling reasons, the Committee needed to interrupt this discussion to turn to the next agenda item, but these issues are taken up again at agenda item 4.

3. Policy Revisions

Ms. Bardouche and Dr. Falkner presented two policies with proposed changes. One is Teaching and Learning – Student Responsibilities, which incorporates two other existing (small) policies, one on appropriate use of class notes and one on the use of electronic devices in the classroom. Ms. Bardouche explained that educational policies are part of the regular comprehensive policy review process (to look at whether policies are effective, still needed, etc.); the changes have been consulted widely and are now being brought to the Committee for action. Dr. Falkner added that part of the review is to determine if there is unneeded language in the policies; in the case of the two smaller policies, they concluded there was and removed it.

Committee members suggested that the term "electronic devices" is vague in the proposed language:

Use of personal electronic devices in the classroom. Instructors determine if personal electronic devices are allowed in the classroom. Students may be directed to turn off personal electronic devices if the devices are not being used for class purposes. Students are not permitted to record any part of a class/lab/other session unless explicitly granted permission by the instructor. If the student does not comply, the student may be asked to leave the classroom.

It could include pacemakers, observed Professor McPhee, and it may be meaningless down the road, akin in the future to instructors saying whether or not students can have their clothes on. Professor von Dassow suggested adding a parenthetical phrase giving examples, "such as laptops or cell phones." The point, Dr. Falkner noted, is to make it the instructor's purview what devices may be used in the classroom. The Committee recognized that the policy can be updated again as needed, as technology develops; it will have to be revisited on a 3-year timetable in any event.

There are other behaviors that are also inappropriate, Professor Michaels observed, such as knitting, reading the newspaper, or sleeping. Dr. Falkner observed that the Student Conduct Code covers disruptive behavior and gives the instructor the right to tell students to stop doing it.

With the addition of examples of electronic devices, the Committee approved the changes unanimously.

The second policy change, about credit and grade-point requirements for a degree, clarifies the University's system standard and provides that a student may not earn two degrees in the same major (e.g., a BA and BS in History) from any campus of the University but may earn two degrees, such as a BA and a BS, in two different fields.

In response to a query from Professor Michaels, Ms. VanVoorhis agreed that there is no language in the policy about what a BA or BS is but noted that the AAU has just completed a survey on the topic.

The Committee approved the changes unanimously.

4. Memo on Grading

The Committee turned next to the draft memo to Vice Provost McMaster about grading that had been prepared by Professors Schiff, Wambach, and Wick. Professor Schiff reported that since the discussion at the last meeting, she and Professors Wambach and Wick had made some wording changes.

Committee members discussed the routing of the memo (directly to the Vice Provost or through the Faculty Consultative Committee, and concluded the former was appropriate), the inclusion of discussions of grading as a component of program review, whether the proposals in the memorandum will require more work from faculty members and others compared to the original proposal from FCC, the need to address both grade inflation/compression and faculty behavior (the memo addresses only the latter; the former will be taken up in the near future), the authority of the Committee (these are recommendations to the Vice Provost), the need at the department level both for philosophical discussions of grading but also rich data on trends and identification of outliers, the possible responses of faculty members (from "it's my responsibility and none of your business" to difficulties achieving consistency across large classes with TAs in charge of sections), the need for advisers to know how faculty members grade, the need for support/mentorship for adjunct and contract faculty members and TAs, the usefulness of discussions at the department level every few years (because grading practices no doubt change over time),

Dr. McMaster said that the memo was timely and that a review of grading could be a meaningful part of program reviews. He said he would take the memo, once he formally receives it, to the associate deans for undergraduate education and ask that they ask departments in their colleges to have the discussions recommended in the memo.

Committee members agreed with a suggestion from Professor von Dassow that the memo should include language about the link between evaluations of faculty and TAs and how they grade.

The Committee voted unanimously (by email after the meeting) to endorse the memo to Vice Provost McMaster. Following a few minor additional editorial changes by Professors McCormick and Schiff, the memo read as follows (between the * * *):

* * *

February, 2013

Dear Vice Provost McMaster:

In the summer of 2011, Professor Christopher Cramer, then chair of the FCC, asked SCEP to initiate a discussion of grading practices and to investigate the possibility of including information on student transcripts about the "context" of grades. SCEP spent over a year investigating and discussing several options that could provide additional information about grades in context and will provide FCC with an annotated list of these options soon. Meanwhile, SCEP members agree with Professor Cramer that more attention should be given to grading practices and to encouraging high standards for the A grade. We therefore recommend the following administrative practices for your consideration:

1. **Confirm the role of faculty oversight of courses, grading, and the curriculum:** The faculty is responsible for assigning grades in their courses. They are responsible for making sure that their grades accurately assess student performance and are based on the standards of their unit and discipline. The faculty of a unit has oversight of the curriculum. In order to perform this duty effectively, faculty should periodically review grade distributions for courses offered by the unit. This information is useful in curriculum planning and advising students.
2. **Clarify the role of collegiate and department administrators in the oversight of grading:** Information about grades in courses is available to faculty on the umreports website. Associate Deans for Undergraduate Education should retrieve reports on the grade distributions for units in their colleges at the end of each semester. The distributions should be reviewed with each Department Chair and/or Director of Undergraduate Studies. The Department Chairs and/or Directors of Undergraduate Studies should retrieve the grade distributions for all sections of courses in their programs at the end of each semester. Department level administrators should discuss with faculty courses in which grades deviate significantly from either grades in similar courses or a statistically normal distribution, and courses in which grades differ greatly among sections.
3. **Protect the quality of undergraduate education and the students' educational experience by encouraging new instructor training, mentoring, and dialogue:** While assigning grades is an instructor responsibility, new instructors may not have received training or mentoring on the processes of creating effective assignments and creating rubrics for grading them. New instructors may also not be aware of the typical competencies of students at various stages in their educations or may not appreciate why truly outstanding students deserve to be awarded a higher grade than students who simply met the course requirements. Directing new instructors to training before the term starts, providing them with mentoring during their first term, and engaging them in dialogue with experienced instructors will help instructors grade effectively.
4. **Require undergraduate programs to answer questions about the units' grading practices as part of departmental/unit reviews. These questions might include:**
 - a. How are student grades related to the achievement of learning outcomes? Does the undergraduate program offer any courses with an A-F grading system that could be better served by being offered S-N?
 - b. What standards are used to assign A grades? Units should refer to the Senate policy on permanent grades for academic work:
<http://www.policy.umn.edu/Policies/Education/Education/GRADINGTRANSCRIPTS.html>
 - c. To what extent are grades consistent across sections of courses? Do inconsistencies reflect different student competencies or different grading practices?
 - d. How often do faculty participate in training to design effective assignments and give students useful feedback? How is that training delivered?
 - e. How do faculty share expectations about the level of skill development they expect students to achieve at various stages of their development?
 - f. What support is available for students enrolled in courses that have high potential for DFW grades?
 - g. Given that students' perceptions of grading practices may have a considerable effect on their evaluation of courses and instructors, how do departments take this effect into

account in evaluating the performance of instructors? What measures do departments take in order to ensure that instructors, especially those on contingent or probationary appointments, feel free to assign grades according to the standards articulated in Senate policy?

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The Committee agreed that Professor McCormick, Ms. VanVoorhis, and Dr. Falkner would begin to compile options on providing context for grades. Following Committee review, the compilation and commentary will be forwarded to the Faculty Consultative Committee.

5. Subcommittee Reports

On program assessment issues, Professor Tarone promised that the subcommittee will have proposed student-learning outcomes soon.

On technology in the classroom, Professor Michaels said their focus was not clearly defined so they would set their own and it would look at not only e-learning but also active learning (including distractions in an active-learning classroom), focusing on educational policy implications, as well as how credit hours are set for e-learning.

On financial aid messaging, Ms. Chock reported that information is available to students and the main problem is not graduating but incurring debt; students need to understand that the goal is graduation with low or no debt; students need to be educated as they proceed in their undergraduate career.

On public engagement, Professor Nelson (the Committee's representative to the Public Engagement Council) said she has identified three initiatives with policy implications; the chair of the Council, Associate Vice President Furco, will be on an upcoming agenda to brief the Committee.

On the student-release questions, Prof. McCormick reminded that last Spring SCEP had made recommendations to address the need for increased faculty buy-in to releasing the information. A resolution from the Minnesota Student Association calling for making more information might be an impetus for the students to consider changing the wording of the questions so they are not covered by the Minnesota Data Practices Act, Professor Schiff suggested.

Professor McCormick thanked Committee members for the reports and adjourned the meeting at 3:55.

-- Gary Engstrand