

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, February 20, 2013
2:00 – 4:00
238A Morrill Hall

- Present: Alon McCormick (chair), Karla Hemesath (for Barbara Brandt), Thomas Brothen, Charlene Ellingson, Robert McMaster, Nic McPhee, Thomas Michaels, Kristen Nelson, Leslie Schiff, Elaine Tarone, Eva von Dassow, Susan Wick
- Absent: Lee-Ann Breuch, Megan Chock, Janine Grebin, Henning Schroeder, William Ziegler
- Guests: Tina Falkner (Academic Support Resources)
- Other: Suzanne Bardouche (Office of Undergraduate Education); Ole Gram (Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs)

[In these minutes: (1) grading discussions with associate deans; (2) student-ratings-of-teaching issues; (3) issues pending; (4) update on grade context posting options]

1. Grading Discussions with Associate Deans

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:00 and asked Vice Provost McMaster to provide a report on his discussions about grading with the associate deans for undergraduate education.

Dr. McMaster reported first that he had received a memo from the Student Senate about the results of the student-release questions: The Student Senate asked him to do everything he can to encourage faculty members to release the results. He told the Committee he would bring up the resolution with the associate deans next month. This discussion was continued later in the meeting.

He had a discussion with the associate deans about the grading memo that he had received from this Committee, Dr. McMaster reported. They are quite willing to go to their colleges and have conversations, although it is not clear with whom they will be held (department chairs, directors of undergraduate study, etc.), and they will take up the topic again in March. The associate deans view grading as the purview of the faculty. He said he was asked if, when he served as department chair, he would take to the faculty an unbalance distribution of grades. He would have, he said—he would raise the issue if the grades seemed out of line.

He also informed the associate deans that as a more robust program assessment process is developed, there will be questions about grade distributions—and the departments will be provided data.

* 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.

Professor Brothen said he thought this was the first time there had been pushback on grades as anything other than a faculty matter. Dr. McMaster said the associate deans agreed with that view. This started in a different way, Professor Brothen recalled, with claims that faculty were not grading correctly and something needed to be done. Now the Committee is hearing that it is a faculty matter. Professor Wick asked if the associate deans expect pushback. They are willing to have the conversation, Dr. McMaster said, and he was simply reiterating the concern they expressed. If a faculty member wants to give 80% A's, that's his or her prerogative. His predecessor, Vice Provost Swan, released lists of courses with high percentages of A's. He has not done that, he said, because there are courses in which one would expect a high percentage of A's. There have also been questions about why the list is circulated, to which Professor Schiff responded "don't they read the news?" Professor McCormick asked if there is receptivity to the notion that individual faculty members are responsible for grading but the people who devise the curriculum and who advise need to know what is happening. There is, Dr. McMaster said, and they understand there could be more communication. They will talk with their colleagues and then meet in March to review the status of the discussions.

2. Student-Ratings-of-Teaching Issues

Professor McCormick recalled that Vice Provost Carney had provided a proposal last spring to identify the top 30% of instructors as rated by the student ratings. This Committee went in a different direction; Professor Chervany's subcommittee recommended that in addition to reminders to faculty about releasing the data, faculty should be persuaded of the value of doing so and persuading departments to assist them in doing so. Professor Brothen said that the Chervany Subcommittee broadened the review beyond the student-release questions to include making syllabi and other information available to students so that they would have more information about what the course is like. It also recommended faculty increase the amount of information posted on the course guide, Professor McCormick added.

Vice Provost McMaster said that there may be a need for changes in the questions on the Student Rating of Teaching form with the advances in e-education. When the questions were first developed, the University was not as immersed in e-education as it is now and the questions don't cover essential aspects of e-education classes. Dr. Gram said that Vice Provost Carney, for several reasons, is open to re-examining the questions even though the current version has only been in place for a few years. One reason is e-learning; another is feedback about what questions work and which do not, because an opt-out system (if legal) would cause a lot of confusion, and because there are questions used in personnel matters (thus data that cannot be released) and the student-release questions, which are in part redundant and which instructors don't always know what to do about. The questions could be improved. After the Committee's discussion with Ms. Smith from the General Counsel's office about the likely legality of an opt-in system but the fact that some of the student-release question results are not covered by the state data practices law, they have talked about releasing some data, which could open the way to new student-release questions that are more about the course in general. There are a number of matters that need to be sorted out and warrant discussion, Dr. Gram said, and Vice Provost Carney would like to see these matters brought to this Committee, to the Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs, and to the Faculty Consultative Committee.

Professor Nelson recalled that there is also a bank of additional questions that included online course questions; it would be useful to know if anyone has used them.

Dr. McMaster affirmed that coupling the release of information to the course guide and the release of the student-release questions has been discussed.

Professor von Dassow pointed out that it would be easier, for those who wish to release the information, to do a blanket release rather than having to do so semester after semester. One can do a blanket release, Professor Schiff said; Professor McCormick reported that there has also been progress in making the process easier.

3. Issues Pending

Professor McCormick distributed a list of possible issues the Committee could take up.

Issues pending Spring 2013 for SCEP

Options for posting grade context (at FCC request)
e-education and Hybrid Classroom - questions and recommendations for educational policy and admin. practice
Checkup on new graduate education policies and Graduate Education Council structure
Checkup on new Twin Cities Curriculum Committee
Public engagement
"Who teaches what" report from Arlene Carney and John Kellogg
Checkup on the Honors Program
Checkup on Athletics advising

Other issues - which does SCEP want to take up soon?

St. Paul campus educational experience; questions and recommendations for educational policy or admin. practice (at FCC request)
Next step on graduate program assessment, learning outcomes (at Provost suggestion)
Undergraduate program assessment, Student Learning Outcomes (at Provost suggestion)
Questions and recommendations about the Student Rating of Teaching form itself
Checkup on University curriculum requirements, Council on Liberal Education and College Writing Board/Writing Enriched Curriculum
Questions and recommendations about Year-round academic programs
Questions and recommendations about the Course Guide

-- On the issue of the St. Paul campus, this is part of a broader question about the future of that campus, including amenities, educational programs, travel time, and so on. The possibility that the Bell Museum could be moved near the St. Paul campus means it could be a cornerstone for new educational programs. The question is what educational policies are involved; the Committee concluded it probably could not get to these matters this spring.

-- On the issue of year-round programs, Dr. McMaster said there a number of thorny issues to address that it would help to have Committee discussion about.

-- One policy question is a recommendation for ongoing funding opportunities (like those just awarded from the provost's office) to improve pedagogy and to improve classrooms. There were

exciting proposals in response to the request to units to seek funding for e-education; does the Committee wish to say something and to keep the momentum going?

-- The Committee will be involved in undergraduate program assessment this spring, Dr. McMaster said, and ideas will be presented to the Board of Regents in May. Professor McCormick noted that the provost had urged that undergraduate and graduate program assessment be kept together, and asked that Committee members submit questions and comments about undergraduate program assessment.

Professor von Dassow asked what shape undergraduate program assessment would take; one needs to know the goal in order to ask questions. Moreover, there is widespread faculty sentiment, at least in CLA, that there have been unfortunate consequences to implementing the liberal-education requirements and the Student Learning Outcomes; she suggested the Committee discuss them, although separately. She reported, as a relatively trivial example, that in order to remove reference to a non-existent course from the information on line about another course, it was necessary to submit a "student learning outcome" for the existing course; further, a staff member was able to determine the Student Learning Outcomes for the existing course without any faculty involvement. She said the topics fall well within the Committee's purview and it would be worth the time to examine what the Student Learning Outcomes have wrought. Have they had a positive effect or do they just make more work for staff? Do they serve any purpose? If not, they should be changed. (Vice Provost McMaster expressed surprise that it was difficult to cleanse the catalogue of a non-existent course, something they have been doing for some time; Professor von Dassow said that it had been removed from the catalogue but was still listed in the class schedule as recommended preparation for another course.)

Vice Provost McMaster said that Professor von Dassow raised important issues. He recalled that there was a discussion of undergraduate program assessment in the fall and a number of ideas were laid on the table. With respect to the Student Learning Outcomes, it is tricky to deal with them at the time the campus is preparing for its accreditation review; the backbone of the review is the Outcomes. As they go through accreditation, he said he hopes that the Committee will be attentive to both liberal-education requirements and the Student Learning Outcomes—he hopes the faculty will do that. The deeper dive into the latter will be an assessment plan from each college on how the Learning Outcomes are regressed on classes, how the courses are addressing them, and what students are leaning. Professor Schiff said that they knew at the time the new liberal-education requirements were adopted that all core classes would satisfy the learning outcome related to "ways of knowing/modes of inquiry," and many cores and themes would easily satisfy several others. How that has played out should now be assessed, and only the faculty can weigh in on that matter.

Professor McPhee reported that at Morris, every course must satisfy one of the general-education requirements and the committee that assesses courses asks how they satisfy the requirement.

Professor Nelson said that her department used the Student Learning Outcomes to design the major to fill in gaps and meet them all. There is a perverse incentive just to check the box, which was not the intent, so faculty need to think about what they are doing.

Professor von Dassow said that if the process is a sham, the Outcomes should not be used at all. There are two ways to approach the matter, she said: (1) examine and correct the problems that result in a travesty of purpose, and clarify the procedures for operationalizing the Student Learning Outcomes, or 2) reconsider the relationship of the Student Learning Outcomes to the education they

actually engage in, with a view to revising them. She said she was surprised anyone could use the Student Learning Outcomes to design a curriculum because they are so general and vague. Professor Nelson said they find that the general nature of the statements allows them more flexibility and to talk about them. If they were less general, it is less likely there would be agreement on them, Dr. McMaster observed. They would also seem more top-down, Professor Tarone added. Dr. McMaster reported that the colleges approach the Outcomes very differently and some are farther along in amplifying on them for their units than others.

Professor von Dassow said, apropos of program assessment and their connection to the Student Learning Outcomes, that the consultation on them should go beyond the membership of the Committee, which is small. It needs views from more faculty members as well as from instructional staff and language coordinators, who have a lot of contact with students and the curriculum. Professor McCormick agreed the Committee should do so.

Professor Michaels said that the Student Learning Outcomes are also being scrutinized at the program and major level, which is a lot of work. Courses must also demonstrate high quality and multi-disciplinarity—how many requirements are there? It may be that the requirements are becoming onerous. That may be an artifact of expecting a single course to do all those things, Professor Tarone said. With backward design, she said, faculty begin by identifying desired program Outcomes -- the knowledge and skills graduates of the program should have learned by the time they leave -- and then be able to identify where across the entire program those outcomes are addressed (and that can include not just courses but also internships, RAships, oral exams, theses, study abroad, and so on).

It was agreed that the Committee wished to review any proposed program assessment process. It was noted that often there is no correspondence between undergraduate and graduate programs and that while department reviews can be conducted, identifying and assessing undergraduate and graduate programs together "is messier." Professor Tarone maintained that graduate and undergraduate programs have very different goals and should not be lumped together. Vice Provosts McMaster and Schroeder will be invited to share their thoughts as the planning moves forward.

4. Update on Grade Context Posting Options

Professor McCormick turned next to grade context options. He first reminded the Committee of the May, 2012, minutes of the Faculty Senate and noted the grading information contained in them. This is the typical report, he said, but at that meeting Professor Cramer introduced a broader discussion about what should be done about grade inflation/compression. That discussion served as background to much of the work that Committee members and others were engaged in last summer and fall.

A related question is about options for posting grades, Professor McCormick said, and recalled that he had earlier provided a sample of what is available on myedu.com for a number of public universities. Myedu.com also invites students to shop for easier courses using their data. So the data are available, Professor McCormick pointed out; the question is what the University wants to do. The Faculty Consultative Committee has asked SCEP to compile the options.

Professor McCormick reported that Ms. VanVoorhis has asked the AAU schools what they do, and she was able to share some data with the Committee. Quite a few of the public institutions

release information to myedu.com (although not the California schools); fewer of the private institutions do so (and they are not bound to respond to Freedom of Information Act requests). In most cases, the information is made available to faculty, departments, and colleges, and a few make it available to students. Only one institution provides contextual information on the transcript itself (Cornell), one dropped it (because of PeopleSoft), and one is considering it (North Carolina). Only a few institutions identify anyone as responsible for monitoring grade compression. One possible use by a student would be to enter all his or her courses and generate a document providing the grade distributions for each, but that may not be practical with the systems in place. Professor McCormick noted the various ways that institutions provide the information (for every course, by college, by instructor, and so on).

Professor McCormick ticked off several issues. Should any data be available only inside the University (e.g., to students) but not the entire world? Those data are already available at myedu.com. Some FCC members believe that those who evaluate transcripts should have access to contextual data. Asked if everything about grading on the University's websites should be public, some on FCC believe it should. Dr. Falkner has reported that grading information has been determined to be public information under Minnesota law.

Professor Michaels said that if students want information for applications, CVs, and so on, they should have access to it. UM Reports are the raw material but they are not what students need. He said he would like to see the information available so, as a first cut, students should have it and know how to use it so they can talk about it in career offices and other settings. He expressed mild misgivings about making the data completely public. Professor von Dassow did not agree and advocated for transparency; as a public university, it should make the information available to the public at large, who can do with it what they wish. Professor McPhee said he agreed and that the University should not delude itself it can control the information, so it would be better to present it a way that is useful—rather than letting others dribble it out in ways that may not make sense. (He also observed that the coordinate campuses are not on myedu.com because it hasn't asked the coordinate campuses for the data.) Professor McCormick recalled that one member of the Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs suggested simply sending everyone a link to myedu.com and letting it go at that. Professor Wick said she had looked at Myedu.com and found only one of the four courses that she teaches each year—validating concern that the data at myedu.com might not be accurate or complete

Professor McCormick reiterated the faculty concerns he had heard about releasing all the information to students. One is that students would make unbalanced academic decisions, e.g., shopping for easy courses (which the University cannot control anyway, as Professor McPhee pointed out). A second is that releasing it all would increase the pressure on grade inflation ("why are you such a hard grader when others are not?"). But those two themes came from a minority of the faculty in his informal poll; a slight majority supported releasing the information. Professor Tarone commented that the word is out about who the easy graders are, that has always been true, and the "word out there" may not be reliable. Professor von Dassow said that students are grownups and the University can't control how they make their choices—and the faculty could make the case work the other way by telling students they can get a rigorous education in X field, and if they come out with an A, they have done well. Committee members discussed the different cultures in the colleges (e.g., in CSE there is strong support for the Senate definitions of grades).

Committee members generally expressed support for making the data available. Professor McCormick reported that Ms. VanVoorhis had indicated that if Minnesota wished to do what Wisconsin does (by asking for a specific term, one can receive the records for every course but not the instructor names), that could be accomplished quickly and cheaply. If the proposal were to include a search function (e.g., by course) that would require some work. If the proposal is to allow students to compile a document with data for all his or her courses, that could be done but the expense of creating the system is not known. If one wanted the data available automatically for students, that would be a significant expense. Professor Wick observed that if only students have access to the data, that allows them to game the system by only providing information for courses where they did well; in fairness to all, all the information should be available to all.

Professor Nelson said that this entire issue is 101st on her list of 100 things that could be done to improve education at the University. Professor McCormick said his sense of the discussion is that if making grading information available can be done cheaply and quickly, that would be fine, and if not, there are better ways for the University to spend its money.

Professor McCormick also reported that a question had arisen at the last FCC meeting: Can SCEP provide information demonstrating grade inflation? One data point would be the reports that have been provided to the Faculty Senate for the last 13 years; would that be sufficient? One question is the level of analysis, Professor Schiff said—college or department? Professor McCormick said, in response to a query why FCC wanted to know, that it was related to urgency: Is there an immediate danger that all students will soon all be receiving only A's in every course, or is the change gradual enough so that the discussion proceed more deliberately. Professor Nelson said that posting grades will not get at the problem of grade inflation and suggested that FCC decide if it wished to recommend spending money on posting them.

Professor McCormick adjourned the meeting at 4:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota