

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
April 9, 1992**

Present: Stanford Lehmberg (chair), Victor Bloomfield, Stephanie Carr, Thomas Clayton, James Cotter, Michael Handberg, Kenneth Heller, Karen Karni, Clark Starr, Tim Swierczek, Christine VeLure

Guests: Pat Snodgrass (Academic Affairs), a Daily reporter

1. Report of the Chair

Professor Lehmberg convened the meeting at 1:15 and reported on several items of interest:

- The Senate, in 1921, was asked to approve a policy declaring absence because of a religious holiday to be an unexcused absence; the Senate declined--so the revised policy calling for makeup examinations for students who miss them due to religious holidays appears to be in accord with earlier Senate action. (!)
- The Senate, in 1922, on the advice of its Educational Policy Committee, approved a statement declaring three hours per week of student work to be equal to one credit. (!!)
- Both of the policies which SCEP forwarded to the Consultative Committee (the revised make-up policy and the editorial amendment to the prohibition on scheduling events during the period from study day to the end of finals week) have been placed on the Senate docket for April 16. Professor Lehmberg urged those members of SCEP who are also Senators to attend the meeting and speak up on behalf of the SCEP actions.

2. Draft Statement on the Evaluation of Teaching

Professor Lehmberg next turned to Professor Wick to introduce the revised statement on evaluation of teaching. She made a number of comments about the draft, including a proposal that several items be added to the list of activities for which one can be evaluated besides classroom teaching (such as preparation of lab manuals, texts, etc.).

It was then argued, by one Committee member, that in addition to the two stipulated purposes for the evaluation of teaching (information for personnel decisions and assist faculty in self-improvement), a third one should be added: to improve the learning environment so that teaching can take place. Such

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things as heat, room quality, and chalk can affect teaching.

Committee members deliberated this point for some while. Several took the position that evaluation of teaching should be an assessment of the ability to perform within the limits of the resources available to the faculty member. Others argued that these structural factors are important for teaching and evaluation should point them out. It was finally agreed that this was an important point that should appear in the document, but not as one of the reasons for evaluating teaching, and Professor Wick agreed to revise the language in accord with the comments. Several other related points were made:

- Students, in their assessments, separate bad facilities from the quality of teaching--but some places are SO bad that they make good teaching nearly impossible.
- Other questions might also be considered, such as whether the faculty member wanted to teach the course or was assigned to it to plug a hole in the curriculum; such an issue might well affect classroom performance. So also would the teaching support functions available in the department (overheads, duplicating, etc.).
- If there is peer evaluation, could not their colleagues note the problem? No, it was said, faculty are the LAST ones to notice; they are not sensitive to the position students are in. It is the students who can judge if SOMETHING is wrong, even if they cannot pinpoint the exact reasons.
- An evaluation of the physical environment, and purely mechanical difficulties, should be conducted early, apart from the evaluation of teaching--students should be asked if they can hear, if there is adequate lighting, if the temperature is comfortable, etc. And action should be urged if something is amiss.

The next point taken up was support for improvement of teaching; the draft statement notes an obligation both on the part of Academic Affairs (to provide general programs of professional advice and training) and the departments (to provide discipline-specific assistance). Such assistance at the departmental level, Professor Wick responded to a query, need not cost money; it can be informal. But, it was argued, there is still a cost in faculty time--another extra demand, on top of many others. It is not possible to improve teaching, it was argued vigorously, without spending money.

It was agreed that language should be added noting that it would be appropriate for Academic Affairs to provide resources to individual academic units, if required.

The Committee then took up the number of courses that should be evaluated; the draft policy calls for a minimum of one per year (the same as required by existing Senate policy). Points made included the following:

- Professor Louis, in discussions with the Committee, said her department found evaluating every course every quarter to be useful. Others who have studied evaluation of teaching argue that doing so leads to LESS reliable results because students become disaffected by the process.

- There are evaluations to be conducted in addition to those by students.
- If a faculty member changes a course each time it is taught, he or she should obtain feedback on it, although full-fledged evaluation may not be necessary each time.
- The aim of the existing policy, in calling for evaluation of one course per year, is to have ALL courses of a particular faculty member evaluated over a period of years; faculty members may not choose the most popular course they teach year after year.
- If a faculty member wishes to obtain a merit salary increase, evaluation of one course should NOT be sufficient. Alternatively, there is the feeling that in deciding on salary increases, the decision should be based on performance over several years and that it is not fair to rely on the results of one year's effort in determining a merit increase. A course, it was pointed out, is not a five-year project.
- It may be that there should be separate merit increases for teaching, research, and service. In one department mentioned at the meeting, a faculty member may select not to have courses evaluated--but then is also ineligible for a merit increase based on teaching.
- Unless deans and vice presidents agree to live by and act by Senate policies, these discussions are a waste of time. In one college, rules exist for plans to be made by faculty to improve performance--and they are never implemented.

No detectable consensus emerged from this part of the discussion.

The need for consistent data across the University was next taken up. One of the problems mentioned by Vice Provost Hopkins is the lack of such data; what is needed is an instrument used by every department. Again, a number of comments were made:

- For purposes of instructional improvement, departments would probably wish to use a longer form identifying specific ways improvement might be made; for salary and promotion and tenure decisions, the relative data of the institution-wide form would be used.
- This policy, like any others, will only work if the vast majority of the faculty believe it is reasonable; the present policy does not work because the faculty do not see the instrument as reasonable.
- One department represented at the Committee uses a teaching portfolio; each faculty member keeps information and accumulates a body of evidence over time, include teaching evaluations and other items, and documents changes over time (or the maintenance of quality).
- Two different reactions were expressed by the same Committee member: One, it would be a lot of busywork, but two, those in the sciences go through such a review every time they apply for a grant--and they don't object to it in that context but they do when used in

teaching. The process of planning research, preparing a proposal, the reasons for it, and the expected outcomes is a process of documentation that has value. The process would be useful, albeit more work, if not required too often.

- The policy will run in to trouble in the Senate unless the proposed evaluation instrument is included, because faculty will imagine all kinds of possibilities--when in fact the Committee has in mind something of no more than 5 - 7 questions plus room for written student comment.
- Many object to teaching evaluation because there are no funds to reward good teaching and one is demeaned if the results come out bad. Until there is a commitment to recognize strong performance, there will be trouble getting ANY policy adopted.
- The MOST effective way to improve teaching would be to require peer review; no one wants to look bad in front of their colleagues. If the University REALLY wants to improve and emphasize teaching, THAT would improve things. That is true only when one can disagree with colleagues on disciplinary issues rather than on politics or ideology, noted another Committee member; in the latter case, peer review is less than useful. Another possibility might be to rely on a process akin to granting doctoral degrees: require outsiders, who may not know the subject matter but who can assess techniques. (Students can be intimidated by faculty visitors, a problem that can be overcome by the use of videotapes.)
- There is no chance of passing the document if it requires peer review, commented one Committee member. Faculty would be far MORE likely to pass it, rejoined another, if it required peer review, with appropriate safeguards. Reviews of syllabi, rather than being an item of peer review, should be a department matter--and if syllabi make no sense, then the department head should be fired. The Committee, it was pointed out, had earlier decided NOT to require peer evaluation, or at least not every year; the complaints about it come not from those who are evaluated but from those who must DO the evaluations. Where peer review works well (such as in research), it was said, there is no reason to have to conduct it every year.
- Other things need to be included in the list of factors to be evaluated, including such things as performance on certification exams (important in some fields) and mentoring (an important part of what faculty do).
- The policy must be sensitive to what the faculty will be sensitive to; the only place salary is mentioned is in connection with STUDENT evaluation of teaching. It was agreed that student evaluation is but one means of assessment and that it should be used in conjunction with other types of information.
- For this policy to be implemented, Senior Vice President Infante and Vice Provost Hopkins will have to free up funds. It is possible, one Committee member speculated, that funds for the Undergraduate Initiative might be used for this purpose. Alternatively, it was suggested, SCEP should be asking if this would be a better expenditure to improve

undergraduate education than spending money on secretaries and supplies. Or on carpenters to fix buildings.

The Committee agreed it would devote its next meeting to a redrafted statement and, assuming there is support for it, then bring it to the Consultative Committee for placement on the docket of the May 14 Senate meeting. It was also agreed that the instrument to be used in student evaluations of teaching should be included with the recommended policy.

It was also agreed that the Committee would invite Vice Provost Hopkins to join it, at one of its May meetings, to discuss the status of the Undergraduate Initiative.

3. Changes in the Bush Fellowships

Professor Clayton next distributed materials related to possible changes in the criteria for awarding Bush Fellowships. He quickly walked Committee members through the possible changes and asked them to think about the issues in advance of the next time the subject will be discussed.

The Committee adjourned at 3:10.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota