

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, May 27, 1998
1:00 – 3:00
Room 238 Morrill Hall

Present: Laura Coffin Koch (chair), Elayne Donahue, Gayle Graham Yates, Darwin Hendel, Gordon Hirsch, Thomas Johnson, Robert Leik, Judith Martin, Kathleen Newell, Palmer Rogers, Craig Swan, William Van Essendelft

Regrets: Avram Bar-Cohen, Tina Rovick

Absent: Adam Miller, Kevin Nicholson, Jessie Jo Roos

Guests: Vice Provost Ann Hill Duin (Academic Affairs)

[In these minutes: ROTC subcommittee; grade inflation subcommittee report; distance education; policy on reorganization; issues pending]

1. ROTC Subcommittee

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and began with a brief report on the ROTC Subcommittee. She has been attending its meetings; she said it is comprised primarily of ROTC representatives, all of whom are very dedicated. The subcommittee has focused more on military events than academic offerings, and there have been problems getting courses approved. The subcommittee needs a better connection with SCEP, she said.

A new subcommittee chair and members will be appointed. The military wants the subcommittee to have more of an academic focus. The current reporting line of the ROTC units is through Student Development and Athletics, rather than a college; the lack of connection to academic unit has caused some problems.

2. Grade Inflation Subcommittee

Professor Martin next reported for the Grade Inflation Subcommittee. She provided copies of a draft report and reported on the data collected. There are good data back to 1989, and other time-series data back to 1955, but the two are hard to compare. What is clear from the aggregate data is that there was a significant jump in grades between 1969 and 1974, and after that a leveling off, with a slight upward trend. These trends differ by college.

With respect to the recommendations, Professor Martin said:

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- (1) The Subcommittee was uncertain how much data to include with its report.
- (2) One hears that there is no talk of standards in departments, and in some, students are all given As and Bs, so the subcommittee is recommending that departments talk about what students are expected to achieve, what should be expected, and how to use appropriate grades to recognize that achievement.
- (3) College should produce reports annually,, and by designator and course level, showing the average grade awarded and showing the percentage of As awarded; the reports should be published in the DAILY and presented to the Senate.

These recommendations produced a number of comments.

- Publication of average grades by course level and designator will let students know where to go to get the easiest grades; it will be interesting to see what students do, using the course evaluation and grading data. On the other hand, pressures on departments will be both up and down; the subcommittee heard that people need a small dose of courage to use the full range of grades available.
- One would not have thought the dissemination of data would be so broad. That can be discussed, but the subcommittee believed strongly that wide dissemination is desired if behavior is to change. The report will come to SCEP, which will have to make the final recommendation to the Senate. Some SCEP members supported the proposal for widespread publication.
- It is to be expected that higher course levels would have higher grades; it is assumed that the comparisons will be among designators at the same course level (e.g., if one department in a college has an average grade of 3.4 in 1-XXX courses, and another department has a 2.2 in 1-XXX courses, presumably this sort of variation would raise questions in the college and the departments.)
- The subcommittee has requested information on admissions data as well, so that one can track changes in high school rank and ACT scores of incoming students. (This will only be helpful in the case of freshman; similar data for advanced standing students are not kept.)
- The term "grade inflation" is value-laden, and changes in grades awarded may not be inflated when one takes into account changes in student abilities. Ultimately, whether there is grade inflation and how it will be addressed are decisions that will be made by departments. Moreover, the Registrar's office has routinely provided reports on grades by course to all departments; the capacity to address the issues has existed for some time. It would be a mistake to say that this problem has just been discovered. (It was pointed out, however, that each department receives reports only for its own faculty and classes.)
- Some believe there is no grade inflation, but there is clearly reluctance on the part of many faculty to use the C grade, even where it is appropriate. If the reports can get people to realize there is a full range of grades, that would be a positive change.
- The subcommittee did not consider what might be occurring in the high schools. It is clear that student grades have risen dramatically, but SAT scores have not.
- One concern not addressed through grades is course content: what was routine in introductory courses in the past is now too much to expect of undergraduates. Grades could stay up while course

content declines. The place to begin addressing this may be with high school preparation standards; there has been talk with MNSCU about a joint committee to look at high school standards. Another possibility would be to examine course requirements, although those data may not exist very far back in time. It would be useful to have data, however, rather than simply complain "students don't work as hard." There is also a much larger knowledge base, and it is often difficult to get students to put in the time required.

-- It is also necessary to take into account grading philosophy or approach: some use a norm-based system, with a predetermined percent of students who will receive each grade (e.g., 10% A, 15% B, 45% C, etc.). Some use a criterion-referenced system, so that any student meeting the criteria for an A would receive an A, and everyone in the course, conceivably, could receive an A. In higher education, there has been a shift to more criterion-referenced grading, which can bring higher grades (which are not necessarily grade inflation).

-- The focus of the subcommittee was on undergraduate education.

-- SCEP would be responsible for the ongoing monitoring of grades.

-- There has also been a change in the skills needed, with a shift to computer-based learning and research, away from critical thinking and the use of language. It is nearly impossible to require high standards in composition. Students have not been taught to do hard-nosed library research or to think about materials philosophically and analytically.

-- Another element of the change in philosophy, or in faculty culture, is that faculty are trying more to promote student success than to wash people out. If higher education wants more people to come and to succeed, some faculty may give grades that students do not deserve – and some may spent more time helping students actually do better. There has been a shift in responsibility to the faculty and institution for a student to graduate; students seem not to have a sense of their own responsibilities.

-- It might be helpful for the University to have sessions for faculty, especially new faculty, on testing and grading and the meaning of assessment.

3. Distance Education

Professor Koch now welcomed Vice Provost Ann Hill Duin to the meeting to report on distance education and the Minnesota Virtual University. Dr. Duin began by handing out copies several items and commenting on the contents of each. A number of issues and points were raised in the ensuing discussion.

-- The Minnesota Virtual University is not something for which the University will offer courses; it will be a front door to higher education in Minnesota; it is a marketing mechanism for the state.

-- In terms of distance education, the responsibilities of Dr. Duin's office include support for faculty who want to offer off-site instruction. One question is what policies SCEP should look at (e.g., the Senate has adopted standards on class time); what about distance education students who work anywhere, anytime? Will courses be taught by University faculty? A report from the Graduate School on these general subjects will be provided to Committee members.

-- If there is a paradigm shift underway, and the University says that students can learn and will be granted credit without coming to campus, how will outcomes be measured? Faculty are not geared to this kind of instruction. Moreover, distance education, which tends to be competency based – which is antithetical to the way some students learn – could result in the University reducing its service to those who are already under-served. Furthermore, this activity comes at a time when more students want to live on campus. (One recent institutional study demonstrated that 80% of the distance education users were on campus.)

-- In Senate discussion of standards, leading to prohibitions on taking overlapping classes and requiring certain levels of faculty-student contact, there was a statement that faculty believe there is value in what occurs in the classroom. How is that given effect in distance education?

-- There is a need to monitor distance education at the University – who participates and what happens. Distance education forces units to deal directly with student learning and performance.

-- There is a danger that faculty will “teach to the test” in distance education, and techniques to address this phenomenon must be developed. The traditional measure is by the classroom, not by the cumulative effect. For those who teach on line and have asked about the outcome, students have been asked, for example, about the relationship of the course to their job and what has changed. This is a very different way of looking at outcomes.

-- How can standards and quality that the faculty value be maintained in distance education?

-- Some aspects of teaching will not work using distance education (e.g., labs). In the college compacts, the majority of distance education is occurring in the professional schools.

-- SCEP could be helpful in this process if it could advise units on how to maintain standards and where the problems occur, help units sort out what works and what does not. There is a committee working on this, Dr. Duin reported.

-- How is the integrity of the course to be protected? One student signs up for the course; another does the work. This is where assessment comes in; there are, for example, voice recognition techniques, and programs that can identify a unique writing style. This can be a problem with traditional classroom education as well, in large classes.

-- There is a faculty workload question involved; faculty can spend much time in one-on-one exchanges with distance education students. There will doubtless be much variation among colleges and departments in this respect, and any standards would have to be carefully thought out, but it is an issue that department heads and deans must face. One has the impression that on-line courses can be a tremendous amount of work; in one case, one faculty member has estimated that such a course requires 2.5 times as much student contact as a regular course. (It may be, it was said, that if faculty are spending that much more time with students, the students are learning much more because the instruction is more individualized.)

-- In terms of course completion rates, part-time (distance education) students took 12.5 years to complete their degree; students who supplemented their work with distance education cut 3.5 years off that time. Nine years, it was cautioned, is not too long a time for someone who is working full time.

There is a need for information on course and degree completion rates. Locally, it appears that a significant number who register for a distance education course never start; of those who do, completion rates run about 60-70%. Data on current students, however, may not be predictive because of the novelty of distance education and the efforts that faculty are now making.

Professor Koch thanked Dr. Duin for joining the meeting, and promised that SCEP seriously would take up distance education next year.

4. Policy on Reorganization

Professor Koch next drew the attention of Committee members to the policy on reorganization (of campuses, colleges, and departments). The Committee on Finance and Planning had endorsed it, but Dr. Bruininks was concerned that the processes identified in the policy would take too long and unnecessarily delay action by the University. Dr. Swan suggested that review by collegiate committees would be appropriate, and might lend useful perspective on the policy.

In general, it is in the interest of the University to be able to move quickly; there must be consultation on reorganization, but one can question if it should be at the level of the Senate. There appeared to be agreement that consultation with the Consultative Committee might be more appropriate. Moreover, there are a range of reorganizations that might take place; some belong clearly in the colleges, while others have a broader impact. It was pointed out that short of elimination or merger, nothing that happened at the department level would be subject to the provisions of the policy.

One Committee member argued that there must be a way for faculty views to be heard on major changes in a college. Dr. Swan pointed out that college constitutions have provisions about such changes, and that there would be discussions in a college before a department were eliminated.

Even a requirement for Senate "approval" (suggested for college or campus closures) would only be advisory, inasmuch as all Senate actions are advisory. The Committee appeared to concur with a suggestion that Senate approval should not be required.

Professor Koch concluded that the draft should be revised, circulated to the colleges, and then reconsidered by the Committee.

5. Issues Pending

The Committee then briefly considered what issues would be of import for the next meeting and into the next year

- The IMG subcommittee (to be continued on a year-to-year basis)
- The partnership degrees proposal
- Management of classroom renovation
- ROTC
- Peer evaluation of teaching (the last the Committee knew, most colleges were not complying with the policy)
- The academic appointments subcommittee, chaired by Professor Bales

On policy reviews, the Committee still needs to take up housing and international education; these are matters that need attention vis-à-vis their educational content. The subcommittee on degrees and credits still needs to make a report.

The Senate approved the policy on transition to semesters in 1996; Professor Koch said she would bring it back to SCEP next year.

Professor Koch adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota