

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, April 9, 1997
1:00 - 3:00
Room 238 Morrill Hall

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Avram Bar-Cohen, Anita Cholewa, Elayne Donahue, Darwin Hendel, Gordon Hirsch, Robert Leik, Judith Martin, Kathleen Newell, W. Phillips Shively, William Van Essendelft

Regrets: Thomas Johnson, Gayle Graham Yates

Absent: Tina Rovick

Guests: Robert Pepin (IT Director of Honors), Judith Wanhala (CLA Associate Director of Honors)

[In these minutes: Policy on degrees with honors and with distinction; policy on reorganization of academic units; policies on transfer and on graduate/professional teaching award; course numbering; Kellogg Commission report on the student experience; student evaluations of teaching]

1. Policy on Honors

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Robert Pepin and Judith Wanhala to discuss the draft policy on honors. The policy, drafted by SCEP about two years ago, proposed to establish standards for degrees "with honors" (i.e., those with the Latin additions: cum laude, magna cum laude, summa cum laude) and for degrees "with distinction," and to set a limit on the percentage of degrees that any college could award "with honors" or "with distinction." Discussion of the policy had ended because it became mixed up with issues of grade inflation and how that affects the award of these kinds of degrees. One Committee member recalled that the Committee took notice that if the level for "honors" or "distinction" were set at a 3.5 GPA, there would be a massive number of such degrees, making them meaningless.

Professor Hirsch (Director of Honors for CLA) reported that he had distributed copies of the draft to several college honors directors; there were a number of points upon which individuals took sharp exception to the draft. One problem pointed out repeatedly was that to use a percentage, rather than a stipulated GPA, means that the target for students changes each year, and cannot be known until after graduation (because of late grades, Incompletes, and so on). This would be a "disaster for students," said one individual.

Ms. Wanhala inquired why limits were being proposed and what problems are being addressed by the draft policy. The existing policy has been in place for a long time and colleges each administered their own policies. It is an attempt to bring regularity to the honors degrees and degrees with distinction

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that are awarded by the University, to standardize the definition of such degrees, and to allow for the fact that students transfer among colleges or from outside the University. (For example, the policy requires that honors degree recipients go through an established and approved honors program, while degrees with distinction are to be based exclusively on grade point average.

Committee members discussed the proposal: some colleges now permit more than 10% of graduates (the proposed limit in the policy) to graduate with honors or with distinction); there are differences across colleges; whether the GPA requirement a college sets should be the same for both degrees; whether a student can receive both an honors degree and a degree with distinction; the fact that the honors degree is supposed to be tied to extra and special work, not a GPA, and that a student in honors courses may end up with a lower GPA because of enrolling in more competitive courses; if one can get "kicked out" of an honors program (yes); and whether a degree with distinction should be consistent across the University, while a degree with honors could and should vary with the colleges.

The problem with stipulating a University-wide GPA for either type of degree is that grading patterns vary across the colleges. To set a specific number could mean that a significantly larger percentage of students would qualify in one college than in another, which does not seem fair to students.

Professor Pepin said the policy could serve a useful purpose in reminding colleges to monitor the number of students graduating with honors and with distinction, and might include a suggested guideline of X percent. He urged that SCEP consult with the colleges about the policy, and that it not adopt an arbitrary and floating number.

The Committee then discussed the desirability of offering both degrees with honors and with distinction; some colleges have chosen not to offer degrees with distinction. It is unlikely, it was said, that anyone outside of a university would recognize the difference between the two types of degrees.

It was agreed that the Committee should be provided information on the number of students who obtain degrees with honors and with distinction from each college. One possibility for identifying the difference between the two might be the inclusion of a short statement on the back of the transcript describing the difference. It was also agreed that a redrafted policy would be circulated to the college honors directors for review and comment.

2. Policy on Reorganization

Professor Koch then turned the attention of the Committee to the draft policy on reorganization. It was noted that the fundamental principle in the policy is that for reorganization of academic units (those which offer programs leading to a degree or offer regular instruction) is that 1) at the level of campus or college (creation, elimination, or merger), they should have the approval of the Senate, and 2) within colleges or equivalents (e.g., UMC or UMM), information should be reported to SCEP and the Senate, with time allowed for comment, but that no action would be required. That is, there is a distinction between approval and review.

The Committee discussed various elements of the proposal, including what the role of the governance system should be with respect to cross-collegiate or interdisciplinary program changes, the importance of communicating with the academic community about the changes that are made, and the

need for SCEP to be thoughtful about the implications for program changes or elimination.

The third part of the policy, which speaks to administrative reorganization, calls for consultation with the appropriate Senate body but contains no requirement for approval.

It was agreed that further drafting is needed, and that the policy would be brought back to the Committee for further review. The draft will also be referred for review to the Committee on Finance and Planning, which is also supposed to play a role in the decisions and review.

3. Policy on Graduate and Professional Teaching Award

Professor Koch reported to the Committee that the Senate Consultative Committee (SCC) expressed a wish for this policy to be brought to the Senate, so she had taken the liberty of redrafting some of the language in accord with earlier SCEP discussions and had then brought it to SCC. After discussion, SCC placed it on the docket of the April 17 Senate meeting.

One reason for bringing it for action earlier, she reported, is that those who will be responsible for raising funds to support the award need it to be established before they can effectively seek funds.

4. Transfer Policy

Professor Koch also reported that the policy on transfer of credits has also been placed on the April 17 Senate docket. SCEP had earlier approved the policy, but she had taken no action because there may be other elements that should be included. Inasmuch as there is legislative concern about the transfer of technical college credits to the University, however, and because the policy proposes to allow such transfers under careful conditions, it seemed appropriate to take action on what SCEP has already approved. The policy may require future changes, but those can be brought forward as they are ready.

It was reported later in the meeting that the legislature wants to know EXACTLY what courses will transfer. The problem is that the technical colleges are all different, and the quality of the faculty varies; departments will have to examine each course to determine if it is acceptable for transfer.

5. Course Numbering

Professor Koch told the Committee that there had been interest in the legislature in requiring a common course numbering system for the University and MNSCU, and a possible threat to withhold \$40 million pending creation of such a system. One major problem is that such a system could not possibly be developed so fast.

The legislature is looking for ways for the University and MNSCU to work together, but perhaps does not understand that much is already being done (such as the transfer curriculum and course mapping).

Another more cynical question, said one Committee member, is why the University should want to make transfer so easy. In an enrollment-based funding system, the University wants credit for students, and does not necessarily want it to be easy for them to leave. If the legislature wants easy credit transfer,

it should give credit to the institution. One of the reasons the University has a low graduation rate is because it is so easy to transfer out.

There are data on student movement, said another Committee member. This is really a state policy issue: institutions receive credit for helping students graduate, no matter where they started, and all the national statistics focus on graduation rate. If the state wanted to help, it would also take notice of where students start. In fact, however, there are a large number of students who leave the University; there is a larger number of students who come to the University after beginning their college work elsewhere.

6. Kellogg Commission Report

The Committee next turned to the Kellogg Commission report on the student experience. This is one of eight reports the Commission will produce, and the President has asked this Committee and SCC to comment on the report. The report is intended to stimulate discussion across the United States.

Should the University adopt the statement of principles or the action agenda contained in the report, Professor Koch inquired?

One Committee member suggested the Committee look at how the University stands now with respect to the principles and action agenda laid out in the report. If it does so, it might conclude that the University is doing well with respect to many of them, but that there are parts where the University could do more. Committee members discussed this idea and agreed it would be a good starting point.

Another Committee member noted that the report is "motherhood and democracy," but things that faculty care most about are not in the report: the research agenda of the University. The University keeps saying to students they should come here because they can work with faculty doing research. None of that is in this report. Yet another Committee member agreed; he recalled the FCC white paper on faculty vitality and suggested it be reviewed along side the Kellogg Commission report. Another problem is that the University is not the master of its own house when it comes to carrying out the suggestions of the report; how can the legislature be convinced to fund the activities that are suggested?

Asked why the document is being taken up, one Committee member noted that there is significant public criticism of higher education, there is an underlying sentiment that research and teaching are out of balance. The legislature might fund such a shift--or it might say that funding should be shifted from research to teaching. That, responded another, would ignore the fact that the University does much graduate and professional education.

Other Committee members pointed out that undergraduate education is part of the land-grant mission, and that this report is focused on land-grant institutions. The Kellogg Commission has been concerned about land-grant schools, and has provided funding to help them think about their role. The next report, it was said, will look at research and public service roles and how they are connected to undergraduate education.

In terms of the report recommendations, what SCEP might do is identify areas where the University could be doing better and also identify the barriers to doing so. If there is something new in the debate, the Committee should focus on one or two items.

The Committee then returned to a discussion of the relationship with MNSCU. Some say a connection does not make sense. It was noted that there is no central curriculum on each MNSCU campus, and there is no sense that the legislature understands what higher education needs to run. Legislators rely heavily on their own experiences, rather than information about all of higher education in the state. The legislature wants the systems to have more and more in common, but that does not make sense in terms of the different missions. One Committee member reported a proposal had been made to put all course materials on the web, but others expressed worry that people would steal. The difference is not the materials, it is the faculty; the faculty will NOT be the same across systems. If the legislature were to mandate that the faculty be the same, the University would revolt.

There are horror stories about transfer that legislators hear, said one Committee member, but analysis says the system works quite well. There are instances where a student will NOT receive credit from the University for coursework taken elsewhere; when reasonable people look at the instances, they usually conclude the student SHOULD not receive credit.

It was agreed that Professor Koch should direct to Senior Vice President Marshak a request for summary information on what and how the University is doing on the various elements of the Kellogg recommendations. In terms of the future, one possibility might be to make a request of the legislature that an appropriate committee meet with SCEP (perhaps over the summer or in the early fall) in order to let the legislature know there is a committee at work on these issues and to try to build a positive understanding of what is occurring.

7. Student Evaluations of Teaching

Dr. Hendel reported that the subcommittee on teaching evaluations had met earlier in the day and has prepared a draft report. The subcommittee will review its report and then present it to SCEP. They believe that the data must include responses to questions that help students make course selections, and that perhaps these questions should be kept separate from questions used for other purposes.

It is clear that other institutions that have been used as examples with the legislature are themselves revisiting what they do. There is concern among some about who has access to the information; others do not share that concern. They are looking at other institutions, and must distinguish between policies on evaluation of teaching and on data privacy.

There will be recommendations for SCEP in the very near future, it was said.

Professor Koch thanked Dr. Hendel for his report, and adjourned the meeting at 3:10.

-- Gary Engstrand