

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Tuesday, May 16, 1995
1:45 - 3:30
Room 626 Campus Club

Present: Kenneth Heller (chair), Anita Cholewa, Elayne Donahue, Megan Gunnar, Darwin Hendel, Manuel Kaplan, Laura Coffin Koch, Judith Martin, Darren Walhof

Regrets: William Van Essendelft, Robert Johnson, Gayle Graham Yates (on leave)

Absent: James Cotter

Guests: Elizabeth Grundner, Sam Lewis (Office of the Registrar); Gerald Rinehart (Carlson School of Management); Provost W. Phillips Shively

[In these minutes: Report of the Committee on Teaching and Learning; policy on classes, schedules, and final exams; policy on plus/minus grading]

1. Report of the Committee on Teaching and Learning

Professor Heller convened the meeting at 1:45, welcomed Provost Shively, and began by asking the Committee if it wished to adopt a resolution about the Report of the Committee on Teaching and Learning (CTL). Following brief discussion, the Committee unanimously adopted the following resolution:

The Senate Committee on Educational Policy endorses the Report of the Committee on Teaching and Learning and calls for implementation of its five key recommendations and 29 items for action; and it further recommends that there be a process that leads to a report that focuses more fully on assessing and improving student learning.

Provost Shively reported that he has been asked by President Hasselmo to review the CTL report and to pull from it items for action, and to bring the report to the governance system to seek advice on its dissemination. The President has also asked him to organize another series of President's Forums on Teaching and Learning, which he said he is delighted to do.

Asked what he thought about the CTL report, Dr. Shively said he thought it very good. The recommendations vary from exhortations to specific recommendations for action. He told the Committee he has decided to establish a modest fund in his office, easily accessible, to support department initiatives in teaching and learning. He suggested that SCEP might wish to follow through on the recommendation calling for development of a mid-course assessment tool to assist faculty who want to evaluate their courses while they are in progress.

*These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate or Twin Cities Campus Assembly; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

Dr. Shively said he saw no reason to wait on action by the full Senate to begin implementation of the report and said he intended to ask the deans and provosts how they intended to respond to it. The Committee concurred.

2. Policies on Classes and Schedules

Professor Heller welcomed Ms. Grundner and Mr. Lewis to the meeting to discuss the proposed policies on classes and schedules that SCEP had been deliberating at its previous two meetings.

Mr. Lewis explained that they had used the draft policies being considered by SCEP as the basis for a memorandum sent last week to Deans, Directors, and Department Heads about class schedules. As they look to computerization of room scheduling, Ms. Grundner commented, they have to reduce the diversity of class time schedules now in use or the computer will be unable to do its work.

His office has been following procedures that have been around for a long time, Mr. Lewis told the Committee, although the procedures have not been grounded in Senate action. They believe the SCEP policies present an opportunity to restate principles and to fit the principles and policies together as they move to automated room scheduling. The prohibition on taking courses that overlap is part of that regularization of the process.

Professor Heller explained briefly that SCEP has been unearthing existing Senate policies and reviewing them to determine if they apply to the present day. It will recommend that the Senate pass an entire set of consistent educational policies based on those currently in force and repeal those that no longer apply.

Ms. Grundner then related that the policy on class starting times, adopted when the 50-minute hour had been approved and calling for hours to begin at 0800 on Minneapolis and 0830 on St. Paul, had been established at the request of the St. Paul departments. SCEP has called for the same class start times on both campuses, and it appears that many St. Paul units concur. The impetus for this proposal, Professor Heller recalled, came from the St. Paul units.

On the issue of longer classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays, the draft SCEP policy required them to START at the regular starting times of classes. Ms. Grundner explained that this would present difficulties, because they would not have enough classrooms if the 75-minute classes had to start at 0800 or 0905 or 1010, etc. They propose instead a schedule requiring such classes to start at 0815, 0945, 1115, 1245, and so on; this would permit better use of classrooms and would also permit students to take, for example, an 0945-1100 class and also then enroll for a regular 1115 class. That is the peak period for classes, Mr. Lewis commented, and it is important to have the schedules mesh.

The intent of the Senate policies, said one Committee member, is that there be one schedule. If necessary to accommodate the needs of room scheduling, the allowance for different starting times for extended Tuesday-Thursday classes is acceptable--as long as there is a STANDARDIZED schedule, so that if there are 75-minute classes, they do not start and stop at random times determined by individual instructors.

Asked about the impact on room scheduling of classes that meet four times per week, Ms. Grundner said they are not a problem. Most such classes are in IT, while most 75-minute classes are in CLA, and they do not normally use the same rooms. That suggests there are two different class schedules for the two colleges, observed one Committee member.

This difference between IT and CLA assumes they have different class structures, which is a problem in terms of credits. Is it true that a 4-credit course in science or engineering is different from a 4-credit course in the liberal arts? One meets five days a week; another meets only two or three. This sounds strange.

They studied the 4-credit classes, Ms. Grundner reported, and the idea of requiring them to meet 200 minutes per week. The idea died down when it was clear that the largest college is the one that offers the most 4-credit courses meeting only 150 minutes; she was glad from a scheduling point of view, because if all the 4-credit courses were to have to meet 200 minutes, there would not be enough classrooms. It is said, responded one Committee member, that there are classrooms that are not needed under current practices--but what if the current practices are not optimal? No one claims that any particular class should meet any particular length of time--the Committee considered that issue in recent years--but it is peculiar that these differences in class lengths should vary by college. That suggests that credits are NOT the same across CLA and IT; students get confused, and it looks like the University does not know what a credit is.

Dr. Shively suggested that when the change to semesters is made might also be a good time to evaluate these other differences. He said he has spoken about the semester change to former Senior Vice President Kuhi, who has been through the process three times. His advice is that when the change is made, the University must be very careful to be certain that not all the changes go in one direction--that all classes seem to require less contact time, or that two-quarter courses all become two-semester sequences. There has to be caution both about aggrandizement of curriculum as well as taking the easiest route. But it would probably not be wise to address course variability now and then semesters later, he concluded. He agreed, however, that it is odd that the relationship of class meeting times to course credits varies by college.

Ms. Grundner then reviewed a point in their memo that "course offering times for winter quarter 1996 classes will be adjusted on the course offering data base before departments receive their course offering turnaround documents about May 30." In a parenthetical comment, Committee members urged that the turnaround documents should not be distributed during busy times for faculty and staff, such as finals week or the first week of the quarter, so that departments had adequate time to consider the impact of the changes.

The fourth point in their memo is related to the Classroom Utilization Study recently completed. The scheduling office wishes to retire some of the poorest classrooms, ones which are so bad that even upgrading them would not make them better than marginal. (There are a number on the East Bank; the ones in Jones and Nicholson are the worst.) In order to eliminate these classrooms, and to prepare for automated scheduling, departments "will be required to balance their classroom requests across the day and week so that no more than 60% of their class hours are between 0800 through 1310 with classes distributed evenly across all class hours."

The final point in the memo notes that the Office of the Registrar may, "after thorough review and careful consultation with academic units, adjust proposed schedules for better time distribution and classroom utilization. Deans and provosts will be consulted on any such adjustments which create serious problems for departments or colleges affected." This is language that has been in place since 1975, Ms. Grundner noted. One Committee member inquired if involvement of the provost was necessary; she agreed that such instances would likely be very rare.

In terms of distribution of courses across the day and week, Ms. Grundner reported that there had been no standards until approximately 20 years ago. At that time her office worked with Vice President Henry Koffler to develop the standards, which he approved. Ms. Grundner said her office would welcome a Senate policy on this matter; Ms. Cholewa agreed to incorporate a proviso about distribution of classes in a revised set of proposed policies.

These policies do not apply to CEE, Ms. Grundner said in response to a question. Nor are there serious problems in scheduling CEE classes. CEE also decides the starting time of its classes.

One Committee member inquired about the proposed SCEP policy prohibiting students from enrolling in classes that overlap. Mr. Lewis said that students are now informed if they enroll in overlapping courses, but they are not prohibited from doing so. He assured the Committee that it would require only a very simply change to prevent students from registering in overlapping courses. There will always be special cases, several Committee members observed, so no student would be prohibited from seeking an override. The Committee agreed, however, that the signature of BOTH faculty members should be required; Ms. Cholewa agreed to incorporate this change in the draft policies as well.

Committee members then discussed at some length with Ms. Grundner and Mr. Lewis the possibility of a student enrolling for courses and having overlapping final examinations. Ms. Grundner said that that possibility should not exist, except in very rare cases, and that the way the schedule is constructed, no student should ever end up with more than two finals on the same day. The more likely problem with overlapping finals is that a faculty member has changed the day or time of the final, thus creating a problem that the schedule did not.

Discussion also touched on the problem of common finals for large courses with multiple sections. Since only two evenings are allocated to common finals, this is a major source of overlap for students.

The Committee agreed that students, when they register, should receive a copy of their final exam schedule. If there are overlapping finals, they would know about it immediately and can either adjust their courses or make arrangements with the faculty at the beginning of the quarter. This may be in particular a problem with seniors, who are trying to finish and graduate. The question is, whose responsibility is it to deal with the problem of overlapping finals? The prevailing view of the Committee appeared to be that it is the University's problem, unless students are simply trying to avoid finals at a particular time. But there is a problem for faculty, who may legitimately be unable to give an alternative final exam. There are two faculty members involved when this occurs; whose responsibility is it to make the accommodation for the student?

It was agreed that before the Committee reached any conclusion on this issue, it should obtain data on the number of students for whom overlapping finals are a problem. Mr. Lewis agreed to provide the

information.

Professor Heller thanked Ms. Grundner and Mr. Lewis for meeting with the Committee.

3. Plus/Minus Grading

Professor Heller next welcomed Associate Dean Jerry Rinehart from the Carlson School of Management to the meeting. He recalled that SCEP had, in 1991, approved a proposal from CSOM to permit plus/minus grading for a five-year period; Mr. Rinehart joined the meeting to report on their experience.

Mr. Rinehart noted that they are nearing the end of their five-year trial period and that they need to gather information to help inform the discussion about possibly moving to a plus-minus grading system. He said they tracked information, the first year they used plus/minus grading, to respond to two major questions: first, would GPAs decline, and second, would there be more disputes about grades because of the finer distinctions between grades.

At the time of their first study, they had about 2600 grades for about 750 juniors and seniors. On the first question, they found no significant change in GPAs, and in fact there was a very slight increase. That may have been attributable to a change in the student body. On the second, which was a significant concern of the faculty, they found that plus/minus grading appears to have REDUCED the incidence of grade disputes. Mr. Rinehart said that in conversations with the core faculty, it is clear that they would be very distraught if they could no longer use plus/minus grading. One could argue for finer and finer distinctions in grading, but there is a significant difference between systems that do and do not permit pluses and minuses. While they were not certain what they were getting into at first, the faculty of CSOM now feel VERY positive about the change, he told the Committee.

There is anecdotal information that the student reaction to the change has been mixed. He has learned from high-achieving students, Mr. Rinehart related, that some do not like the fact there is no A+. For students who want a 4.0 GPA, an A- is a disaster. For the more average students, he said, the system has worked out well. They will do a survey of students, he said, but the question does come up about who should make the decision about grading. The view of the CSOM faculty, he said, is that it would be well worth the effort to change the University's grading system to plus/minus.

Committee members raised a number of points in the ensuing discussion.

- Asked why there is no A+, Mr. Rinehart said it was a matter of philosophy. If an A is perfect, then perfect is perfect; how could a student graduate with a 4.2 GPA? There is, however, room to maneuver on that issue, he thought; the CSOM faculty, he was certain, would rather add an A+ to the system than give up plus/minus grading. Adding the A+ would likely satisfy high achievers, he agreed.
- There is no REQUIREMENT that faculty members use pluses and minuses, although about 90% of the CSOM faculty do so.
- Asked how many different grading systems there are in use at the University, Mr. Lewis said "I

can't count that high." Many of the variations occur because an N may or may not count as an F, for instance. All of these systems except for the CSOM experiment, it was noted, are in violation of Senate policy, even though some of the systems (e.g., the Medical School, the General College) have been in place for decades. Either the Senate policy should be changed or the grading systems should be brought into conformance with it.

- Some faculty (outside of CSOM) put pluses and minuses on their grade reports; students then occasionally wonder what happened to their "+."
- When the Duluth campus changed to pluses and minuses, Mr. Lewis reported, the average GPA declined by 1/100th of a percentage point. There was in essence no effect.
The Committee took up a proposed policy recommendation. Should a plus/minus system not apply to the Medical School, the Law School, or 8-XXX courses? Alternatively, the revised system might not apply to students who are enrolled in those units.

There was general agreement that the Committee should recommend adoption of the plus/minus system, applying to all campuses, pending a report from CSOM with more information on its experience. Further comments followed.

- Adoption of the system would save money over the long run, but not in the short term, because the system would have to maintain information on all the grading systems now in use for students who need records. The motivation of the Committee in recommending the change, however, would not be to save money but to improve grading and to make the University more user-friendly.
- It will be important for students to know how their GPA is calculated; that must be made clear to them. There needs to be a point scale that applies to all students, and the GPA must be calculated the same way for all (so, for example, the N either counts as an F or it does not for everyone).
- The largest faculty concern in making the change has been student reaction. In a poll on the issue in the mid-1980s, students opposed a plus/minus grading system by about 75%; faculty favored it by the same margin. The primary student concern was that GPAs would decline. Professor Koch reported that students in General College are very comfortable with the plus/minus system it uses, although it has been in place for a very long time so there has been no opportunity for them to compare it with other systems.
- The Committee concluded there would be no great advantage to waiting to make a change to a plus/minus system at the same time a change is made to semesters. If anything, it would be better to make this change sooner so it is done and out of the way, because the semester change WILL make great demands on the faculty. For most faculty, it was said, this change would not be that big a deal; it would not require huge effort.
- In order to respond to the concerns of high-achieving students, it was agreed that there could be an A+, to recognize rare and outstanding accomplishment. At the same time, there would be no recognition of any GPA higher than 4.0, although the A+s would appear on a student's transcript. This would permit students who get an A- in one course to offset it with an A+ in another. There could be some grade inflation, it was observed, but the award of an A+ should be rare enough that

the impact should be minimal. (Without an A+ grade, it may be that A students are hurt with a change to pluses and minuses while D students gain, resulting in the observed no net change in overall GPAs. Adding the A+ would eliminate the possibility of a slight reduction in GPAs for high-achieving students. Mr. Lewis agreed to try to provide data on this point; he surmised that the speculation about the A and D students was correct.)

- There should perhaps be included in the grading policy a statement about the purpose of grades and the responsibility of the faculty to make discriminations in student performance. In mastery courses, all students might justifiably receive an A; in others, that would not be the case. Some faculty would prefer that all students master the material in a course, and all receive a high grade, rather than sort students out. That goes to the question of what the institution is about; should it rank students? Some faculty are more comfortable with doing so than others.

It was agreed that Dr. Donahue would draft a new grading policy and system, including adjustment of the language describing each grade to accommodate the possibility that students could receive pluses and minuses. It was noted that there is a great deal of information available from other universities in terms of how they describe their grading systems; that information would be made available to Dr. Donahue. She agreed to bring the redrafted report back to the Committee at the end of the month.

Deliberation turned to the question of what should be included in Senate policies; many practices now in place may be by administrative decision or because it has always been that way. The faculty should decide these policies by Senate action, it was argued, irrespective of current practice. The faculty SHOULD agree on major policy, rather than abdicate decision-making to the administration. This is a housecleaning effort, it was said; the Senate will be asked to re-pass existing policies, eliminate those that are outdated or unwanted, and adopt policies where none now exist.

The Committee agreed that it would have two extra meetings in order to complete its review of Senate educational policies, receive a report from the Council on Liberal Education, and to discuss the peer review of teaching system.

Professor Heller adjourned the meeting at 3:30.

-- Gary Engstrand