

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, January 23, 2002
1:00 – 3:00
385 Mondale Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Shawn Curley, Scott Ferguson, Steve Fitzgerald, Christina Frazier, Gretchen Haas, Geri Malandra, Christine Maziar, Kathleen Newell, Martin Sampson, Mary Ellen Shaw, Mary Sue Simmons, Craig Swan

Absent: Patricia Cavanaugh, Frank Kulacki, Carol Miller, Marsha Odom, Karen Seashore

Guests: Nick Dehnert (Minnesota Student Association)

[In these minutes: (1) legislative accountability riders (metropolitan higher education planning; top five undergraduate programs, graduation "productivity"); (2) graduation and retention rates (a 13-credit-minimum rule, tuition policy, advising); (3) grading issues (use of the I, the W); (4) fall semester on the Twin Cities campus; (5) mid-term alerts]

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:05 and reported that the Committee will act on the nominees for teaching awards at the February 20 meeting. He then turned to Dr. Malandra.

1. Legislative Accountability Riders

Dr. Malandra reported that the reports prepared in response to the legislative riders will go to the Regents at their February meeting for review and information. In the meantime, there have been a few changes in the reports relative to issues that the Committee has discussed.

-- In terms of post-secondary planning with MnSCU (with a focus on the metropolitan area), the definitions of remedial and developmental education have been clarified. To distinguish between the two may be too broad and not capture all the reasons that students may take remedial or developmental courses: Some may take the courses as a refresher. The report now includes a recommendation that the systems gather data on students taking these courses.

-- There is recommendation for future work and a partnership board that would foster more cross-system coordination and oversight.

-- Expand the University/MnSCU partnership degree programs to respond to social needs; the trustees, regents, and provosts are very interested in doing this.

-- In terms of investment in the top five undergraduate programs, it became clear that the Regents were not going to support a report that identified the top five programs because they want broad support for undergraduate education. As a result, the list of areas has been expanded.

* 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 represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

-- In terms of first-generation students, the definition established is that a first-generation student is one neither of whose parents have more than a high-school education. The Admissions Office will develop a method of tracking these students. The Regents asked that the report be clear that the University will not make admissions decisions based on ANY single characteristic.

-- On graduation rates, it was suggested that "graduation productivity" be included: the number of degrees the University awards annually. Because of the shift in the composition of the student body over any period (attrition of new high school students but admission of transfer students), the University still provides a significant service to the state.

Professor Ahern inquired, apropos "graduation productivity," if X students enter as freshmen, and all graduate, the number of graduates would also be X. What would the number be if transfer students were included? Dr. Swan said that on the Twin Cities campus, the number of students who graduate is about equal to the number who are admitted. About 40% of those who receive undergraduate degrees enter the University as transfer students, Dr. Malandra reported.

Does the University have the capacity, at the upper division, to serve all who are admitted as freshmen if it admitted no transfer students, Dr. Maziar asked? It does, Dr. Swan affirmed. This is a concern that could arise on any University campus but is most relevant to the Twin Cities, which receives the most transfer students. If there were no attrition among those admitted as freshmen, the University would be pressed, but that is not the issue. But the capacity to admit transfers depends in part on the rate of retention of new freshmen, Dr. Maziar concluded; Dr. Swan concurred.

In addition, Dr. Shaw pointed out, there is a flow of students FROM the University to MnSCU. Students who leave should not just be called drop-outs. It would help in the long-term if the University could track where students go when they leave. Dr. Swan agreed and said this is a job that the state Higher Education Services Office may do.

Where in the report on post-secondary planning with MnSCU is there discussion about meeting unmet needs for baccalaureate degrees, Professor Ahern asked? Or is that left amorphous. Dr. Malandra admitted that the matter is not clearly resolved. There are areas in which the institutions believe there is growing demand, workforce areas that might be served by applied baccalaureate degrees and career ladder programs that might be served by distributed learning programs; both could be delivered jointly with MnSCU. The overarching concern is access and whether the University and MnSCU provide the most appropriate access in the metropolitan area. There is a lack of agreement on specifics, Dr. Swan concluded, so discussions with MnSCU thus far have remained at a general level.

Professor Sampson joked that the University sounds like a well-run system: It makes errors in its admissions decisions and replaces them with transfer students and everyone graduates! Except that they take too long, Dr. Swan added. And if the University did something about graduation rates, there could be capacity questions, Professor Sampson concluded. If the University reached a 100% graduation rate, that would be true, Dr. Swan conceded; at the same time, even if the University improves graduation rates, it is facing constant high school graduation rates and then a trend down in seven or eight years. Improving graduation rates could be a way to deal with a declining number of high school graduates.

2. Graduation and Retention

Professor Ahern noted that the last discussion of graduation and retention was somewhat directionless. Next Tuesday the Committee on Finance and Planning is discussing tuition strategy, although this is essentially an educational policy discussion, not a financial issue. Today, he said, the Committee will hear from students about the retention report and the proposal for 13-credit rule. He turned to Mr. Dehnert for a presentation from the Minnesota Student Association.

Mr. Dehnert began by saying that Dan Kelly, the President of MSA and chief author of the MSA report, was unable to attend and sends his apologies. The MSA position paper does not look at the positive or negative aspects of a 13-credit rule but rather the way the issue is being framed. The current approach ignores quality of education issues at the University and places the responsibility on the shoulders of the students rather than the whole University. He said he hoped that the Committee would take the position that the University must also look at financial aid, orientation, advising, student-faculty interaction, the need for students to work, and so on. In addition, something like a 13-credit rule takes the responsibility for student decisions about their education out of their hands.

Professor Newell said she wondered how many students start to work in high school and like having the discretionary income, so continue working in college. Because they work they may be stretching out their college education; perhaps they could do without the work if they took out loans. Mr. Dehnert said his personal situation was that he was not allowed to work in high school and his parents are paying for college. Many of his friends, however, are not in that situation and have no choice about working.

Mr. Ferguson next reported to the Committee the variety of comments he had solicited from students about a proposed 13-credit rule.

- work is important, especially with tuition and housing costs increasing
- some want to study abroad, so work more and take fewer credits in order to save money
- freshmen get over their heads so drop classes so they can get their study habits in order (especially in IT)
- student-athletes are often red-shirted, must travel a lot, and have to work out about 20 hours per week
- some students gradually increase the number of credits they take as their study habits improve
- a major concern is the amount of work required for a 3-credit course versus a 4-credit course: some 3-credit courses require more work than a 4-credit course. If a student is to be full-time, he or she must take five 3-credit courses, which may realistically mean the equivalent of taking 20 credits. Many students are confused by the discrepancy in workload between 3- and 4-credit courses. If there is a 13-credit rule, some may take a gym class or something else just for the sake of taking 13 credits, not because they need it. Students agree that they should graduate faster but do not support this rule.
- some classes are only offered in the fall or the spring so students must come back to take them
- academic counselors tell students to take courses they do not need
- in terms of the flat rate, students have to be informed about the benefits of getting their degree; not enough is said
- there need to be clear steps toward a major; IT does well, but sometimes students must take 17 credits per term in order to graduate in four years

Professor Ahern invited Committee members to respond to the points Mr. Ferguson made or to the position that MSA has taken. The Committee will take no action today but will hear from the Finance and Planning Committee and then decide what it wishes to do.

Mr. Dehnert said he would frame the issue as involving several factors for students: work, campus involvement, social life, and academic work. If the University wants students to emphasize their academic work, sacrifices will have to come in other areas. Students will not sacrifice their social life and many will not give up campus involvement, so they take fewer credits. If the emphasis is to be on academic work, that means looking at financial aid. In addition, advising for students can take more time than provide help.

Professor Cardwell said he had several thoughts. Both students touched on advising; in the students he sees (about 40), those who self-advise are the ones who get in trouble because they are not aware of when courses are offered and run into other problems—they have a plan that does not work. It may be that there are parts of the University that do not have either the quality or amount of advising students may need, he conceded, but if one is to point the finger at advising, the University must have mechanisms whereby students can avail themselves of it. It is imperative to look at how to support advising AND how to get students to use it.

Students working is a difficult issue and the University may not be able to get a handle on it. The increases in tuition and housing costs are substantial; student employees received wage increases but not in proportion to their cost increases. The question is how to balance cost against timeline; many students make a rational decision to take five years because they know they can handle 12 credits and 20 hours of work per week. The University needs a better handle on this before it condemns student choice to take more than four years to graduate.

"Some of struggle with this question: Why is the University of Minnesota different?" Dr. Maziar commented. Other public research universities have a different profile of student credit loads; why? The student bodies at these universities have similar backgrounds.

It would be interesting to look at the number of activities different campuses have for students to get involved with, Ms. Frazier said; there are many enriching activities, which is why it takes students longer to graduate. Mr. Ferguson said the University is in a larger city than most; many major universities are in small towns so students stay on campus more. That is a good thing because they can focus on their education, Dr. Maziar responded; it is the one time in their lives that students can do so.

There are also more distractions in a larger city, Mr. Ferguson said. Students may also take a bus to work, which takes a lot of time; work-study programs on campus should be encouraged. Dr. Maziar agreed that students would be helped if the transit system served them better.

In the course of earlier conversation, it had been said that some students may take fewer courses in order to do better in them, thus presenting a transcript with better grades, enhancing a student's chances for graduate or professional school or a job. Taking only two or three courses a term in order to do better could have an insidious effect, Professor Sampson mused. Instructors try to watch the workload in their courses, and if they find students can do more, they may assign more.

That, however, is unfair to students who are taking a full load. Most instructors want to teach a course that offers a workload compatible with being a full-time student.

There are some lock-step majors in which students do graduate in four years; is there anything that can be learned from them, Professor Sampson asked?

On the issue of students working, he said, from his conversations with undergraduates it appears that in many cases parents are happy their child is working: it will help them develop skills of self-reliance and it also may mean the student has less time to spend on activities that will worry the parents. It offers some reassurance if a student has a job.

In terms of freshmen being overwhelmed, Professor Newell asked, is there a way to provide study skills information in orientation to help them get over the initial transition to college? She also noted that she directs a lock-step program (dental hygiene); they have positives and negatives. The program does not have many electives and 99% graduate with their class (students come in as sophomores and take three years to get a degree). If a student misses part of the program, they must drop back a year. Out of an entering class of 36, they will lose 1-2 who decide the program is not for them and perhaps one more (in three years) for academic reasons. Her major regret about the program is that students do not have very much time for liberal education courses.

Dr. Simmons, recalling Dr. Maziar's question about what is different about Minnesota, said one of the key words she picked up on is involvement in the life of the University beyond being a student. She said the high school programs have a component that includes community service or civic activity; she said she likes the idea that citizenship within the University is part of what a land-grant institution should be about, and one assumes that such involvement will continue in the lives of students after they leave the University. The University is not special in that regard, Dr. Maziar responded; she has been at two other major research universities and students are just as involved and active there as at Minnesota.

Ms. Haas pointed out that the proposal for a 13-credit rule is to address the problem of students who do not graduate in six years--or ever. If a student takes 12 credits per term, they will graduate in less than six years. The 13-credit rule will not solve the problem. Changing the atmosphere and the culture, however, would be different.

Dr. Swan at this point enunciated his thoughts on the various points that had been made. The 13-credit rule is not a magic bullet, he began; that by itself it will not transform the University. The Graduation and Retention Task Force began with the presumption that students are here to get an education and that graduation is an important marker of student success. Graduation brings to closure a course of study and is a goal worth striving for. Competency in a major, a broad education, and completion are important intellectually AND FINANCIALLY for students. Students who graduate do not just have more credits, they also make 15-20% more than students who do not finish. The idea behind the Graduation and Retention report was to provide a series of recommendations to help students toward the goal of graduation. He said he REJECTS the notion of blaming the student; the intent is to work with students in helping them achieve success. Students must change but so must the University. Students and the University must work together on the issues identified by MSA, but in the CONTEXT of improving graduation rates, of which a 13-credit rule should be part.

-- Dr. Swan agreed that credit for a course should be aligned with workload so that five 3-credit courses are not like taking 20 credits. Earlier comments suggest that workload may not be aligned correctly.

-- There is no clear answer to "what is different about Minnesota." He said he would like to see every student have a written graduation plan by the end of their first year. Many students may have such a plan in their head, or their advisor may have one, but they are not usually written down. The student need not know what he or she will major in, but such a plan would help prepare for a major. In general, students need to get in to the University, do their work, and get on with their lives.

-- Colleges have been talking about extending orientation advising over the first semester or year; some do this more than others.

-- One of the pieces of evidence from the dental hygiene program is that setting clear expectations helps overcome the problem of getting behind. That is the advantage of the 13-credit rule: it sets clear expectations. It says that if a young person comes to the University, completing an education is their first priority (which does mean that other activities are not also important). Any such policy must be administered in a humane way (some of those taking courses could be University employees on Regents' scholarships, and they must work full time). Those who want to graduate but who have family responsibilities or learning disabilities, for example, should be allowed to pursue degrees.

-- On the issue of study abroad, the Global Campus takes the position that it should not be exempt from degree requirements and timely graduation; rather, study abroad should be integrated into the program. The University has a sizeable grant to further curriculum integration of study abroad so it is not separate from a student's regular academic program.

-- The issue of students working comes up again and again. Students can work and be full-time students. Athletes, for example, have the equivalent commitment in addition to rules set by the Big Ten and NCAA; they must meet the rules or they do not play—and there is serious talk about increasing the requirement for athletes to 14 credits per term. The question about work is the amount. In one recent national study, there was a distinction between an employee taking courses and a student who works; those who identified themselves in the latter category did much better in terms of graduating.

-- In terms of tuition increases, the University is in a situation where public policy now calls on students to be responsible for more of the cost of their education. That is a large change in public policy. Minnesota in this respect is no different from the rest of the country. There may be circumstances when accepting an appropriate amount of student loans can be in the best interest of the student: If taking out a \$2000 or \$3000 loan means a student graduates in four years rather than five or six, that means a student would have one or two years' more earnings, which could be worth much more than a reasonable level of loan. Given current public policy, taking on an appropriate level of loan can be in the student's best interest.

Ms. Haas agreed. She said also that the evidence from other schools suggests there is no single solution to the graduation rate issue. She is a graduate student, but said she believes a 13-credit policy would be a responsible thing for the University to adopt. She suggested the Committee pass a

motion in favor of such a policy and that it also urge the University to take up the other suggestions for changes needed in order for the policy to be feasible (e.g., full-year registration, education about financial aid, advising, the credit-to-work ratio).

The question that arises in many discussions is what happens if somebody does not do what is recommended, Dr. Rovick pointed out. There should be repercussions; if not, the policy has no teeth. What happens if a student does not register for a full load (if required by policy) and does not obtain the required exemption; does he or she still pay full tuition? Or will there be many waivers?

Mr. Dehnert said he liked the idea of setting expectations but wondered if they are being set wrong. Many students come to the University so they can get a job, not an education, and work is as important as classes: They get good grades in order to get a good job. Taking fewer courses and spending more time on them, to get better grades, makes sense if one is in college to get a job. The time working also means gaining experience; graduating two years earlier does mean two more years of earnings, but perhaps not as good a job as could have been obtained with more experience. Dr. Swan responded that he would be glad if students just graduated, period.

Professor Curley said he agreed with Dr. Rovick that the problem with the 13-credit rule will be teeth, which is the reason he endorses the Committee on Finance and Planning looking at tuition models. That is the cleanest approach, he said. But he is hearing conflicting messages about the goal of graduating in four versus six years, which has implications for the number in a policy on minimum enrollment.

Twelve credits is defined by federal guidelines and is the absolute minimum, Dr. Maziar said. Professor Ahern noted that 12 credits is defined in many places as full time, so some ask why use 13 credits when 12 credits per term will lead to graduation in five years. He said he agreed with Ms. Haas that whatever the Committee says, any motion should be tied to the other issues that have been identified. What will be the cost of making other things happen as well, he asked? In a world of higher tuition and no guarantee of increased aid, is the University not saying that an education will cost more? Dr. Swan said the University has increased the allocation of funds for financial aid and he would argue that it should do so again.

Professor Ahern agreed that a 13-credit rule would not be a silver bullet and expressed the hope that any Committee action would point to multiple steps that should be taken, as suggested in the Graduation and Retention report.

On the question of advising, Professor Ahern continued, students come to the University wanting to graduate; advising can help clarify what that takes and help students develop a 4-year plan. What is known about current advising and what may need fixing? He said he has heard that some ADVISORS agree students should not graduate in four or five years. Professor Newell recalled that in years past students in pre-health-sciences programs were advised to take 12 credits in order to make their transcript more competitive—but the programs in the AHC want to see how a student handles a heavy load. There was a disconnect between the advisors and the programs. Dr. Swan said there is a lot of anecdotal evidence, and that the story about students going in to health sciences programs was probably true a number of years ago, but that advisors in CLA are now approaching advising very differently.

Another problem is that advisors are committed to student progress but often have difficulty getting good information, Dr. Shaw said; it would be especially helpful if there were graduation plans for upper division programs. She added that she initially believed in a 12-credit policy but now thinks a 13-credit rule would be acceptable; that leaves a small buffer for the 12-credit minimum required by federal financial aid policy. Her biggest concern, she said, is making known the policy and not making it a lot more expensive and embarrassing for students who cannot meet it. It will also be necessary to build the program, perhaps through advising, so that it is not merely another hoop students must pass through—perhaps by just adding another course. What will be key to the policy's effectiveness is students working toward a target, so they will need to see an advisor to be sure they take the right courses.

Dr. Maziar said she applauded the idea of a written graduation plan. Such plans might also help Mr. Fitzgerald develop a long-term plan for course demand and classroom commitments.

The next step is to draft a statement and take a position on the proposal and to identify other issues that must be addressed. The statement will go to the Senate. For now, however, the Committee will wait on the Committee on Finance and Planning (although, Professor Ahern added, he sees flat tuition as more coercive than a 13-credit rule). Flat tuition has many varieties, Dr. Swan said, that ranges from the Northwestern University model to a tuition band.

Dr. Swan said that in the letter from the President and Provost, and in conversations he believed the two have had with the Faculty Consultative Committee, they have taken the position that a 13-credit requirement is within the purview of the deans and does not need Senate action. The students have argued that there should be campus autonomy. There has not been very much discussion about how such a policy would be implemented; one could imagine it being phased in with students beginning at the University in 2002.

If the decision on credits could be at the college level, Professor Ahern said, the colleges should also look at policies that may get in the way of students graduating within six years. And they should look at policies that would help students graduate.

Professor Ahern thanked Mr. Dehnert for joining the meeting.

3. Grading Matters

There has been raised a question about how the Incomplete (I) is being awarded: there may be a contrast between the policy and the practice. The policy provides that an I is only to be awarded in extraordinary circumstances; the practice may be more loose. There is certainly abuse of the I at the graduate level, Dr. Maziar commented. At Duluth, Dr. Rovick reported, a student may not graduate with an I on the record; it must be cleared up.

This may need attention from the Committee.

There has also been raised a question about the most recent interpretation of the grading policy accepted by the Senate, which provides that a grade may not be converted to a withdrawal (W) once more than a year has lapsed since the grade was entered on the transcript. Dr. Shaw raised the issue; she said it goes to the question of whether the W is a registration symbol or a grade. If a student takes

a W during a term, the instructor has nothing to do with it. In the colleges, changing a grade to a W is a matter of correcting a record. But the approach of belatedly changing it does not reflect reality, Dr. Maziar objected.

A student may leave and not return to the University until much later, Dr. Shaw said; she sees perhaps a dozen such students each term. The cap on one year to make the change does not make sense; it is not like changing a B to a C or an I to a B. She said this is not a grade change. If a student receives a semester of F grades, it looks like he or she left the University before the end of the term. If they want to come back later, they are suspended or on probation. General College allows a retroactive cancel so the transcript entries are W's, not F's. (The college will verify, however, that the student did not actually fail the course, in which case an F would NOT be converted to a W.)

Is there a sense that the most recent interpretation of the grading system would not allow this retroactive change, Professor Ahern inquired? If a student is gone more than a year, the grades could not be changed, she said. His question, Professor Ahern replied, is whether, with ANY policy, there are exceptions? Dr. Swan agreed; that is the role of college scholastic standing committees. He said he saw no inconsistency between the interpretation and students seeking an exception. If it is a policy with no effect, why call it a grade change, Dr. Shaw asked? In practice, no one is enforcing the policy.

The standard is that a student seeking an exemption from any policy has to explain the circumstances to a scholastic standing committee. Dr. Maziar agreed, saying a change should be an EXCEPTION, and college scholastic standing committees need to play an oversight role.

What problem is the interpretation intended to solve, Dr. Shaw asked? Students have a year to petition to change a grade; after that, the matter is settled, Professor Ahern said. It is Dr. Shaw's view that the W is only a registration symbol, but others see it as a grade, as part of the system; if it is to replace a grade, such a change must be reviewed.

Dr. Rovick reminded the Committee that financial aid comes into play as well. If a student is cancelled out of a term two years earlier, the books have already been closed on financial aid for that year, but there could be an implication for audits. The Committee needs to be cautious in allowing changes too easily because there are implications outside the transcript. Professor Ahern agreed and related that the Morris Registrar told him that there is a need for flexibility; sometimes the slate can be wiped clean and in other cases there have to be W's entered for financial aid reasons.

4. Calendar

On the question of 70- versus 75-day semesters, Professor Ahern reported, current policy allows for 70-day semesters on the Twin Cities campus. To curtail the Fall Semester, so finals do not run right up to Christmas, raises the question of whether the Spring Semester should be the same length. He said the Committee will not act on this issue without wider consultation.

Dr. Swan said the conversations he has had have all related to a 70-day Fall Semester because it presses on the holiday. That is one thing. He said he has NOT had any discussions about reducing the length of BOTH semesters from 15 to 14 weeks.

5. Mid-Term Alerts

The Committee voted unanimously in favor of a motion establishing policy requiring mid-term alerts for students who have a D, F, or N. Following discussion at the November 28, 2001, meeting, it was agreed a draft motion would be circulated by email. The Committee now approved the draft that had been prepared.

Professor Ahern adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota