

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, September 14, 2005
2:30 – 4:30
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Richard McCormick (chair), William Bart, Vernon Cardwell, Shawn Curley, LeAnn Dean, (George Green for) Gail Dubrow, James Leger, Claudia Neuhauser, Christopher Pappas, Mary Ellen Shaw, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Craig Swan, Douglas Wangenstein

Absent: Emily Ronning, Paul Siliciano, Joel Weinsheimer

Guests: Tina Falkner (Office of the Registrar)

[In these minutes: (1) University expectations of incoming students in mathematics; (2) the I after graduation; (3) course repeats after graduation; (4) instructor discretion to set the level of S; (5) revisions to Morse-Alumni award rules; (6) academic probation/suspension rules; (7) retroactivity of credit residency requirement; (8) strategic planning task forces]

1. University Expectations of Incoming Students in Mathematics

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:35 and said that he had asked Vice Provost Swan to introduce a discussion about the University's expectations of incoming students in mathematics. The issue will be brought back to the Committee after it is discussed by the undergraduate deans.

Dr. Swan distributed a handout with two elements: one, a summary of a national study about factors affecting bachelor's degree attainment, one of the findings of which is that "of all pre-college curricula, the highest level of mathematics one studies in secondary school has the strongest continuing influence on bachelor's degree completion. Finishing a course beyond the level of Algebra 2 (for example, trigonometry or pre-calculus) more than doubles the odds that a student who enters post-secondary education will complete a bachelor's degree." At present the University tells students they must have three years of high-school math, four if they are thinking about Biological Sciences, IT or the Carlson School. The question is whether the University should think about requiring four years of math for all incoming students. (The national study found that math is increasingly used in virtually all fields.)

There are data about the University's Twin Cities campus retention rate and GPA for students with and without four years of math in high school. Across all colleges, the retention rate for students without four years of math is 79.3% (fall 2003 cohort); for those with four years of math, it is 87.7%. The first year GPA of the same cohort, without and with four years of math, was 2.79 and 3.06, respectively.

People ask if there is something especially important about math. It is more likely the habits of mind and analytic rigor from the study of math that help, Dr. Swan surmised. He said he has spoken with six school superintendents around Minnesota about the proposal and has encountered little opposition.

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

This issue, he added, will come back to the Committee because the proposal, if approved by SCEP, would also require Senate approval.

Committee members asked questions or made points.

- Would a requirement affect all colleges and campuses? It would: four years or the equivalent of math.
- Professor Leger said he is a strong advocate of math and believes that students do not have enough training in it; however, he wondered about the cause-effect relationship in the data Dr. Swan presented; do the data identify smart students? He also wondered about students who might be extremely good in literature or music and wanted to enter the University to concentrate in those areas, where more math might not be essential. Such students could survive well at the University. Dr. Swan agreed that there may be a selection bias in the data but noted again that math is increasingly showing up across virtually all disciplines and that by requiring only three years of math in high school, the University is sending the wrong signals to students at lower levels.
- Professor Cardwell agreed with Professor Leger. From the viewpoint of the high schools, the University's decision to require two years of a language put a lot of stress on them; what impact would a requirement of four years of math have? And what would it do for students' flexibility in course selection in high school? It would be better if the University HIGHLY RECOMMENDED four years of math and left the choice to individuals. If the University adds another requirement, it is possible that other courses that contribute to a well-rounded high school education will be pushed out. Dr. Swan reported that if one looks at incoming students in colleges other than Biological Sciences, IT, or the Carlson School, about 80% already take four years of high-school math. He agreed that the language requirement required adjustment by the high schools, but the University thought that was the right thing to do. It might decide that the same thing is true for math. It also seems likely that the requirement would have only marginal effects on school districts. He said he has the sense that with the possible exception of English and some humanities fields, math is becoming more and more important in many disciplines.
- Dean Green said he was not persuaded by the correlation of the data because there is no demonstration of a causal relationship with math. But the proposal is worth considering because it would set more rigorous expectations of high schools. Students sometimes cut back on math before they should, which cuts them out of majors and careers at which they might be good. Other things may seem more important when concerns for peer approval are raging between 9th and 12th grade, especially for young women, which could have an effect on their numbers in scientific and mathematical fields. Students in high school may not understand the implications of taking fewer math courses; a University requirement could help them keep their options open.
- Professor Neuhauser said she supported the four-year requirement even though she did not believe the data showed any causation. She agreed with Dean Green: to not take four years of math cuts students off from careers.
- Dr. Shaw said she sees many students who want to go into technical fields but who have to make up 1-2 years of math in order to do so. She expressed concern, however, that an increased math

requirement not "select out" students who may not take four years of math because of sociological or personal problems. The University needs to send a message about keeping the bar high but also keep in mind students who might inappropriately be cut out. Any change the University makes would have to allow lead time for students, Dr. Swan agreed; if the University were to decide now to change the requirement, it would be effective for new students in the fall of 2010.

- Professor Wangenstein said he supported the idea but asked if there would be more details in a Senate item: would ANY math be acceptable or would students be asked to take math up to a certain level? The requirement would talk about level, Dr. Swan said, such "up to pre-calculus," and perhaps serious a statistics course could go toward meeting the requirement, but not business math or consumer math. Professor Bart agreed that quality and type of math are important, otherwise students could end up taking a lot of math that would not help them.

- Anything the University can do to help high schools become more rigorous is good, and it is better if students get the message early on about what is required for the University, Professor McCormick commented. When he served on the Council on Liberal Education, some faculty from engineering and the sciences wanted to increase the University's math requirement, and there was majority sentiment to do so, but the Council learned that this proposal was beyond its charge. The math department has found that the high schools are the right place to deal with students who have had problems meeting the University's requirements.

The issue will come back to the Committee, Professor McCormick repeated, and he thanked Dr. Swan for introducing the issue.

2. The "I" (Incomplete) After Graduation

Professor McCormick turned next to changes in the grading policy. Dr. Falkner explained that an audit of policies in the Registrar's office brought to light the fact that the grading policy has contradictory provisions concerning what happens to an I after graduation. The policy provides that an I remains an I permanently if a student graduates with the I on the record. The policy contains a footnote providing that the I converts to an F or an N, depending on the grading system the student enrolled under, after one year.

The proposal before the Committee is to delete the footnote and confirm the provision that the I remains an I permanently (which has been the provision the Registrar's office has been following). Professor McCormick said the University does not want people changing transcripts after graduation and endorsed the clarification.

The Committee voted unanimously in favor of the proposal.

3. Course Repeats After Graduation

Dr. Falkner next reported that in the last several months the Registrar's office has received requests from students who, after graduating, want to repeat a course they took before graduation and have the post-graduation grade count in their degree GPA and the first grade bracketed. The policy now provides that students have a year to petition a grade change, even if they have graduated, or if there are errors in the transcript. But this is not covered. The proposal before the Committee is to prohibit

repeating a course after graduation and having it affect the graduation GPA. The proposal also confirms the long-standing practice that except for certain stipulated reasons (e.g., errors), the transcript is "frozen" at the time of graduation.

Professor Neuhauser agreed that there should be no changes to the transcript after graduation, because students could retake any number of courses and obtain higher grades.

Dr. Swan asked who was making these requests. Students who are getting bad advice from graduate and professional schools, Dr. Falkner surmised. Dean Green pointed out that the student could retake the course as a way to persuade a graduate or professional school that he or she had mastered the materials without any change being made in the University's transcript.

The Committee voted unanimously in favor of the change.

4. Instructor Discretion to Set the Standard for an S

Professor McCormick turned to Dr. Swan for an explanation of this item. Dr. Swan said the issue arose in part because of a case last spring. A student took a course S/N and would have received a C+, but the instructor set the standard for an S at B-, so the student received an N. The course was critical for the student to graduate and he felt it was not fair to receive an N because he would have passed if he had taken the course on the A-F grading scale. At the Duluth campus, Dr. Swan reported, faculty do not know if a student has enrolled for a course S-N; grades are submitted and the registrar's office automatically changes letter grades to S or N, as appropriate and the instructor has no discretion in setting the bar for the S. While he was not party to the original discussion of the grading policy that allowed for instructor discretion, Dr. Swan thought the student had a point. He said that there was no issue about whether the student knew that the standard for the S was a B-.

Professor Neuhauser commented that since the transcript does not indicate that a student will fail with less than a B-, this should not happen. Professor Cardwell said the rationale was that a C is identified as meeting course requirements, so the C- is the lowest C a student may receive and still have a satisfactory grade. He said he was surprised that some instructors would set the standard for an S higher than a C- and said he favored the Duluth system, which would remove the judgmental decision from the instructor.

Committee members noted that (1) the grading policy allows departments and instructors to forbid S-N enrollment in some courses, (2) some courses in the major may not be taken S-N, and (3) some courses in a major may ONLY be taken S-N. Any change in instructor discretion with respect to the S would not affect those policy provisions.

The Committee discussed but did not act on the notion of changing to the Duluth system. Dean Green pointed out, however, that if the system were adopted, and instructors did not know which students enrolled on an S-N basis, that would remove the incentive for a "workaround" to fudge the grade to get the result the instructor wanted for a student enrolled S-N. Some faculty may have decided that a C- is too low for a pass, and they don't want to give an S for what they see as lousy work, but setting the S equal to a B- is too high. If instructors are using C's that way (for lousy work), Professor McCormick observed, they are misusing the grade, which is supposed to represent mastery of course materials. It may

be a response to grade inflation, Professor Leger said, but the Committee should not condone the practice—if a C is a passing grade, then a C should be an S.

The Committee voted unanimously to eliminate instructor discretion in setting a higher standard for an S than a C-.

5. Revisions to the Morse-Alumni Award

Professor McCormick noted that Committee members had received via email proposed revisions to the Morse-Alumni Award rules (not the policy). He recalled that the nominating committee last year made a number of recommendations and suggestions, following its experience in dealing with the dossiers, to streamline the process and standardize the format of the files. SCEP received the suggestions, sent them to the Academy of Distinguished Teachers, which proposed revisions, and then an ad hoc committee for former SCEP chairs reviewed the proposal and has made recommendations to the Committee.

Professor Cardwell, who was on the nominating committee last year, explained the problems they had encountered (e.g., some files used an 8-point font to stay within the established page limits). The nominating committee wants to review the files on the merits, not on the characteristics of the files. Other issues revolved around the presentation of courses taught at the University and the student evaluation results (which use different scales on the different campuses). The nominating committee wanted standardized files and to stipulate the sources of letters of recommendation.

The revisions continue to allow consideration of the breadth of contributions, including program development as well as classroom instruction. They also make clear that simply turning in a CV is not acceptable. The Committee discussed whether it would be a problem for departments to provide summary statistical data on student evaluation results; Dr. Swan said that some of the data could be provided by the central administration and the departments would be able to do the relevant calculations.

Dean Green cautioned against imposing too many requirements on departments because many do not make nominations due to the workload. In small departments, it is difficult to get individuals to nominate. In big, well-organized departments, assignments are shared. Any data requirements imposed on small departments "could be a killer." Dr. Swan said the administration would be able to provide candidate scores but providing departmental averages would be more complicated. Presumably departmental averages are used for promotion and tenure files, so should be available for use with nominations. Colleges could also help small departments, Professor McCormick observed. He also pointed out that it is in the interest of small departments to have standardized files so that they are similar and larger departments with more resources cannot develop more attractive files.

Professor Bart suggested that the files and student evaluation results should distinguish between academic year and summer courses—because often facilities are too hot or too cold and instructors are punished on the evaluation forms. Summer courses should be excluded.

What about written comments on student evaluations, Professor Neuhauser asked? They should be captured in nomination letters, Professor Cardwell said. The nominating committee should not be provided raw evaluation comments.

It was noted that dossiers of those who win the award are public. Dr. Swan asked if there should be language in the letters soliciting nominations informing those who write letters that they will be public if the individual receives the award. Professor Cardwell thought there is an obligation to let people know. Dean Green commented that he doubted there would be much harm to the award winners themselves if their dossier is public.

Professor Cardwell suggested that the forms requesting information about the nominees classes should include information about class sizes, because evaluation results from large classes are always lower than those from small classes. If someone has taught primarily large classes, he or she could be at a disadvantage because student evaluation numbers could be lower.

The Committee unanimously approved the recommended changes, subject to some final revisions to the tables by Dean Green and Professor Cardwell.

6. Academic Probation/Suspension Rules

Dr. Shaw reviewed proposed changes in the academic probation and suspension rules, which the Committee had considered last spring. The biggest change is eliminating ambiguity in the language: the current language allows a student to have a good semester, a bad semester, a good one, a bad one, and be on probation a long time. She said it would help to get this through by the end of the semester so that it can be effective for spring.

The Committee voted unanimously to approve the changes.

7. Residency Requirement Retroactivity

Professor McCormick reported that a question had arisen about whether the new residency requirement (the number of credits that must be earned at the University in order to obtain a University degree) is retroactive. The Committee agreed by consensus that it would issue an interpretation of the policy declaring that the provisions would be effective for students entering the University fall, 2005.

8. Strategic Planning Task Forces

Professor McCormick reminded his colleagues that the Committee had talked at the retreat about the charges to the strategic planning task forces. He said he wanted to be sure that Committee members had read them, especially for the task forces related to undergraduate reform, to see what is in them and what might be missing. There will be an FCC representative on each of the steering committees, so any comments from SCEP members can go to that person, or to the task forces.

Professor McCormick adjourned the meeting at 4:20.

-- Gary Engstrand