

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, March 21, 2001
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Prince Amattoey, Shawn Curley, Khaled Dajani, Steve Fitzgerald, Christina Frazier, Gordon Hirsch, Frank Kulacki, Karen Seashore, (George Green for) Christine Maziar (as well as Christine Maziar in person), Carol Miller, Kathleen Newell, Marsha Odom, Martin Sampson, Mary Ellen Shaw, Rita Snider, Thomas Soulen

Regrets: Geri Malandra, Steven Sperber, Rachel Sullivan, Craig Swan

Absent: none

Guests: Susan VanVoorhis (Office of the Registrar)

[In these minutes: (1) correction about Crookston nominees for the Morse-Alumni award; (2) minimum credits for a University degree; (3) Interpretation of Grading Policy (use of pluses and minuses not required) and a policy on syllabi (they should be required); (4) report from the IMG subcommittee (impact of IMG); (6) grading data to the Senate]

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:05, reviewed the agenda, and noted that with respect to the question of requiring a syllabus, the Classroom Expectations Guidelines call for a syllabus to be provided; no one, in response to an email he sent to Committee members, suggested changing that guideline to a requirement. [Much more on this topic, however, later in these minutes.]

1. Correction

In the minutes of February 28, 2001, it was written that there were no nominees from the Crookston campus for the Morse-Alumni award for outstanding contributions to undergraduate education. That was incorrect; there were two nominees from Crookston.

2. Minimum Credits for a University Degree

Professor Ahern turned to Professor Hirsch for a recommendation from the Subcommittee on Credits and Degrees. Professor Hirsch distributed a draft proposal and commented that other items of business from the subcommittee would be presented to the Committee later. Professor Hirsch's draft read as follows:

DRAFT: MINIMUM UNIVERSITY CREDITS FOR UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES

(1) To be eligible for a University of Minnesota undergraduate degree, a student must present at least 30 semester credits awarded by the University of Minnesota.

* 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.

(2) These 30 credits must include at least 24 credits taken after admission to the student's major or program, and these 24 credits must be taken from the college (in the case of the Twin Cities Campus) or campus (in the case of Morris and Crookston) offering the major or program.

(3) Of the last 30 credits earned prior to the award of a University degree, at least 15 credits must be awarded by the University of Minnesota.

A student's college or campus may waive the requirements in sections 2 and 3 above, but not section 1.

All credit awarded by the University, regardless of the type of instruction, shall count toward the credit requirements for the degree.

Comment: The Senate has not to date passed a policy on this matter adjusted for semester credits. The previous quarter-system Senate policy required that 45 quarter credits be earned at the University of Minnesota for a degree, and this substantially conforms with that. The Twin Cities Campus Assembly adopted the Standard Undergraduate Academic Policies and Practices, which called for (1) 30 semester credits at the U of M, (2) 24 semester credits at the U of M following the declaration of a major or program, and (3) 20 semester credits at the U of M of the student's final 30 credits. Morris Campus officials noted that the third, 20-credit rule, might result in hardship for some students, as it would impose a residency requirement that could not readily be met in one term. Thus we propose a 15 semester-credit rule for #3, which would apply to Twin Cities, Morris, & Crookston campuses, and which would replace that small portion of the Twin Cities Campus Standard Undergraduate Academic Policies. [Duluth is not included because it is not governed by Senate policy.]

There is no policy governing residency requirements for semesters; this proposal, Professor Hirsch told the Committee, essentially amalgamates existing Twin Cities policy with the previous Senate policy governing residency requirements when the University was on the quarter calendar. The point of the second and third provisions is that students do the majority of their program work where the degree is awarded and that at least one-half of the final year be at the University of Minnesota.

Professor Hirsch related that one of the members of the subcommittee, Professor Sperber (who could not be at this meeting), thinks that the 30-credit requirement is too small and would prefer 45 credits. The subcommittee agreed that the requirement is pretty minimal but the number acknowledges that the University has a large number of transfer students and that it wants to facilitate their graduation.

Ms. VanVoorhis reported on the residency requirements at other institutions in the Big Ten; they are: Wisconsin 30, Illinois 30, Penn State 36 of the last 60, Purdue 32, Michigan State 30, at Michigan it is up to each college. The subcommittee recommendation is clearly at the norm of the Big Ten.

With respect to point #2, Ms. VanVoorhis inquired if a student in CLA could take some of the 24 credits in IT. Professor Hirsch said that the college has discretion in deciding that, especially since it is the colleges that issue degree clearances. It may be that CLA would wish one of its students to use IT credits to complete a degree. This policy gives authority to the colleges and majors to decide what credits they will accept.

Professor Odom commented that the last provision, #3, is quite different from the current requirement at Crookston. This proposal provides that courses from ANY University campus would be

acceptable; the current Crookston rule is that the 24 credits must be from the Crookston campus. The draft would permit a student to take credits from Crookston to the Twin Cities and earn only 24 credits from the Twin Cities to obtain a degree on the Twin Cities campus. Ms. VanVoorhis said that would happen only very seldom; when students transfer they almost always lose credits and have to take more.

The concern at the Morris campus was that students would come to the Twin Cities for their last semester of work but still graduate from the Morris campus. What is objectionable about that, Dr. Green asked? A student would take two or three courses on the Twin Cities campus but still obtain the degree from Morris. The concern was that students would NOT be able to do that; this proposal permits it, which satisfies the Morris campus, Professor Ahern said.

Professor Hirsch said the subcommittee wanted to allow for as much flexibility as possible and treated the University as one system but with obligations on the part of the student to do a certain amount of work in the major program.

Committee members made several points.

-- One must realize that when students transfer they often lose credits and must take more in order to graduate.

-- In an increasingly mobile world, the University does not want to turn away students who only need one more year of study to graduate.

-- This is too few credits; a student could earn 90 credits at Somewhere Southwest Tech and then graduate from Minnesota with 30 credits. One would prefer that students transfer the University of Minnesota credits back to their original institution and obtain the degree from it. The contrary view is that the University is saying that if students can succeed in 24 credits from the major department at Minnesota, they should be able to obtain a degree from Minnesota.

-- Students must also meet the University's liberal education requirements.

Without further ado the Committee unanimously approved the proposed policy.

Professor Hirsch said that there would be additional written reports from the subcommittee at upcoming meetings.

3. Interpretation of the Grading Policy & Policy on Syllabi

The Committee next took up a draft Interpretation of the Senate Grading and Transcript Policy; the Interpretation is intended to make it clear that instructors are not obligated to use pluses and minuses. The Interpretation read as follows:

1. There are two distinct grading systems on each campus of the University of Minnesota, A-B-C-D-F (with pluses and minuses) and S-N. The S-N system is a self-contained alternative to the A-F system and the two may not be combined for a particular student in a particular course. Students may receive grades or symbols only from the grading system under which they have registered for a course.

Interpretation by the Committee on Educational Policy: The policy does not require any instructor to use pluses and minuses.

COMMENT:

There continue to be questions addressed to the Senate office about whether or not instructors are obligated to use pluses and minuses. The Committee on Educational Policy takes the position they are not.

When the current grading policy was presented to the Senate, over a number of meetings and with considerable discussion, both Professors Laura Coffin Koch and Judith Martin (chairs of the Committee on Educational Policy when the grading policy and subsequent amendments were discussed) told the Senate that use of plus-minus grading was not mandatory. The Committee does not believe that the promises made during the debate about the policy should be ignored. The Committee thus proposes that this interpretation be included in the policy.

Professor Sampson noted that instructors are not required to give A's or F's, either.

Professor Kulacki wondered if the policy should also stipulate that an instructor may not, at the end of a course, change to or from using pluses and minuses. If the syllabus indicates the instructor will or will not use pluses and minuses, Dr. Green observed, that creates something like a contract with the students.

Discussion then turned to whether a syllabus should be required. At present no University or Senate policy requires one, although the Classroom Expectations Guidelines recommend that a syllabus be provided.

Ms. Shaw, arguing that a syllabus should be required, nonetheless maintained that an instructor should not be constrained from deciding on use of pluses and minuses until later in the course; he or she may not know until the end of the semester whether any pluses or minuses should be awarded. It is possible for an instructor to say that pluses and minuses will be used—but then determine that no student's work fell into a plus or minus category, Professor Ahern pointed out.

Professor Ahern said there were three issues before the Committee: (1) clarification of the grading policy; (2) whether or not a syllabus should be required; and (3) what a syllabus should contain, if it is theoretically binding on the students and the instructor.

With respect to (1), the Interpretation of the Grading and Transcript Policy was approved unanimously.

With respect to (2) there was considerable debate.

-- Professor Curley said he could not support a requirement that a hard copy of a syllabus be required, as is suggested in the Classroom Expectations Guidelines. Students have electronic access to course materials and can obtain the syllabus that way.

Professor Odom reported, however, that experience with the North Central Accrediting Association suggested it views syllabi as an important tool with which to review curricula. In addition, they receive calls from students who took a course in the past who need a copy of the syllabus; it is

necessary to have files with course syllabi. Any policy should include a comment that it is necessary to keep copies of syllabi on file. There should be a DEPARTMENT archive, Dr. Green suggested.

This is an administrative detail that can be left up to colleges and departments, several Committee members agreed.

Professor Hirsch said there were two issues with respect to the syllabus: if it is a contract with the student about course requirements and evaluation, and (he noted that students a few years ago sued institutions because courses were not structured the way it was said they would be) if there is a way to set out what the contract is with the students.

Mr. Dajani said that as a student, he expects a syllabus. He thought they were required and is surprised to learn at this meeting that they are not.

There must be a legal basis for the expectations of students, even if not spelled out, and it is difficult to imagine a court being impressed by the professionalism of the faculty if there is no syllabus laying out what will be expected of students, Professor Sampson said. Professor Seashore argued that if a course is offered only one time, because students want to do it, then it does not make sense to require a syllabus. It should still have one, even if the expectation is to gather literature, Professor Sampson responded. Ms. Frazier commented that even as a doctoral student she wants to know what contract for the course is.

Mr. Amattoey inquired if the Committee was discussing the need for a policy because the Classroom Expectations Guidelines were not being implemented. The question before the Committee, Professor Ahern said, is whether the "expectation" of the guidelines is adequate or if there should be a policy requirement. The suggestion has been made that there should be a University-wide policy. If the Committee proposes such a policy, it should not be prescriptive about what the syllabus should contain, he suggested; the Classroom Expectations Guidelines outline what is desirable.

There is also the question of timing, he added: should it be required the first day of class or before students must decide whether to cancel/add? Some instructors, he noted, may want to develop the course curriculum in concert with the students, so a requirement that there be a syllabus the first day may not be appropriate.

In order to further the discussion, Professor Odom moved that "all University instructors are to provide syllabi for their courses."

Committee members offered various suggestions and views.

-- Professor Miller said a minimum amount of information should be required. One cannot imagine it not including the evaluation techniques the instructor will use; all students will expect that, she said.

-- It is a slippery slope to micro-managing, Dr. Green said, if the Committee intends to stipulate what must on syllabi. There are independent study and other courses that may not have a formal structure that lends itself to the standard syllabus.

-- In CLA, independent study at any level is a CONTRACT, Professor Sampson said. He added that he was curious about the legal context; a court could look at the syllabus as a contract, much as a student would, informing them how much reading would be required and how they would be graded.

-- It appears that most courses have syllabi; is the Committee legislating where there is no problem, Professor Curley asked? If someone in his department did not have a syllabus he or she would be told that it is the expectation there will be one.

-- Professor Seashore said she could not imagine the syllabus is a contract.

-- Professor Miller responded she could not imagine a course without a syllabus.

-- It already an expectation, as indicated in the Classroom Expectation Guidelines, Professor Curley pointed out. Professor Seashore agreed.

Professor Ahern said that if the Committee wished to adopt anything beyond the minimum statement requiring a syllabus, there should be a small group designated to work on a proposal. Professor Odom said she would prefer that her motion stand as it was proposed; there could then be reference to an understanding that one size does not fit all. The idea is to communicate what is expected of students; at the senior and graduate level there may be student participation and negotiation. But she said she has seen situations where, if there is no policy, the faculty cannot be REQUIRED to produce a syllabus if they choose not to.

-- One strong reason for a policy is so that students have recourse for a problem, which they do not readily have if there is no syllabus, Ms. Shaw said.

-- The policy would not include thesis credits, would it, Dr. Maziar asked? The Committee by assent agreed it would not.

After continued additional discussion, the Committee voted 12-2 in favor of Professor Odom's motion. Professor Ahern asked that Professors Odom and Sampson (with Professor Sampson as chair) and Ms. Frazier act as a small group to make a recommendation at the April 25 meeting of the Committee about what the policy should include.

4. Report from the IMG Subcommittee

Professor Ahern now welcomed Dr. Skaggs to the meeting for a report from the IMG subcommittee.

Dr. Skaggs reviewed the charge to the subcommittee. He said that assessment of the DIRECT impact of Incentives for Managed Growth (IMG) on educational policy is nearly impossible because it cannot be separated from the change to semesters. The impact of the two changes on each other is substantial; some "problems" of IMG are reinforced or masked by the change to semesters. Semesters has led to reduced flexibility for students and faculty; it is difficult to assert that a change in behavior is because of semesters, IMG, or a combination of the two.

The subcommittee has looked at the predicted consequences of IMG and tried to obtain data in order to see the impact. Dr. Skaggs reviewed five areas.

(1) Is there a decreased propensity on the part of students to take courses outside their home college? It is not to the advantage of the home college for students to take courses from other colleges because of the lost tuition revenue. The subcommittee examined data from quarters and semesters; there are some changes and there is less cross-college enrollment. There is an increase of 1-10% in the number of credits taken within the college. The subcommittee concluded there has been a change in course-taking behavior that should be monitored. More recent data, however, suggests there may be a shift back in the other direction, so this may not be a problem.

One thing that should be looked at is supply: are there courses being offered that were not offered before in the college, Dr. Green suggested.

(2) Is there increased specificity in major programs, as predicted, thus leaving students with fewer free electives? Dr. Skaggs reported there has been an increase in the proportion of specified in some majors and there has been a reduction in the number of free electives for students. This issue should be investigated.

Dr. Skaggs explained how the subcommittee developed data on this point and said the subcommittee saw a more general issue not related to IMG or semesters: the number of very highly structured programs.

Professor Sampson observed that the change to semesters has made Ph.D. programs much more rigid. Dr. Skaggs agreed. Professor Seashore agreed and said this is a problem the Committee MUST address.

(3) Has there been an increase in the number of students (to generate revenue), thus decreasing quality? There is no evidence for this concern, Dr. Skaggs said; if anything, quality has increased.

Does IMG encourage programs with marginal capacity to increase enrollments, Dr. Maziar asked? It does, Dr. Skaggs said, but that is probably not where any increase in student numbers has occurred. The subcommittee will probably recommend that the Provost and the colleges monitor quality and numbers in order to maintain institutional standards.

(4) Course sizes would increase with the changes. Data on this point have not been collected.

(5) Interdisciplinary courses and programs will decline. This was a major concern of the ad hoc committee chaired by Professor Catherine French, Dr. Skaggs said; the subcommittee is gathering data now.

One issue the subcommittee has NOT investigated (because it does not have the time) is whether courses would be cancelled or if there would be more courses taught by non-regular faculty. Professor Ahern said he hoped that the Committee could get at that issue by monitoring the impact of the new policy on academic appointments.

Dr. Skaggs said the subcommittee would also have comments on the issues related to common goods.

Professor Ahern thanked Dr. Skaggs for his report.

5. Grading Data for the Senate

Professor Ahern next drew the attention of Committee members to data on grades awarded by campus, college, and course designator. The Committee had an extended discussion of an apparent gap between the number of students who enroll in a course and the number of grades awarded; it was later learned that this was an artifice of the data.

The Committee is required to provide these data to the Senate each year, Professor Ahern said, and should provide explanation and analysis with them. Dr. Green recalled that the premise of the legislation requiring the reports is that departments would be embarrassed if they see a high percentage of A's being awarded in their courses and would change the behavior. He expressed doubt whether there would be any change in behavior, especially in small specialized departments.

It was agreed the Committee would receive an explanation of the data before it presented them to the Senate.

6. Privacy and Posting of Grades

Professor Ahern said the issue of privacy and grade posting would be brought to the next meeting.

He then adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota