

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, March 7, 2001
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Khaled Dajani, Steve Fitzgerald, Gordon Hirsch, Frank Kulacki, Carol Miller, Kathleen Newell, Martin Sampson, Mary Ellen Shaw, Thomas Soulen, Steven Sperber, Craig Swan

Regrets: Prince Amattoey, Shawn Curley, Christina Frazier, Geri Malandra, Marsha Odom, Karen Seashore, Rita Snider

Absent: Christine Maziar

Guests: Associate Vice Provost Laura Koch

[In these minutes: (1) report on first-year seminars (effect on retention); (2) policy on make-up work for legitimate absences; (3) athletic team absences during study day; (4) applicability of exemption for athletic teams in progress to a championship; (5) peer review of instruction (practices at the University); (6) interpretation of the policy requiring student evaluation of instruction; (7) policy requiring syllabi (should there be one?)

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:05 and, shortly into the meeting, welcomed Professor Martin Sampson from Political Science, appointed to fill the vacancy when Professor Skaggs resigned to become Acting Associate Dean of CLA.

1. First-Year Seminars

Professor Ahern welcomed Associate Vice Provost Laura Koch, who began by exclaiming that it was nice to be back again (Professor Koch served on the Committee for six years and chaired it for three). She related that she has been asking questions about the impact of the first-year seminars and has been collecting data; she distributed a handout with some of the data.

The cohort data were divided into 6 groups, by AAR score (the admissions score the University uses, a combination of test scores, high school grade point average, and class rank). In the case of the 1998 cohort of incoming students, for the lowest 10% and for those who scored in the 26th to 90th percentile there was a difference in retention rate between those who took first-year seminars and those who did not; those who took the seminars had a higher retention rate. For those in the 11-25th percentile and the top 10% there appeared to be no difference. Dr. Koch noted that the N's were not terribly large so not a great deal of significance could be attached to the numbers.

* 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.

The second-year retention rate for the same 1998 cohort showed essentially the same pattern, although there was a slightly higher retention rate among the top 10% for those who took the seminars.

In the case of the 1999 cohort of incoming students, with larger N's, the pattern was similar; for those who took first-year seminars, there was a higher retention rate among students in the bottom 10% and those at the 51st percentile and above. There was no difference in retention rate for students in the 11th to 50th percentile of AAR scores.

Retention rates also varied by type of seminar. Those who took the seminars through the Residential College had the highest retention rate among those who took the seminars (about 93%); those who took a faculty seminar or a developmental seminar had slightly lower rates (89% and 80%, respectively). Dr. Koch noted that there are other activities occurring in the Residential College which could also have affected retention, which has led her to look at other activities that interact with the seminars to affect retention. It may be the case that students who took the developmental seminars were also the academically weakest.

Dr. Koch said she has also been collecting non-statistical data from faculty and students as the seminars were completed. She wanted to understand the impact on the faculty from teaching one of the seminars; did they change the way the faculty thought about teaching?

Discussion then covered a number of points.

-- Ms. Shaw asked if there were any commonalities among the seminars in terms of acclimating students to college work. Dr. Koch said it varied; some were strictly academic while some stressed developmental issues within an academic course.

-- Professor Sperber mused that it may be likely that students who enroll in the seminars are those more likely to stay and that there may be a self-selection process going on. Dr. Koch agreed that the question needed exploration. Dr. Swan noted that while not a complete adjustment the graphs try to cover that point by controlling for AAR score. Dr. Koch related that she had also looked at GPAs and the number of credit hours taken by students who did and did not enroll for the first-year seminars; those in the seminars had slightly high GPAs and took slight more credit hours.

-- Professor Ahern inquired about the reaction of students and faculty to the seminars. Dr. Koch said the reactions were almost universally positive. The biggest complaint from students was about the amount of work required for the number of credits involved -- but even so those students did not rate the seminars negatively.

The number of credits for the seminars ranges from 1 to 3; some were writing intensive and some were more interactive than others. There was great variation but all of them gave a small group experience to students and an opportunity to interact with a faculty member and with other students. Students also liked having a place where they could express their ideas and not be judged.

-- How many students dropped out of the seminars, Professor Newell asked? Dr. Swan said he has only recent received that data; a quick glance suggested it was a very small number. One advantage to students staying and working hard, Professor Newell commented, is that the seminars prepare students to work hard in other courses.

Dr. Swan recalled that there was a survey in Spring, 1999, of first-year students; they were asked if they had to work harder than they expected. 77% said they did. But 82% said they did and appreciated that someone cared and that help was available.

-- Professor Sampson said he heard some complain that only the words "freshman seminar" appear on the transcript and that it would be helpful if the title could be included.

-- The faculty were mostly positive about the seminars, Dr. Koch said. Some did not realize the amount of work that would be required and some were not prepared to deal with the writing intensive requirements. A few faculty said they would never teach another seminar again but most were very positive.

-- Were they over- or under-enrolled, Professor Ahern asked? Dr. Swan said he believed about 98% of the spaces were filled. A few were under-enrolled, Dr. Koch added; they asked that if there were fewer than 7 students the seminar not be offered because that would be a very different experience.

-- Dr. Swan asked Professor Ahern about the perspective of the Morris campus. Professor Ahern said there had been an optional first-year seminar program 20 years ago, pass/fail, one credit. Students who took it had a higher retention rate but also a higher failure-to-complete rate because there was no penalty for an incomplete. The current first-year seminars are required; they are 2 credits and each faculty member is required to teach two (which equals one course). For students, they are one-half a course, but say there is too much work required. It is generally a positive experience but there are things that need attention, such as faculty workload.

In terms of evaluating the impact of the seminars, Professor Ahern said that retention may be the most concrete thing to look at but for the Twin Cities campus the engagement of faculty and students may be more important. The work of Alexander Astin has demonstrated that the factor that most affects whether students will internalize the values a college or university wants to convey is faculty-student interaction.

The more significant impact of the seminars may be how students feel about their college experience rather than retention rates, Professor Sperber commented.

2. Policy on Makeup Work for Excused Absences

The Committee turned next to a proposed redraft of the Senate policy addressing the need for students to be given make-up opportunities for class work missed because of an excused absence. The existing policy reads as follows:

Students should not be penalized for absence due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances. Such circumstances include, but are not limited to, verified illness, participation in athletic events or other group activities sponsored by the University, serious family emergencies, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, and religious observances. It is the responsibility of the student to notify faculty members of such circumstances as far in advance as possible. It is the responsibility of faculty members to provide makeups for major

examinations, ordinarily including midquarter and final examinations. Should unusual situations make this impractical, appropriate alternative arrangements should be approved by the department chair. Except for major examinations, for which accommodations must be made by the instructor, special arrangements for absences are at the instructor's discretion in the course concerned.

Professor Ahern recalled that the Committee earlier had looked at amplifying on the meaning of the phrase "group activities sponsored by the University" and made other draft modifications to the policy (including, for example, requiring students to provide documentation when they claim an excused absence); Dr. Koch has proposed, in addition, changes which would require that students be given the opportunity for ANY missed work if they have an excused absence.

The latest proposal would put a considerable onus on the faculty, Professor Sperber said. Dr. Koch said that in her work with students in athletics over the past several months she has noted a number of problems (problems she also saw in her six years on this Committee). The policy requires students be provided make-up opportunities for mid-quarter exams and finals but not for other work. In many cases, student-athletes have no choice about traveling for their sport if they wish to retain their financial aid.

The Committee deliberated for some while on the appropriate wording for a proposed revision to the policy. There were a number of suggestions.

-- It is understandable that students would be concerned about not getting credit for "minor" class work because even a lot of "minor" work can add up to an impact on a grade. The focus of the policy should be less on make-up work than on ensuring that some adjustment is made so that the student is not penalized (e.g., if in a large class there are 10 quizzes which constitute 10% of the grade, but a student is only able to take 6 of them because of excused absences, the instructor might let those 6 quiz results constitute the 10% of the grade, if devising make-ups for quizzes is unreasonable).

-- It will be important to communicate to faculty that there is a policy in place. In particular, it is important to draw to everyone's attention the first sentence of the policy: "Students should not be penalized for absence due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances."

-- To require make-ups for all course work would place too great a burden on faculty and TAs-- and on department resources. The University cannot accommodate the individual schedules of every student; those who are gone may gain something from their experiences (e.g., if they are student-athletes) but they also lose something. What about students on jury duty for two weeks? There are activities the University sponsors or recognizes as valuable.

-- The policy should require make-up opportunities for MAJOR elements of the course and be no more prescriptive in order not to "drive faculty into insane asylums."

-- Some faculty count any missed work as a "zero." There are unreasonable faculty, Professor Sperber agreed. The policy does NOT allow faculty to give zeros for legitimate absences, Professor Ahern pointed out.

-- Could not students grieve if they had legitimate absences but were penalized? This arises quite a bit; it would consume a lot of time to make all the students file grievances--and filing a grievance against a faculty member is a serious matter.

-- The circumstances under which a student has a legitimate absence should be confined to those listed in the policy, rather than "including but not limited to" those listed. Other Committee members suggested that the range of human activities that might warrant a legitimate absence were too great to confine to a single list.

-- Students may be given an advantage if they take a make-up test; it might be easier. At the same time, they can be at a disadvantage if they have to make up tests. There is no perfect way to resolve the problem, Professor Miller observed.

The Committee eventually approved unanimously the following version of the policy for submission to the Senate for action:

"POLICY ON MAKEUP EXAMINATIONS FOR LEGITIMATE ABSENCES

"Students shall not be penalized for absence due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances. Such circumstances include, but are not limited to, verified illness, participation in intercollegiate athletic events or other group activities sponsored by the University, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, and religious observances. Students are responsible for providing documentation to the instructor to verify the reason for the absence.

"1. It is the responsibility of the student to notify faculty members of such circumstances as far in advance as possible.

"2. It is the responsibility of the faculty member to provide reasonable accommodations or opportunities to make up exams or other course assignments that have an impact on the course grade.

"Comment: The criteria that can be used in deciding whether the event is "University-sponsored" include, for example, the extent to which University funding is provided, whether University facilities are used, whether the student's participation is obligatory or nearly so, whether the student is representing the University (as on a debate or athletic team or in music presentations, and so on), whether the appropriate University faculty or staff agrees that the student is representing the University in the activity, and whether the University has had a role in scheduling the event."

3. Athletic Team Absences

Professor Ahern noted that the Committee has received requests from the men's and women's athletic departments for exceptions to the policy barring travel or competition on study day or during finals week. Both the men's and women's track teams are requesting permission to compete on study day in events that are considered "last chance" for qualifying for the Big Ten and NCAA championships. It was noted that the Faculty Academic Oversight Committee for Intercollegiate Athletics, chaired by Professor Sara Evans, has recommended the exception be approved. The

academic counseling office is to certify that no students at academic risk will be permitted to travel and that academic plans will be provided for the students who travel if they miss more than two classes.

Dr. Koch said that she agreed study day and final exam should be protected but the University has no control over Big Ten schedules; failure to allow the students to compete would affect their ability to attend the tournaments.

Is Minnesota not a member of the Big Ten, Professor Sperber inquired? If so, why does it have no control over the schedule? All of the schools give the Conference their schedules and ask that events not be held during finals periods, but the schools have varying schedules that prevent the Conference from accommodating everyone.

Professor Miller said that with the information provided, there is no reason for the Committee to turn down the request. Professor Ahern agreed and said that if the Committee is to turn down the recommendation of FAOCIA it should have a substantive reason for doing so.

Professor Kulacki commented on two facets of the issue. First, the Committee should request a report from the Big Ten faculty representatives on this issue. Second, the Committee should send a letter to the Conference if it is seriously bothered by these scheduling conflicts. The matter of missed classes is a very large issue, Dr. Koch responded, and studying on the road is not the same. She said she would be grateful if the University could have more influence with the Big Ten or NCAA but pointed out that if the schedule changes to accommodate Minnesota, then other schools are adversely affected. What can be done is to ensure that if students must compete on study day or during finals week they have opportunities to study.

The Committee agreed to ask for a report from the faculty representatives.

4. Applicability of the Policy on Exemptions for Athletic Championship Events

The Committee briefly reviewed materials concerning the request of a student participating in national competition as a member of a Recreational Sports crew team. The Committee concluded that the existing policy includes only intercollegiate athletic teams, not recreational or club teams, and that the issue should be worked out between the individual faculty member and the student.

5. Peer Review of Instruction

Professor Ahern recalled that the University had received a questionnaire from Ohio State concerning peer review of instruction; he had made inquiries and received recently a response from Joyce Weinsheimer about the practices on the Twin Cities campus. Her assessment is that peer review is haphazardly used, that there is interest among faculty in having it used, and while not widely practiced there are two units in particular (Computer Science and General College) that seem to be engaged in best practices. She also reported she knows of no instance of cross-collegiate peer review.

There is systematic peer review in the Bush program, Professor Miller pointed out, and it is cross-collegiate. She said she was impressed that Professor Ahern would respond to a survey and said it would be helpful to obtain information on what other institutions are doing.

6. Interpretation of the Policy on Evaluation of Instruction

Professor Ahern drew the attention of Committee members to a handout with a proposed Interpretation of the policy on evaluation of teaching. There have been questions raised with the Senate office about the applicability of the policy to faculty who do not have tenure-track or tenured appointments. Even though the policy provides that it applies to all who teach, a clarifying statement might help clear up any confusion.

The Committee approved the interpretation unanimously and without ado.

7. A Policy on Syllabi?

Professor Ahern inquired if the Committee wished to consider recommending a policy requiring that all classes have a syllabi; there is no such policy at present. (The Twin Cities Campus Assembly referred to the Assembly Committee on Educational Policy the question of whether or not there should be a policy, when asked by a student; the referral was in 1979 and ACEP never reported back to the Assembly.) He noted that the Classroom Expectation Guidelines itemize what should be included on a syllabus but it does not call for providing a syllabus.

Some faculty do not provide syllabi, Professor Kulacki said, and are under no department or college pressure to do so. There is a policy on the books which provides that a student may drop a course and receive a full tuition refund if there is no syllabus for a course. That was issued by former Vice President Benjamin, Dr. Swan recalled, and there may have been no consultation with this Committee.

Professor Ahern said he would prefer that SCEP take a position. He said it would not be illogical for the Committee to say that syllabi are expected during the first week of classes, and preferably on the first day that a class meets. It was agreed that the Committee would consider language at its next meeting.

Professor Ahern adjourned the meeting at 2:50.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota