

Minutes*

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

Present: Richard McCormick (chair), William Bart, Vernon Cardwell, LeAnn Dean, (Patricia Jones-Whyte for) Gail Dubrow, Josh Feneis, Hannah Kroll, James Leger, Eric Ling, Claudia Neuhauser, Mary Ellen Shaw, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Craig Swan, Sara Tuttle, Douglas Wangenstein, Joel Weinsheimer

Absent: Shawn Curley, Paul Siliciano, Christopher Pappas

Guests: Professor Donald Ross (Co-chair, strategic positioning task force on writing); Susan VanVoorhis (Office of the Registrar)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) task force on undergraduate writing; (2) S/N grading procedure; (3) charge to the General College/Education and Human Development strategic positioning task force; (appendix) note from the Provost about graduate student support funding]

1. Task Force on Undergraduate Writing

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:30 and after a round of introductions for the benefit of the new student members of the Committee, he welcomed Professor Ross to initiate a discussion of the strategic positioning task force on undergraduate writing.

Professor Ross began with a statement he had prepared for the Committee.

We divided our task in four working groups

- Research on writing, including research on the teaching of writing and ongoing professional assessment of writing at the university
- Courses with writing as their primary focus – Freshman composition, advanced composition, technical writing
- Writing in the disciplines and writing-instruction or writing-intensive (WI) courses
- Instruction outside the classroom – tutorials, in the library, and so on.

* 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.

In the past weeks we have met, often in conjunction with the other task forces concerned with undergraduate education – student support and honors – with as many groups and individuals whom we could identify.

The first version of our recommendations was discussed by the Task Force today. As suggested in our charge, we will be defining writing instruction of various sorts as responsibilities which will be integrated across the Twin Cities campus, and which will be well understood by students, faculty, and advisers.

We see writing as central to students' learning and education from the first semester of Freshman year through graduation, and which they will be doing for the rest of their lives. Incidentally, at the university level, it also goes through the dissertation.

For most students, faculty, and staff, writing is the only/main visible record of their thinking, their creativity, and their imagination. To quote an alumnus, Garrison Keillor, "We need to write; otherwise, no one knows who we are."

We have found out something which is central to our recommendations – the University's faculty is very much dedicated to their particular disciplines, and they usually see writing and its related competencies, critical reading and thinking, from a disciplinary lens. Each field seeks to teach its students • how to find and evaluate evidence whether found in the library, the field, or the laboratory, • how to present information and opinions, • how to analyze that information, and • how to frame a convincing academic argument. Having the disciplines take formal and active responsibility for defining the writing goals for their majors and ensuring that student meet those goals is crucial. To quote from a person who attended one of our forums, "How do we build the sense among faculty and staff that we all share to some extent, the responsibility for the writing outcomes we expect of students?"

I'd like to close with a specific example of the importance of writing at this university. For decades I have been reading and admiring what might be called the collected works of Gary Engstrand in the form of Senate minutes. I don't know anything about the quality of speeches and exchanges in the various committees, but Gary's written reports present you and your colleagues as articulate, thoughtful, and well-organized members of the University community.

I welcome your questions.

My question has to do with the University's policy with regard to students' writing – not as a matter of types and numbers of courses and the like, but what should the policy be in the future?

In response to Professor Ross's question, Professor McCormick said that the first answer is that the "policy" on writing-intensive courses that the Council on Liberal Education is supposed to enforce is the only University-wide policy that exists now. [Note: the writing-intensive course requirement is only for the Twin Cities campus.] He noted that Professor Ross used the phrase "writing instruction" rather than "writing intensive," and said the former is the better reference.

The Writing Instruction Project is a wonderful base that has accumulated a wide range of faculty expertise and teaching in writing and they intend to build on it, Professor Ross said. Less obvious are things like the senior project in CLA, something also widespread in IT, that give faculty and students the opportunity to think about writing. Are there policy links between writing instruction, the senior project, and freshman composition?

This Committee would address the question of whether there should be a University-wide policy and, if it believes there should, the policy would go to the Senate for approval, Professor Cardwell said. Thus far, however, the Committee has taken only two actions with respect to writing: established the liberal education requirements (which include the writing-intensive courses) and approved the addition of the writing requirement for the ACT. Vice Provost Swan agreed that many things from the Committee are numbers and rules, but there is language in the Howe Committee report (that developed the current liberal education requirements for the Twin Cities campus in 1991) about the importance of writing. That report was endorsed by the Twin Cities Campus Assembly.

Professor Ross said he was interested in learning what the sense of the Committee is about what undergraduate instruction in writing should be. How should it fit in the major? In liberal education requirements? And it is more important that it fit in the context of all four years of undergraduate education.

Professor Cardwell said the Committee has talked philosophically about writing but it has focused on all four years. The general discussions have also revolved around developing critical thinking because writing is essential to critical thinking. "Few can wax eloquent if they cannot write clearly." He asked Professor Ross if the task force has discussed the problem faculty see with the time needed for appropriate feedback on writing assignments. It takes a lot of time so some faculty are reluctant to seek writing-intensive status for their courses.

Professor Ross suggested looking at the question from another direction. If faculty are teaching a small course (i.e., fewer than 25 students), the likelihood it would NOT meet the standard of writing instruction is small. MAYBE there could be a seminar of 15 that is all field trips, but most faculty assign writing in small courses. So the University should maximize the number of small courses that do not overwhelm faculty as a way to expand the number of occasions that faculty look at student writing. That bypasses the large-class question. (In CLA, however, students will not take small classes unless they meet some graduation requirement, so they tend to be under-subscribed.) This would be a rule change and not require that faculty be re-tooled.

There is a point at which larger classes are too big, Professor Ross said, but even some writing is better than none. He said he would like to see things reach the point where writing is so frequent and so usual that students see that writing is what they do.

Are most freshmen in large classes, Professor Neuhauser asked? That varies, Dr. Swan said. In the sciences, Professor Neuhauser said, most students are in large classes so writing instruction is hard to do. It is the process of putting things logically on paper, but it would not work to do it early. Students do not come from high school with the writing skills that are needed (e.g., writing paragraphs, not term papers).

Ms. Tuttle said that she was exempted from the freshman composition requirement but took writing instruction as a junior. She said she should have had it as a freshman. Professor Ross commented that the University could offer a course for students who are exempt from the requirement. Ms. Tuttle said that writing for political science (her major) is very different from high-school and creative writing.

In IT they need introductory writing early to get student buy-in; students must understand that writing is critical to their success, Professor Leger said. He said he did not see freshman composition as useful (because students believe that what they learn there will be something a secretary will do once they are out in a job). They need to understand that writing is important for their professional lives and is something that should be integrated into their studies.

Professor Ross said there are a small number of large courses at the 1-XXX level but it is important they have writing assignments. Those will not improve because of one sentence in the task force report—SCEP and the University should attend to the best way to get writing into them, such as the science courses. Even large classes in CLA have lab or discussion sections, Professor McCormick said, so it is possible to get writing into them. In biology it is "fill in the blanks," Professor Neuhauser commented.

Mr. Ling said that students see writing as a separate subject, not something they will use in their work. Students must be shown that writing is a tool, not a subject. Do they feel the same way about math, Professor Neuhauser inquired? They do, Mr. Ling said. They see it as a subject, not a tool.

The Committee has talked about writing programs at the University, Dr. Shaw said; the point that has been made by others on SCEP is that the University needs to invest in faculty lines for scholars whose academic focus is in the field of writing and writing instruction at the college level in order to provide leadership in developing curriculum and campus-wide programs. Currently, such faculty members are in Rhetoric and in the General College, involved in the development of those writing programs. The question raised might properly be where such faculty lines belong to best have an impact on curriculum and instruction in the larger enterprise. Faculty would be more likely to listen if another faculty member were talking about writing from a research base.

Research on writing is not part of what faculty do at the University, Professor Cardwell said. (Professor Ross interjected that it is certainly part of what he does!) But it is not for many faculty, and much writing has a discipline-related style that is usually dictated by scientific or technical journals. This kind of writing does not reflect what students need for community/civic activities. They need the disciplined clarity of scientific writing but not scientific journal writing. Where should the responsibility lie for teaching that writing, Professor Ross inquired? Each curriculum needs to define the writing appropriate for where its students will find employment, Professor Cardwell said. They need to know scientific writing, in some fields, but 75% of students will not go beyond the B.S. degree and will be in the public sector, business, or the community, and will not need to write in scientific language. A lot of good basic science writers are not good at writing a newspaper article. It is incumbent on the faculty to teach them the writing they need, Professor Cardwell declared.

Professor Ross commented that he was glad Professor Cardwell did not contend the writing center should be responsible. Professor Cardwell told him that the task force report should talk about

the writing element that should be a part of every curriculum. Professor Ross said the task force has talked about introductory and final writing courses in departments. It also believes that faculty must articulate the beginning and end of the process so that students know where they are. Each department would do this in a different way and it will take time to get it right.

The comment that students perceive writing as a subject is very important, Professor Weinsheimer said. That is especially true for the English Department. It is tiresome to be hear, if one says one teaches English, a listener respond, "I have to watch my grammar." The English Department is still seen as the writing-teaching department at the University, which is not the case. The English Department has a commitment to the teaching of literature. When the writing-intensive courses were introduced, the 3-XXX writing courses disappeared. He said he subscribed deeply to the philosophy of writing-intensive courses. But this cannot be the responsibility of the English Department; let the University also have a Department of Critical Thinking and it can teach critical thinking and be responsible for students learning critical thinking. No department can do that, Professor Weinsheimer said, and English cannot do it for writing. Even if graduate students are committed to writing instruction, it is important to have professionals (the faculty) say they must write—the role model is important. Writing-intensive courses have their problems, but the professoriate does not want to teach writing and still believes that that job is the responsibility of the English Department.

Professor Weinsheimer said that given the history and interests of the English Department, research on and teaching of composition will not be a high priority. Just as there should not be a Department of Critical Thinking, there should not be a Composition program; writing should be spread among departments. English and Composition need to be more distinct, as they were before he tried to integrate them more. The future of writing at the University depends on a common commitment to its significance; students need to be educated about its importance and perhaps there is a need for more TAs in writing in disciplines other than American Studies and English. On the last point, Professor Ross said that he has spoken with IT department heads; IT now employs a number of English and Rhetoric graduate students in their courses.

Is there a way to educate new faculty, Professor Weinsheimer inquired? They have talked about the desirability of creating positions for graduate students in IT as part of professional development, where writing instruction will be seen as valuable as lab instruction. The more spread out writing is, the better. If a student has one writing-intensive course, he or she will not believe it is important to write in other courses.

To convince freshmen that writing is important, the University needs to get people from industry to tell them so, Professor Neuhauser suggested. It is important to get students writing in their freshman year, both in their discipline as well as creative writing. Much is done in recitation sections by TAs, but there is need for a way to train TAs so they see this as important to their professional development. Perhaps they should have a 50% appointment, 25% as a TA in the field and 25% as a writing instructor. That, however, will take money.

This ties in with the discussion at the last meeting about student support. There is need for support for writing because many feel that student writing is not up to par and would jump at the chance to offer writing instruction.

Professor Cardwell related that in reviewing course outlines as part of curriculum reviews, he noticed that the majority of new courses list critical thinking among the expected learner outcomes. Only the writing-intensive courses, however, say anything about writing or its connection with critical thinking. In terms of writing for the discipline versus writing as a competency or skill, every course should think in terms of writing and critical thinking. It should be a burden on every course with critical thinking as a goal to also be an advocate for writing. He said that he advocates writing short pieces. Few people have to write 20-page papers in their work; they write newsletters, letters to the editor, and so on. It is possible to demonstrate critical thinking in short papers. He cited the Gettysburg Address as a notable example. Faculty assign long papers, Professor Ross mused, because they all wrote dissertations.

Professor Leger pointed out the difference between undergraduates and graduate students. In his department, he said, they teach writing to graduate students very effectively because they must write grants and papers. They go over graduate student writing with a fine tooth comb and the students end up knowing how to write. Undergraduates do not work on projects, they do problems in the book. Perhaps there should be a greater emphasis on projects for them. That will likely be part of their report, Professor Ross said: faculty convey more information about their research activities to students and ask students to write more about research. Faculty would enjoy student writing more if it were more focused on research.

Science undergraduates are potential graduate students, Professor McCormick observed, if they receive some training as undergraduates—and if the University is to be a better public university—that would prepare more students to go on to graduate school. A baccalaureate degree from the University should involve critical thinking as well as good oral and written communication skills. He said he did not see writing as a single subject but as something all graduates should take out into the world. And that training should prepare students for engagement with the larger community.

In CLA, Professor McCormick said, the problem with the current system is that there is no articulation of the importance of writing. A student could take three writing-intensive courses and have no long paper to write, and only encounter the need to write something big in the fourth course, the senior project. They are not always trained to write such papers. Your department needs to do that, Professor Ross said. It needs to discuss the question, "We require a 30-page paper; how do we get students prepared?" Professor McCormick agreed that is a failing in a number of departments that have major projects: they do not assign writing along the way. But it is a resource issue. It may be, Professor Ross said, that a department will decide it only wants 5-page papers. This is a resource issue, Professor Neuhauser repeated; departments want to require more writing but do not have the funds to pay for people whose time is needed to evaluate it. Any University-wide policy on writing should encourage departments to think about this issue, Professor McCormick said.

In CLA Honors, and perhaps elsewhere, many students are coming in with AP English and they get out of Composition—but many could nonetheless use a composition course to learn to write at a university level, Professor McCormick said. There needs to be an intermediate level course, because they receive complaints from faculty that students are very bright but have writing problems. Ms. Tuttle agreed and said she struggled with writing her first three years at the University. She said she learned the most about writing in project-based writing in her discipline. Professor Ross commented that faculty do not know how students are thinking unless they (the faculty) see something in writing; thinking is not demonstrated through recitation alone.

Professor Bart agreed. He reported that he teaches about critical thinking as well as does research in the area. Critical writing, reading, and thinking are highly integrated, so the task force may want to show the importance of all three. Professor Ross agreed that it should focus on all three, not just writing. He added that he thinks the faculty will understand and explanation should be easy. Professor McCormick concurred and added that it is important that students understand that writing is part of the thinking process and that they cannot complete critical thinking without writing.

Professor McCormick thanked Professor Ross for joining the meeting.

2. S/N Grading Procedure

Professor McCormick next recalled for the Committee that both members of this Committee and members of the Senate had expressed interest in using the procedure in place at the Duluth campus for students who register for a course S/N: the class lists for the instructor do not list the grading base the student has chosen and the instructor simply submits letter grades for all students. For those students who have enrolled S/N, the computer automatically changes any grade of C- or higher to an S and any grade of D+ or lower to an N. Does the Committee wish to make a recommendation on the point?

Committee members made several points.

- This would eliminate any possible bias on the part of the instructor toward students who register S/N.
- Advisors should know the grading base students choose because it can be governed by major requirements, etc. (Ms. VanVoorhis said that would not be a problem.)
- It used to be the philosophy that students could expand their academic horizons by taking courses S/N without risk to their GPA. That day is long gone, apparently. Some students take particular courses because they cannot afford a B on their transcript—they must have an A or nothing. One can resent the notion, however, that an instructor would fudge a grade because a student is registered S/N and it is disappointing the Committee would base a policy on that suspicion.
- It is not bias. There was a question last spring about a specific case that led to discussion about why instructors had discretion to set the bar for an S higher than a C-. The Committee couldn't identify good reasons why that should be so and recommended the Senate approve a change in the policy. The Senate did so and the President concurred. The question now is simply the grade report.
- With the change, the faculty would know that a C- or better is a pass and a D+ or lower is a fail, and one does not have to worry about random factors entering the grading process.
- This can be an administrative process change rather than a policy change; the Committee can advise the administration to change grade reports.

The Committee voted 13-1 to recommend to the administration that grade reports be changed so that the grading base a student chooses for a course not appear. Ms. VanVoorhis reported that the change could be implemented for spring semester.

3. Strategic Positioning Task Force Charges: College Design: General College/College of Human Development

Professor Weinsheimer began the discussion by saying that he saw the conjoining of the General College (GC) with the College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) as problematic. Professor McCormick said that it will be a big change for CEHD as well as GC; CEHD will be a very different unit, and much larger.

Dr. Shaw reported that in GC there is a mixture of excitement and dread. The excitement is very real; the dread is because of the unknowns. There are committees dealing with program directions, but one of the unknowns is the student population they will serve. How different will the group be? It will likely move away from a broad range of students, so the former GC must trust that the rest of the University will make provisions for students from a diverse set of backgrounds.

Dr. Shaw said she was disappointed with the idea that the University could get better if it simply lopped off the bottom tier of students. She said she would like to see continuing attention to that cohort and wants the University to have students who represent the students who live in the state and that those students can find their way to the University. She said she hoped that there is a more robust relationship with the community colleges and that there is an effective outreach and advising function for them.

Professor Neuhauser agreed. General College will disappear but the unit will stay. There are demographic changes occurring in the state and this is a state school. It may be that students will not start here, but they should have an opportunity to get here. The fastest-growing group is the children of immigrants, Professor McCormick speculated.

The language of the task force talks about improving retention and success of students currently in the system, Professor Weinsheimer noted. Has any thought been given to admitting freshmen to the new college? The model calls for freshmen to be admitted, Dr. Shaw said, in the next one or two years, but they must transfer within a year. Later, perhaps, freshmen will be admitted to the college for longer terms. There is a question about which colleges should admit freshmen, Dr. Swan said, and the answer may not be the same for all colleges.

Professor Cardwell asked about a joint program between COAFES and GC; Dr. Swan said the program would continue in some form. The students will come into a new department, Dr. Shaw said, but the goal of more shared responsibility for admissions and acceptance is a good one. The mechanisms by which this will be accomplished remain issues to be discussed.

Ms. Tuttle said that in many cases it will come down to student support. There are great programs at the University that students may not know about. It would be good for the University to reach out more effectively to Twin Cities K-12 schools (where there is a huge gap between the high- and low-income schools). Having University students help students in high school might also help reduce the need for a GC and also for communications and connections that would match with other

University goals. Dr. Shaw said they are thinking about more programs in the schools, as part of the new CEHD.

The Committee moved to a general discussion of diversity. Dr. Shaw expressed concern that the University not back off a University-wide commitment to recruit and admit students from across the spectrum in Minnesota. That is a challenge to the entire institution. The University also does students a disservice by admitting them when they have almost no chance of success. Students are obligated to prepare, but there is not a bright line between those two factors. There can be students who are very successful with a little help, and sometimes success depends on income (especially in immigrant, ethnic, and rural communities).

Professor McCormick asked Dr. Shaw if she was bothered that the word "diversity" appears nowhere in the charge to the task force. Dr. Shaw said there is a problem with language of inclusion that goes beyond ethnicity and race to all communities. It enriches education and those communities are the future. She said she believed the current faculty and staff of GC can provide leadership and help to find and nourish talent, but she fears the University could end up with a less diverse community inadvertently. And GC could implode because of a lack of trust. So it's a nerve-wracking experience. There is, however, some justification for making these changes; it is to be hoped that the administration allows the new college enough money to do well. Everyone must share in keeping the University open and accessible; it is not the job only of the new college, but the University should let the new department lead in working with schools actively to recruit talented students. Professor McCormick agreed that the task force should emphasize the University-wide commitment to diversity.

A broader task in the redesign of CEHD is the incorporation of the non-design elements of the College of Human Ecology, Dr. Swan commented. This change has happened at a number of institutions—Minnesota is not the first. There are important synergies that can develop.

Professor McCormick said it is his general feeling that having a lot of small colleges and a few big ones is not a good organization for the University. On that note, he concluded the meeting at 4:25.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota

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Appendix

In response to the October 26 Committee meeting, Provost Sullivan sent the following message to Professor McCormick:

In reviewing the Senate Committee on Educational Policy minutes for your October 26 meeting, I thought the following information regarding the funding for the Graduate School fellowship program might be helpful for the committee's information.

In this new budget year, I increased the Graduate School allocation for the funding of graduate students by a net increase of \$3.5 million. \$300,000 of this increase went to the Diversity of

Views and Experience (DOVE) program. Of the remaining \$3.2 million, I awarded \$1,920,000 for block grants and \$1,280,000 for graduate fellowships. In addition to these net increases for this budget year, I have set aside an additional \$1.5 million for FY2007 to be able to enhance the awards for next year. The allocations for both FY2006 and FY2007 are recurring dollars.

Further, I have awarded the Graduate School \$500,000 towards new training grants. I leave it to the Graduate School's discretion to allocate and distribute these funds.

I hope these substantial increases to the budget of the Graduate School for the purpose of supporting graduate students indicate the high priority that we place on graduate education at the University. It is my intention to continue to enhance the budget per the strategic planning priorities, assuming new resources are available.

Tom Sullivan