

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, November 7, 2001
1:30 – 3:30
N202 Mondale Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Patricia Cavanaugh, Shawn Curley, Scott Ferguson, Steve Fitzgerald, Christina Frazier, Gretchen Haas, Frank Kulacki, (George Green for) Christine Maziar, Carol Miller, Marsha Odom (by teleconference), Martin Sampson, Karen Seashore, Mary Ellen Shaw, Mary Sue Simmons, Craig Swan

Absent: Gordon Hirsch, Geri Malandra, Kathleen Newell

Guests: none

Other: Cathy Gillaspay (Board of Regents)

[In these minutes: (1) syllabus policy; (2) early warnings to students on academic performance during a semester; (3) 13-credit enrollment requirement; (4) subcommittees; (5) distributed education current issues]

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:30 and began by congratulating Ms. Frazier on being elected as the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly representative to the Board of Regents.

1. Syllabus Policy

Professor Ahern next drew the attention of Committee members to a slightly revised draft syllabus policy. He noted that he had sent Committee members email messages summarizing the discussion at the Senate Consultative Committee last week and forwarding suggestions from Professor Massey, Chair of SCC. The new draft incorporates one change: it calls for all COURSES to have syllabi, rather than requiring instructors to provide syllabi.

The draft, with comment, read as follows:

MOTION:

That the Senate adopt the following policy:

All courses are required to have a syllabus

COMMENT:

* 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 Senate Committee on Educational Policy appointed an ad hoc subcommittee during the 2000-01 academic year to consider the question of requiring a syllabus. After deliberating about the report, the Committee voted to recommend to the Senate a policy that requires all instructors to provide syllabi for their courses. The subcommittee prepared the following comments.

Some University guidelines on important (legal and otherwise) matters require the inclusion of information of certain kinds in syllabi, but the University does not require syllabi in its courses. That seems odd.

Good teaching practice includes informing students in writing of the course requirements and the scope of the course at the beginning of the semester. Good teaching also requires clarity at the start of a course in the mind of the instructor regarding course goals, topics, assignments, and assessment of students.

We thus believe it behooves the University of Minnesota to require syllabi in its courses. The rationale is that full, written disclosure of course details (including the relative weighting of course activities for final grades) at the beginning of the semester is a student right and should reduce misunderstanding later in the semester. It should be a University responsibility.

We also recommend that graduate level directed studies courses have an appropriate written agreement between instructor and student. The same rationales apply.

SCEP, therefore, concludes that:

The provision of syllabi for courses is a professional obligation:

1. The syllabus should be provided at the first meeting of class, electronically or on paper.
2. The syllabus is to include the name of the instructor of record and specify how grades will be computed, what the students are required to do during the semester, and the purposes of the course.
3. Changing readings or sequences of topics is not problematic so long as students have adequate notice of the modifications and are not penalized financially by the changes.
4. Directed study courses do not require syllabi. If there is no syllabus, there must be a written agreement between the student and the instructor that stipulates what will be accomplished during the semester and how it will be evaluated.

SCEP sees this as a requirement that many people assume is already in place; a requirement that supports effective instruction; and a requirement that diminished the potential for problems between faculty and students ranging from misunderstandings to unfairness.

Professor Ahern pointed out that one question has been whether to keep the policy a simple statement, with explanation in the COMMENT section, or to raise sections of the COMMENT into the policy. This Committee, last spring, opted for a simple statement; the views of SCC members were mixed but it appeared that the majority also favored a simple statement. Some were concerned if the policy were too explicit; others expressed concern that it was too general.

What is required on a syllabus by the Classroom Expectations Guidelines, Professor Curley asked? It refers to academic integrity, how grades will be awarded, accommodations for students with special needs, Professor Ahern said. One possibility might be the one-line policy statement with a reference to the Guidelines.

Dean Green said it is a red herring to talk about an instructor who hands out a blank page with the word "syllabus" on it; using that kind of example is not a good way to write policy. There may be one or two instructors who might do something like that, but the better approach is to establish the principle and provide guidance through the Guidelines. Points 1-4 are too rigid; a simple, short statement is enough.

Professor Odom agreed and suggested there be an explicit reference to the Guidelines. A lot of work went into them and they contain suggestions for good practice. It is cleaner to refer to what the Senate has already passed.

Professor Sampson also agreed. The goal was to mandate a syllabus; the simple statement achieves it.

Dr. Simmons said she preferred the reference to the instructor rather than the course because that language recognizes that the syllabus is part of one's professional responsibility; a syllabus could be quite generic without the imprint of the faculty member. Ms. Frazier argued that using "course" means there will be something on file in a department so if an instructor dies there is still a record. That, Dr. Simmons replied, shifts the accountability for the document and its contents to the department. The department already has that responsibility, Professor Seashore maintained.

Is there any difference between a course and a class, Ms. Haas asked? With smaller sections, there could be different classes. That point also lends credence to Dr. Simmons's point, Professor Ahern said. The Classroom Expectations Guidelines include instructor and department responsibilities, Mr. Fitzgerald recalled. It is understood that instructors create a syllabus but that departments retain them, Dean Green said.

The Committee agreed to amend the policy slightly to recognize a possible distinction between courses and classes, and then on vote taken, all but one member of the Committee voted in favor of the policy. Professor Ahern said he would see that it is placed on the docket of the December Senate meeting.

2. Retention Issues: Early Warnings

Professor Ahern turned next to handouts from Vice Provost Swan dealing with retention issues. He noted that the Committee had earlier had discussion with Dr. Swan and Associate Dean

Rinehart and that since then there had been a memo from President Yudof and Executive Vice President Bruininks suggesting ways to address retention issues. There were also several email exchanges prior to the meeting that raised issues related to retention. There are three issues before the Committee today, Professor Ahern said: college permission to register for fewer than 13 credits, mid-term grades, and limitations on withdrawals.

Dr. Swan began by noting that the proposal for the second item is purposely NOT for mid-term grades but rather for mid-term warnings or “early alerts” for first-year students. Instructors are not asked to assign grades to all students; they are asked to notify students in danger of receiving a D or an F. Professor Massey was concerned that if an instructor told a student he or she had an A, and then the student received a lower grade for the course, that could lead to grief. This proposal avoids that potential difficulty because it does not call for assigning grades or notifying students who are not in trouble in the course.

One faculty member initially opposed this proposal, preferring instead an individual approach. One problem with that would be an inability to aggregate information. Many instructors DO share information with students, but some do not.

Many CIC schools (the Big Ten plus the University of Chicago) on semesters do provide some kind of notice as a way to help students. At the University, only General College does so systematically at present. The notice is intended to serve as a wake-up call to the student. In one institution that provides these notices and evaluated their impact, it was found that the majority of students who received the notice “studied more, talked to their parents and peers, discussed the issue with their TA or instructor, and/or reduced time socializing and partying.” These seem entirely appropriate, Dr. Swan noted dryly.

Is this a Twin Cities or system issue, Professor Odom asked? It could be either, Dr. Swan said. Professor Odom pointed out that the Crookston campus has had a system for notifying students for about 15 years, modeled on the General College system. With the change to semesters, they changed to grade notification: all students receive electronic notification and advisors receive all the student's grades. There was resistance to the system at first but now virtually everyone uses it. They provide the notification in the 6th week of class, for the good of the student.

Professor Ahern said Morris has no such system; he was thinking about an all-University statement, but said that no action by the Senate should disturb what Crookston already has in place. Dr. Swan agreed that campus and college systems that work and that meet the spirit of what is intended should not be disturbed; the only issue is the aggregation of data for students who take classes in different colleges.

Ms. Shaw said that notification the 6th week is desirable; students need that much time either to turn their work around or to withdraw from the course. Professor Sampson said that while he receives inquiries about athletes and about high-school students, no one cares about other students; this system could be immensely helpful. Professor Seashore also endorsed the proposal, so long as it did not require grades but only an early warning. She said she assumed the computer system would flag students in 1-XXX courses to ask for information, and that instructors would not have to sort through students to figure out which are first-year.

Is a stipulated time period (e.g., 6 weeks) a prescription for structuring classes, Professor Kulacki asked? And where will the costs of implementing this proposal fall? The proposal is to call for early warnings for 1-XXX courses, Dr. Swan said; the computer systems can identify the first-year students, or SCEP could choose to say that ALL students in 1-XXX courses should be provided an early warning. It has been assumed this would all take place via the web; it has also been thought that there will be a system for submitting final grades. Dr. Swan said the systems for submitting final grades and an early warning should be the same, so the cost of adding early warnings will be only marginal. There could be more effort required elsewhere, however, if students decided they needed to see their advisors after receiving an early warning. Professor Kulacki commended this as an excellent remedy and urged that it be completed in good time and that the system be brought up all at once.

If adopted as Senate policy, Professor Ahern commented, it is left to the administration to implement it when ready. What is the timeline, Professor Miller inquired? Dr. Swan said the technical people have set a goal of Fall of 2002, unless SCEP were to recommend against the system.

Ms. Shaw urged that the system work for all the students in 1-XXX courses, not just first-year students. This is what Crookston does, Professor Odom said. She also said that students are told that the early warnings are NOT part of their permanent record, as would be the case with the proposal from Dr. Swan. If there is no grade available, other pertinent information is made available to the advisor; the whole point is to know where the student stands so that people who can help are also provided the information.

What about large courses where instructors will not know students, Ms. Frazier asked? In many instances, there are recitation sections and TAs keep grade books, Dr. Swan said; he looks at the grade books. His worry is bad assignments or differences in grade distributions across sections, but there is actually little change from year to year. He said he doubted large classes would be a problem in the sciences but said he did not know about disciplines like Political Science or History.

Professor Sampson took issue with a claim that early warnings would be a burdensome increase in workload. Even if there were 60 students in a class who needed such warnings, how long would it take to transfer the information to a computer, he asked--five minutes? He supported the notification of risk but agreed that grades should not be required.

Professor Seashore suggested that the system should also have flexibility; with two units already providing notification at six weeks, any new system should not be designed to require notification in the eighth week, she said. There would be concern about the ability of the student to withdraw were it that late, Ms. Frazier said; Ms. Shaw also agreed that eight weeks would be too late because there is nothing the student can do at that point. Professor Ahern agreed there should be flexibility; Dean Green suggested the policy advise that six weeks would be best. He expressed doubt that there would be that much difference across colleges that could not be adapted to a simple warning for students. In his own case, he added, he might not now have something on which to base an assessment by six weeks, but he could change assignments or add something in order to give timely feedback to freshman students so they could take action.

In the case of one of the sciences, Mr. Ferguson said, the laboratory TA has no idea what the test results are and the faculty member has no idea what the lab scores are; some freshman science courses have grading curves, which don't come into play until the end of the term. But instructors do

have office hours so students can find out how they are doing. Dean Green suggested that in these courses someone in the department will have to put the TA and faculty grades together.

Committee members agreed, after brief discussion, that any policy should call for early warnings for ALL students in 1-XXX courses, even if they are advanced undergraduates. If a junior or senior is not doing well in a 1-XXX course, Professor Miller commented, it is equally worth it to inform them as well as first-year students. Nor is it a good use of time to sort and exclude students who will not be alerted, she added. Dr. Swan said it was his sense that it would be easy to provide this service for all students in 1-XXX classes.

Professor Sampson wondered if there is not something slightly fraudulent about the process if there are instructors who use a curve with a mandatory number of Ds and Fs. The early warning system will alert students on the edge to withdraw--in order that some other students in the course can take their place to receive a D or an F. This is anomalous, he said.

Ms. Frazier said her experience as a graduate student has been that grades sometimes do not show until long after they are due; will this be a problem with the early warning system? It could be, Dr. Swan said, but if there is Senate policy in place, the policy can be used as leverage to get action. Much will also be taken care of with the computer entry system, Professor Seashore said. Dean Green agreed that there will be problems if the data entry system does not work. Dr. Swan concurred, saying the system must be simple and straightforward.

An early warning could be offered in courses beyond the 1-XXX level, Professor Curley said. Once students receive the service from one course, they will wonder why they do not receive it from others, Professor Odom observed. There is no reason to limit it to 1-XXX courses, Ms. Shaw agreed. The effort must be tied to the ability to send the warnings electronically, Professor Miller warned, and not simply dumped on the faculty.

Professor Kulacki suggested that a pilot study in some high-enrollment 1-XXX courses might help provide faculty support by creating evidence on how easy the process is. There could be some resistance because this proposal asks for more time from faculty on administrative duty associated with teaching.

It was agreed that Dr. Swan would develop language for a policy that could be endorsed by the Committee for Senate action.

3. Retention Issues: 13-Credit Minimum Enrollment

The next issue the Committee took up was a requirement that a student must obtain permission to enroll for fewer than 13 credits. Professor Odom asked if this is a Twin Cities issue. Dr. Swan said that it is primarily a Twin Cities issue; the chancellors were sent copies of the memo proposing it and asked to think about it for their campuses. The perspectives of all campuses will be obtained but the President believes this is an issue upon which there could be campus autonomy. That makes sense, Professor Ahern agreed.

Professor Seashore said that requiring permission for registering for fewer than 12 credits is like mandatory pre-divorce counseling: the parties have made up their minds before they go, but it

may change behavior in 1% of the cases. And what if the permission is not granted, Dean Green asked? It is possible the student would be billed for full tuition, Dr. Swan said, although no answer to that question has been developed. There are schools with fixed tuition (e.g., \$12,000), and students are free to take as many or as few credits as they wish--but they pay the full tuition irrespective of the number they take.

Why 13 credits, Professor Odom asked? Dr. Swan said he could not answer the question completely; it is the number in the University of California, Berkeley, policy. The number could be 15, but there would be a lot more noise in the system because of students who took 13 credits one semester, 17 the next, 15 the next, and so on. President Yudof wanted a more aggressive approach than 12 credits, more than 80% of full-time enrollment.

Do housing or athletics or financial aid require 13 credits, Professor Odom asked? They do not, Dr. Swan said, they require 12. It will be confusing to use 13 credits when the standard of 12 is so widespread for other aspects of attending the University, Professor Odom responded. Students could obtain the credits they need to graduate in four years by taking summer courses in addition to 12 credits per semester. Ms. Shaw said "12, please" because with 12 required for federal financial aid and many other things, 12 makes more sense. Professor Miller agreed; 13 credits would require many students to take 5 courses, because of the predominance of the 3-credit module, which would cause students a lot of problems.

Using 12 credits means the University will acquiesce in a 5-year graduation plan. Not with summer courses, Ms. Shaw replied. The problem is that students do not graduate after SIX years, Professor Seashore pointed out, not five years. Ms. Haas asked if a 13-credit requirement would really deter students or just create another bureaucratic hurdle; she suggested it would not change student behavior. That implies the University can do nothing about the graduation rate, Dr. Swan responded; is that what is being said? Are there other things it could do?

Professor Odom said the University should do other things rather than bar part-time students unless they go through an appeal process. There are other ways to increase graduation rates, she said, and she was at a loss to understand why this one was proposed. The University should try to figure out why students do not graduate after six years; has that research been done? A 13-credit rule will not fix the problem.

Students who are freshman athletes are counseled by advisors to take 12 credits, Mr. Ferguson reported, so the students can get their feet on the ground. Other students plan on doing a study abroad in the summer so take 12 credits during the term in order that they can work and save money for the summer.

There is the issue of how to handle exceptions, Dr. Swan agreed; it will have to be done with a minimum of paperwork and bureaucracy. Special academic opportunities, such as study abroad, would always qualify. And many athletes are red-shirted their first year, so they know they will be here five years, Mr. Ferguson added, because they will be eligible for competition for four years beyond their freshman year.

It may be that a rule will induce more behavior change in parents than in students, Professor Sampson speculated; it is said that many students are from affluent backgrounds but who work a lot;

this change could have the effect of families putting more money into their children's education. Some parents say that students will value their education more if they have to work for it, Professor Ahern said; his question is "working for good grades is not work?"

Dr. Simmons noted that her college, the College of Continuing Education, serves adult working students who have full lives and complex roles. To ask them to take 12 or 13 credits, or to go through an exemption process, would not be reasonable. Almost 100% of their students work, as adults, and it is to be hoped that the policy could take into account an entire college.

Dr. Swan agreed that there is a class of students such as this that must be recognized, but he took issue with the assertion in a recent CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION article that the non-traditional student is the 18-year-old and that the typical student is the working secretary. That is NOT true at Minnesota, he said; the overwhelming majority of undergraduate students are 18 and 19 years old. Adult working students need to be recognized, he said, but there are also a lot of young people coming through, for example, the Inter-College Program, so it is not likely an entire college would be exempted from the policy. A more targeted exemption would be more appropriate.

Ms. Frazier asked if there had been consideration given to a "per year" requirement, rather than per semester. Dr. Swan said that without full-year registration there would be no way to track adherence to the policy. If the University moves to full-year registration, a per-year requirement might be a possibility.

Ms. Shaw related that she started out thinking this was a terrible idea but said she was now warming to it. Notifying students about how much money they will save by graduating faster is part of a change in climate at the University. Disability should be a reason for exemption, she noted, and she suggested advisors might be granted authority to waive the requirement, with the expectation that reports on exemptions granted would serve as a monitor of the process.

One concern is about students who have paid employment of 30 hours per week or more, Professor Ahern said; the question is whether it is a good decision on a student's part to work that much when there are significant opportunity costs to not graduating sooner; it can cost them two or three years more. Or the University simply accepts the practice, Dean Green said. Another virtue of the proposal is that requiring students to ask permission will mean that information about the cost of delaying graduation will be made available to them, Ms. Shaw concluded.

Dr. Swan said he would relay the comments made at the meeting.

4. Civic Learning & Teaching Evaluation Subcommittees

Professor Ahern said that the first meeting of the Civic Learning subcommittee would be tomorrow; Professors Sampson and Harry Boyte will serve as co-chairs.

He has prepared a draft charge for the Teaching Evaluation subcommittee, which will have Ms. Haas and Professor Cardwell as SCEP representatives. Professor Hendel will serve as chair, and Professor Rabinowitz from FCC will serve also. There is a need for representatives from the Committee on Faculty Affairs.

5. Update on the Distributed Education Task Force

Professor Ahern turned to Professor Kulacki for an update on the Distributed Education Task Force.

Professor Kulacki said the group has been reconstituted as the Technology-Enhanced Learning Council (TEL). The Distributed Education Task Force issued a report in June that contained 16 recommendations and 21 action items. It is now up to the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost to decide how to respond.

There will be a collision between business and academic values that this Committee will have to deal with in the future, Professor Kulacki said. There is a notion of on-line degrees; there are questions about standards, faculty development and training, and licensing of materials that all need to be answered. He suggested the Committee begin to take up these issues early in the winter, identifying what it should say to the administration and what academic issues it believes most important to the University. There are a lot of individual initiatives under way; the question is what the institution should look like, what the overall policy should be. These are not trivial matters, Professor Kulacki said; they have an impact on academic integrity, on the degree-granting authority of the faculty, and how knowledge is licensed, for example.

Professor Billie Wahlstrom has begun to work full-time on TEL. There is much happening, and ultimately there will need to be a realignment of resources (TEL has not seen any new funds, yet). Most believe there must be new funding available to faculty if TEL is to be implemented in any significant way.

Professor Seashore said that many faculty are already engaged in TEL and that the Committee should harvest the issues they would raise. Professor Kulacki said that the TEL council represents robust institutional activity but it is not clear it is organized to get issues before it. Faculty who are confronting these issues now have no one to talk to, Professor Seashore said; this Committee should be a place to get help, so it can begin to sense the issues.

Professor Ahern said that Professor Wahlstrom would be invited to meet with the Committee.

The Committee also needs to gather information so it can try to solve the issues people face now, Professor Seashore insisted. Professor Kulacki said it would be better to develop institutional policy/framework based on exemplars and that one could learn from people in Public Health, the Institute of Technology, and the College of Biological Sciences, for example. They should not all come to this Committee, Professor Seashore said. There are a lot of issues the institution must solve that will percolate up through individuals, but there is no library of problems right now.

The effort started as distance education, then became distributed education, and is now technology-enhanced learning, Professor Ahern observed; is this a big shift that was intended? It was, Professor Kulacki said; the TEL council will bring various elements together. It was a deliberate shift so that the effort is not leading with distance education, Dean Green agreed.

There is also a sense that the University can be a national leader in this area, Professor Kulacki said, but there is also recognition that no institution can go it alone. Politics also drives this, Dean

Green said; it could not be sold if it were only a college of distance education. There is more than politics, however, Dr. Swan added; before there were blackboard classes and correspondence study while now there is a continuum.

There was debate in the committee on what a classroom is in this environment, Professor Kulacki said. When TEL is discussed, it will challenge much that was on the agenda today, such as a 13-credit rule, syllabus policy, etc. The College of Continuing Education has looked at these questions for years and will play a major role in the future of the University, he speculated. TEL is also being infused into the mainstream colleges, Dean Green said, and CCE will not carry this out alone but rather in conjunction with other colleges. There will be no empire of distributed education, he said.

The common denominator in all of this is technology, Mr. Fitzgerald observed; this Committee spent a lot of time discussing the classroom technology upgrade plan, which provides the foundation for any plan for technology-enhanced learning, whether faculty use it in the classroom or to distribute the education. The weak link is support for faculty to learn to use the technology, Professor Ahern said. Faculty will have to do it on their own if they are going to be change agents, Professor Kulacki said, and good evaluation and assessment tools are not available.

Professor Ahern thanked Professor Kulacki for his report. He noted that the legislative accountability reports will be on the agenda of the next meeting and then adjourned it at 3:15.

Professor Kulacki provided these notes on his comments.

Brief Report to SCEP on Technology-Enhanced Learning

1. Report of the TEL Task Force of June, 2001, listed 16 major recommendations and 21 action items. The task force has now become the TEL Council, with 25 members. Professor Billie Wahlstrom is the chair of the Council.
2. A CD is available that highlight many program in the University that are considered to be exemplary with respect to distance education. CDs can be obtained from Professor Wahlstrom.
3. Key academic issues for the future appear to be:
 - Fully on-line degrees.
 - Fully on-line graduate certificates.
 - Partnerships with private sector organizations.
 - Academic policy development: accessibility, standards for course materials, compliance with existing academic course and degree policies
 - Definition of the classroom
 - Faculty workloads
4. Key technical issues
 - University portal strategy. Work is underway in the Executive Vice President's office.
 - Web CI as the framework for course management.

- College portal strategies (AHC will have a portal by June 2002)

5. Key business issues
 - Development funds
 - Cost of development versus price charges for courses.
 - Licensing fees for faculty member

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota