

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, May 8, 2002
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Vernon Cardwell, Shawn Curley, Scott Ferguson, Steve Fitzgerald, Christina Frazier, Geri Malandra, Christine Maziar, Kathleen Newell, Martin Sampson, Karen Seashore, Mary Ellen Shaw, Mary Sue Simmons, Craig Swan, Douglas Wangensteen

Absent: Patricia Cavanaugh, Gretchen Haas, Frank Kulacki, John LaBau, Carol Miller, Marsha Odom,

Guests: John Kellogg (Institutional Research and Reporting); Susan VanVoorhis (Office of the Registrar)

[In these minutes:

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:05 and noted that this was the last meeting of the year--as well as his last meeting as chair. Professor Newell moved that the Committee thank Professor Ahern for his service; Committee members gave him a round of applause. Professor Ahern thanked the Committee and also expressed thanks to the two outgoing Committee members, Professor Newell and Ms. Frazier.

1. Class Sizes After the Change to Semesters

Professor Ahern welcomed Mr. Kellogg to the meeting to discuss possible changes in class sizes that might have occurred when the University changed to semesters. Dr. Swan asked that the minutes not contain numbers because the data being presented are only a first attempt; it stretches the institutional databases to develop this information, he said, and the comparisons between 1998-99 and 2001-02.

One clear change is that there is a big decrease in the number of lecture courses with fewer than 10 students, Dr. Swan said; it is not clear why that has occurred. Other than that, he said, there are not a lot of changes. Some courses in particular departments have grown; others have not.

Committee members discussed the data and made a number of points.

- It may be that departments have allowed the 1-XXX and 3-XXX courses to increase in size while keeping upper division courses small.

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- There is no agreement on what is a discussion, what is a lecture, and so on; one department will call a course one thing while another department will call it something else. A more sophisticated analysis will require tighter definitions.
- Some departments project higher enrollments in a course than they achieve in order to get a particular classroom--and keep the classroom even when the enrollment turns out to be small.
- Some deans may argue that if the same class has 9 students each semester, it is more efficient to offer it once per year to 18 students.

This is an important issue, Professor Seashore said; even if the data are not great, they respond to urban legends about who is disadvantaged by the change to semesters. Dr. Swan agreed to follow up on a couple of suggestions that were made during the discussion.

2. Credits and Degrees

Another issue before the Committee is credits and degrees, Professor Ahern said. In some programs the change to semesters was accompanied by a change (increase) in the percentage of degree credits required by the major field. The numbers were reported earlier to the Committee; Dr. Swan said he would jawbone departments about the requirements. Professor Ahern asked if there were any additional information to report.

Dr. Swan said he had worked with the Twin Cities program and had suggested to the academic affairs vice chancellors on the coordinate campuses that they do the same. He said he did have discussions with Twin Cities deans about large increases in the number of required credits and about programs which have a large percentage of required credits for a degree. This will be, he said, like the fight for liberty: it will require eternal vigilance and the Committee will have to stay on top of the issue.

Some units are constrained by accreditation requirements, Dr. Swan said, but there has been some movement in the right direction. The stage has been set so that people understand the issue; he said he would continue to work on it. Some colleges said the data about program requirements were incorrect, and there is some "softness" in use of the liberal education requirements (e.g., a student may be required to take a Psychology course, for example, as part of a degree, but that course is also then counted as fulfilling liberal education requirements).

This is a question of balance. Departments may be of the view that if students take "just one more course" they will be better prepared, but carrying that view to its logical end would mean a student would have no choices at all. At the same time, programs must have the ability to adopt a reasonable set of requirements for a degree.

The concern of the Committee, Professor Ahern recalled, is that students do not lose flexibility and choice. It could track the role of majors in the undergraduate curriculum and be sure that changes are not made without thought. In his view, Dr. Swan said, prescribing a liberal education course means it is part of the major. That is a fine line, Professor Cardwell said; his program requires math, which also fulfills liberal education requirements. Many business majors are required to take a semester of calculus, which was counted as part of degree requirements, Dr. Swan responded. This is

a subject on which reasonable people could disagree, Professor Ahern summarized, and said it would be the subject of further Committee discussion next year.

3. Report from the Civil Learning Subcommittee