

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, October 26, 2005
2:30 – 4:30
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Richard McCormick (chair), William Bart, LeAnn Dean, (Patricia Jones-Whyte for) Gail Dubrow, Josh Feneis, Eric Ling, Claudia Neuhauser, Christopher Pappas, Mary Ellen Shaw, Paul Siliciano, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Craig Swan, Sara Tuttle, Douglas Wangenstein, Joel Weinsheimer

Absent: Vernon Cardwell, Shawn Curley, James Leger, Emily Ronning

Guests: none

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) draft teaching evaluation questions for release to students; (2) grading data; (3) charge to the task force on support for graduate students; (4) charge to the task force on discipline evolution; (5) charge to the task force on faculty culture]

1. Draft Questions for Student Release

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:30 and began by introducing the two new student members of the Committee, Mr. Ling and Ms. Tuttle. He then reported on the status of the "student release" questions for the student evaluation of teaching forms. He reviewed the development of the questions and noted that the Senate, at its last meeting of spring, 2005, delegated to this Committee final authority to approve questions. The Senate asked that Committee seek assistance from experts in survey questions; Professor Michael Rodriguez from Educational Psychology has been working on the wording and piloting of questions.

At this point they are waiting for the Student Senate leadership to approve the wording of the questions; once that approval has been obtained, the questions will be piloted. The questions are very similar to the ones the Committee saw last year and they reflect the interests of the students.

Professor McCormick agreed that the Committee would see the wording of the questions, for information, as approved by the Student Senate leadership before they are piloted.

2. Grading Data

The Committee voted 11-1 to close this portion of the meeting.

* 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.

The Committee discussed courses with a high percentage of A's. At the conclusion of the discussion the Committee approved on an 8-2 vote (with two abstentions) the following statement:

The Senate Committee on Educational Policy has reviewed material provided by Vice Provost Swan with regard to courses with a high percentage of A's. There are clearly some situations where a high proportion of A's would not be unusual, e.g., smaller classes with a large proportion of high ability students. While there are no simple numeric limits that the Committee would want to impose, a high proportion of A's in large classes for which there is little reason to expect that enrollment would be selective does raise questions about the appropriateness of the use of the A-F grading scale.

In particular, SCEP believes that there are a group of courses for which S-N grades would be more appropriate. These include courses where there are not specific differential expectations of performance linked to grades; grades appear to be heavily based on attendance rather than an evaluation of learning.

The Committee asks the Provost's Office to share this statement with colleges, to have follow-up conversations with colleges on specific courses, and to report back to SCEP by the end of the spring semester.

3. Charges to Strategic Planning Task Forces: Graduate Reform: Student Support

Professor McCormick next asked Committee members to review the charge to the "Graduate Reform: Student Support" task force. He noted that the task forces do seem to be taking seriously the questions SCEP has raised about the other task force charges; one of the chairs of one task force has asked to meet with SCEP.

Committee members made several suggestions/comments about the Student Support task force charge:

-- At present, graduate students do not have access to the writing center, but there are students (native and non-native English speakers alike) who need assistance. These students do not have access because the Graduate School does not contribute to the support of the writing center.

-- The task force does not appear to be charged to consider diversity and to have broad representation in the graduate student population.

-- There is need to address support that is not available to graduate students, but needed, such as child care (which is available to undergraduates).

-- Graduate students need help with visas. There is an office that helps with this, but visa issues have become more difficult since 9/11, and the office in question has difficulty meeting the demand.

-- Graduate students in general are skeptical or cynical about the strategic positioning process and have little faith that it will help them very much. A lot of the wording in the charges is vague and does not seem to mean very much. There is little mention of the financial situation of graduate students, especially with respect to health care, and housing is also an important issue. There is a lack of data on salaries, the number of TAs and RAs, and no one is doing a systematic review of the data. The amount required for

international students to come to the University, for example, is a random guess; there are no data to make an informed decision.

-- This is an opportunity to highlight graduate education, which is something the University has not done much for the public or the legislature; inside the University it is recognized as important. There is, however, not enough money to pay students and the University loses some of the best students to other schools; that situation will make it tough to get into the top three. Top students get excellent offers from other schools and the University will not be able to compete without additional funds. A related issue is that Directors of Graduate Study turn over every three years so there is a lack of institutional memory. Quality in the DGSs fluctuates, even though the Graduate School trains them. The DGSs play a significant role.

(A concurring view:) It is difficult to attract top graduate students to Minnesota because other schools offer \$4,000 – 5,000 more. The high fringe benefit rate also makes it cheaper to hire postdocs, which some are doing because of the shortage of money.

-- Even after one discounts prejudice, undergraduates cannot understand some TAs and professors. This is still a residual problem; the University needs to support accent-reduction programs and insist on proficiency in English.

-- It is to be hoped that the thought that has gone into improving the undergraduate experience could be directed to the improvement of the experience of graduate students as well.

-- Professor McCormick noted that the new Graduate School dean, Gail Dubrow, attended the Committee retreat and discussed a major re-thinking of graduate education at the University. It is to be hoped that an effort similar to what has gone into improving the undergraduate experience could be directed to the improvement of the experience of graduate students as well.

4. Charges to Strategic Planning Task Forces: Graduate Reform: Discipline Evolution

-- There are graduate programs that are purely interdisciplinary and not linked to departments; funding for those programs is uncertain and insufficient to provide adequate student support. It is thus difficult for students to get through them and obtain positions in other departments.

-- There is a contradiction here: The University wants to promote interdisciplinary/emerging work but it also wants to close departments. (But, contrarily, even with increasing resources, if there are new places the University should put its money, how can it do so without closing other departments/programs? The Committee could talk about the process for closing units. One criterion might be that they are too small. In the case of emerging programs, which will start small, they must be given time to grow, but if they do not, they should be closed.)

-- The entire strategic positioning process is related to the new budget model; one hears that the new model is like the current model, only worse. The new model will assess all costs to colleges, which raises questions about whether it will support interdisciplinary work. There may be a pool of central funds available to provide incentives to colleges to support interdisciplinary units. Ultimately, with respect to this task force, it will be an issue of resources and how graduate students and interdisciplinary programs are funded.

-- There was a prestigious department called "History of Consciousness" at one institution in California; it could not place students. That is a problem with new names for departments and centers: people do not know what they mean. The University is conflicted about this: it wants to promote cutting-edge research, but it could be that one must be in a department and do excursions into new research, rather than creating new units. It is not necessary to create a new program/center/department to do a lot of interdisciplinary research in a department. But departments must allow the flexibility to do such research.

-- One thing that might be considered in this area is a request to the state for funding because the state is interested in interdisciplinary work. The Governor is interested in biomedical work.

-- This discussion raises the question about the structure in which interdisciplinary research is done: with a new department and tenured faculty, or a research center and a couple of courses to bring people together?

-- The Committee discussed the definition of "applied doctorates" and the University's role in the state in offering doctoral education.

-- Interdisciplinary research as used in this context is what NIH and NSF have as a model, encouraging PIs from different fields to work together, not what might happen in CLA. And to do good interdisciplinary work, one must know the disciplines. Students are still trained in a discipline, but so they can talk to people in other fields. These interdisciplinary interests and efforts also shift over time, so institutionalizing an interdisciplinary program is a problem.

-- It is beneficial for students to be plunged into another discipline and it is good for the University to encourage interdisciplinary "travel" so that students learn from other fields. (Every Ph.D. student must have a supporting program.)

-- Biomedical Engineering is an interdisciplinary program but like some, it may be here for a long time. The University needs to think about how to set up these long-term programs. Most, however, will not be around for years.

5. Charges to Strategic Planning Task Forces: Faculty Culture

-- It is surprising how far down the list teaching is. (But one can be happy to see that teaching is there at all. There is an issue in terms of what strategic positioning means for teaching and undergraduate education.)

-- Vice Provost Swan expressed fundamental disagreement with a concern that teaching will be de-emphasized in the strategic positioning process. There have been discussions about which public universities are #1 and #2; the general consensus seems to be that they are Berkeley and Michigan. Both institutions offer great experiences for undergraduates and graduate students, and they attract great students. They seem to have solved any conflict between being a great research university and delivering good education. These are not polar opposites.

-- Teaching is mentioned in the strategic positioning documents but there is a common perception that it is less important, especially outside the University and among undergraduates. The Provost has declared that this will remain a university, not become a research institute.

-- There are a lot of competitors around the world, beyond Berkeley and Michigan; a number of institutions are publicly-funded but do not have the same missions as public universities in the United States. Rankings for public research universities come out but it is not clear what numbers are used for teaching. The University of Florida system, which seems to be one the University might use, includes one measurement that has to do with undergraduates: ACT/SAT scores. A lot of studies rely on graduation and retention rates as an indirect proxy for teaching. Retention and graduation, however, will also be higher if there are higher ACT/SAT scores. The metrics and measurement task force is working on measurement of learning. This is a tricky issue because one needs a measure that goes across institutions—and while the University does a lot of surveys of students, they are not the same as surveys that other institutions do.

-- There has been talk of using the "University of Florida plus": using it plus other measures the University believes important. The Florida study, however, is domestic, so other measures will have to be used for international comparisons.

-- The game (aiming to be among the top three public research universities in the world) is not a worthy one. The University is already among the top research universities in the world, and it can direct funds to improve or retain its position, but the emphasis on the numbers is contemptible. The only way to get to the top three is to go headhunting at other universities because that is the way it is done. The document mentions ambitions with respect to rankings several times; teaching is mentioned once. The University is "pretty damn good," and it can be better, but the articulation of this goal is not a good thing.

-- Where the University ranks lowest is on the data for incoming students; it could fix that problem by lopping off the students with lower scores.

-- The University should not make a fetish of the numbers but it does need aspirational goals to be excellent in all that it does, or it could easily be in 10th or 11th place and become complacent. Every hiring decision, for example, should be the best person the University can get to do research and work with students.

-- The issue of resources is not brought up; the best faculty will go to places that provide more support and funding.

-- The reason it is called strategic positioning is to help the state understand what a resource it has in the University. That could lead to more support, if successful, which could mean additional resources. Those who began the strategic positioning process were right: the University must move forward if it is to survive because there will not be as many research universities in this country in the future. In the national and international marketplace, the University must set an aggressive goal if it is to survive.

-- It is not just a question of hiring; once people are here, it is important they develop a commitment to the University. They will not stay if they do not.

-- With respect to retaining faculty, there are resource questions when it comes to faculty salaries and faculty size vis-à-vis the number of students. This is a small faculty, which leads to more service commitments, which take away time from research, so the faculty cannot be as productive.

-- One general item with respect to culture is that it has changed to much more of a free agency system and with less identification with the unit or University. It is not just salary, it is also other elements of the job, but it is something the University does not often think about. One example: a faculty member

received an offer of a large increase in salary from another institution; he told the Provost that he did not want a salary increase but wanted three new assistant professors in his area. Why the change in culture? One simplistic answer is because other universities became willing to raid and offer more money and endowed chairs.

-- There has always been movement of faculty. One question is whether the counter-offers now must be larger; one could test that proposition but it's not clear what it would show. If the University creates a place where faculty are committed to the University, they will not leave for small differences in salary.

-- But everyone knows there are two ways to get a big raise: get an outside offer or be in a situation where one MIGHT receive an outside offer (preventive retention). The ability to move is a criterion of value. It used to be that the Ivies had lousy salaries and the benefit was the prestige; this is no longer the case. They have higher salaries and are more competitive than public institutions.

-- The cost of living in the Twin Cities is no longer as moderate as it once was.

-- People are not as happy here (they are more cynical) than faculty at other institutions. That needs to change so that people LIKE to be here rather than just look at their paycheck. This is just a feeling about the University, but it seems to be true. At other places faculty respect the place and like the location; here they tend to get jerked around more. There is more buy-in elsewhere. At the University new faculty are provided a good salary and a big start-up—and five years later they leave. It is hard to pinpoint the causes, but there is a need to build commitment to the University. A lot of faculty retire, and many of them retire angry.

-- The University could do more to support families of assistant professors. Other places pay attention to that matter. It can be something as simple as daycare.

-- Being in the top three is a big deal, but those already among the best are not going to wait for the University. The University must think about what will be important in the future. What does it not have for new faculty? What will help current faculty remain productive as new faculty are brought in? If there is no money because the University is paying senior faculty to keep up with students, what do new faculty have to look forward to? There is a question of career trajectory; faculty should be permitted to work in several disciplines without penalty. Bringing in new faculty could make the University more attractive. At one of the Ivy schools, the prevailing attitude among the faculty was "how can I shape the place," not "what can the University do for me?" The conviction on the part of the faculty that they can shape the place is missing here.

Professor McCormick adjourned the meeting at 4:35.

-- Gary Engstrand