

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, January 31, 2006
1:30 – 3:30
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Richard McCormick (chair), William Bart, Vernon Cardwell, Maureen Cisneros, (George Green for) Gail Dubrow, April Knutson, James Leger, Claudia Neuhauser, Peh Ng, Paul Siliciano, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Craig Swan, Cathrine Wambach, Joel Weinsheimer

Absent: Douglas Wangensteen, Kristen Wendtland

Guests: Professor Leslie Schiff (Chair, Council on Liberal Education)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) Bok's book *Our Underachieving Colleges*; (2) the work of the Council on Liberal Education in revising liberal education requirements for the Twin Cities campus]

1. Derek Bok's Book *Our Underachieving Colleges*

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 1:35 and noted there were two items on the agenda: discussion of Bok's book and discussion with Professor Leslie Schiff, chair of the Council on Liberal Education, about revising the liberal education requirements for the Twin Cities campus. He turned first to Dr. Knutson to lead a discussion of Chapter Four of the book, *Learning to Communicate*.

Dr. Knutson highlighted the points of the chapter.

-- Students should graduate with the ability to express one's self with clarity and precision, and if possible with style and grace.

-- Communication has been a problem since the beginning of higher education.

-- Senior faculty are not involved in the most important task in undergraduate education, and leave the work to graduate students and adjunct staff; this is a recurring theme in the book. (Dr. Knutson said it would be better if more senior faculty taught undergraduates, but she defended "adjunct" staff and graduate assistants, who devote more time to pedagogy and do a very good job. Bok describes adjuncts as poorly paid and with no loyalty to the institution; that is not so true at the University any longer, where teaching staff have full-time jobs and fringe benefits—and do feel loyalty to the institution.)

* 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.

- Teaching to write is a process, not a product; it requires many drafts and revisions, and the aim is to achieve clearer thinking.
- There are different objectives for writing courses; faculty should have forums across disciplines about the goal of writing more clearly so it can be taught across disciplines.
- Most research is on writing instruction; if writing instruction is ill-understood and ill-served, teaching speaking is even more so. There is no understanding of how to teach speaking.

Several points arose in the following discussion.

- Some colleges train graduate students in teaching; others do not. At the high end, a department may require a week of training; at the low end, a half a day or less, and in both cases there is little about teaching writing. Most TAs are more worried about the content of the course.
- Some colleges have training for graduate students to teach writing; it would be desirable to have such instruction for assistant professors as well. (One Committee member suggested that all probationary faculty be required to take one course on teaching writing.)
- With the investment in the writing studies department, the University is ready to make a significant leap in the teaching of writing.
- There is a long history at the University of incorporating writing in classes; good writing is not achieved in a single course. The University is trying to achieve writing across the curriculum.
- Writing across the curriculum puts writing in the hands of the general faculty, many of whom are not proficient at writing instruction. The University does not provide guidance to the faculty on how to teach writing skills. Training is offered, but most faculty are too busy. The new writing baccalaureate requires every discipline to identify a way to major in writing in the field. (It is likely most faculty have never seen the literature on writing in their discipline.)
- There is a need to elevate the status of writing in the eyes of students, many of whom do not see written or oral communication as important. There would be more student buy-in if they could see the relevance of communication. Writing-intensive courses in the field are better; students get bored taking writing classes in other fields. (A student member of the Committee: writing-intensive courses have been very helpful, they force one to learn to communicate; it would be better to have more of them in the major.)
- The problem might be attacked most successfully in the graduate curriculum; many faculty could benefit from instruction in teaching writing. There should be a course required for an advanced degree; now there is no discussion of writing instruction in graduate curricula. There could be one required course on pedagogy and writing.

Professor McCormick turned next to Professor Bart to lead a discussion of Chapter Five, Learning to Think.

Professor Bart thanked Vice Provost Swan for providing copies of the book to Committee members, and summarized the chapter.

-- Two of the main goals of undergraduate education are the ability to communicate and the ability to think critically; they are reciprocal but not the same.

-- There is no college that does not want to address critical thinking and communication; teaching students to think critically is a principal aim of undergraduate education. There is an array of thinking skills but faculty rarely think about what commitment to them would mean. In some fields, the ability to think critically actually declines during college years. If one says things are important in undergraduate education, some will ask how to measure whether or not they are occurring—and whether some fields contribute more than others. If critical thinking is central, institutions will need accountability measures and program assessment as well as new pedagogy and an environment where students can express alternative views, not be indoctrinated.

Committee members offered comments.

-- There is not universal definition of critical thinking. It may be a big part of math, for example, but do other disciplines have different definitions? Professor Bart agreed there are variations in the definition, related to the variations in cognitive skills, but there is also a great deal of agreement on it.

-- Students should indeed not be indoctrinated; while they should be taught to be critical of mainstream thinking, they should not then be taught a "party line" for critiquing mainstream thinking—a party line, inside or outside the mainstream, is never critical thinking.

-- Most provocatively, Bok argues that the lectures everyone grew up with in college, while efficient, do not provide much opportunity for critical thinking. Lectures are mostly passive listening. One can model critical thinking in a lecture, but one cannot learn to ride a bike by watching. There needs to be more student participation.

-- As with writing, how does one teach faculty to provide an active learning environment? That could be built in as part of what assistant professors must learn. (Several Committee members, however, observed that there is a role for the lecture in education.)

-- There is research on critical thinking that would be helpful if brought to bear on instruction.

-- "Uncritical thinking" is the most frequent and most important thinking that people do most days of their lives. If one engaged in critical thinking all during the day, life would be debilitated, especially on values one holds dear (such as "all men are created equal," which everyone knows is not true). There is a place that critical thinking does not reach and people do little of it; there are reasons to honor thinking that is not critical.

2. Discussion with Professor Schiff about the Council on Liberal Education (CLE)

Professor Schiff began by explaining that the process for review of the Twin Cities campus liberal education requirements has not been linear, although it has not yet become circular. CLE membership has been expanded for the purpose; they have developed a syllabus and are treating the

effort as a seminar. They have looked at a vision of liberal education, at what other institutions are doing, had focus-group discussions with students, faculty, advisors, and have reviewed the Howe Committee report (which created the current liberal education requirements). They are also considering the student learning outcomes and multicultural elements.

The discussion of Bok's book here was like that at CLE: the focus was on process versus content versus ways of knowing. CLE has agreed that one purpose of liberal education is get students out of their comfort zone. They also agree with the goals of the Howe report; the failures have been implementation, not the vision.

The problems they see are several.

- There are increasing requirements in the majors, squeezing out room for liberal education requirements.
- Liberal education course designations are increasingly driven by the budget model (which is not necessarily better; bigger is not better; liberal education designation should not be a marketing program designed to get students into particular classes).
- Identification of how or why a course meets liberal education requirements—but courses can change over time.
- The value of liberal education requirements is not well-articulated by faculty, advisors, the web, or administrators. Students do not recognize it; they see the requirements as something to get done. Student choices are based on the number of dips, easiness, and their schedule; the choices are NOT driven by what faculty hold dear about liberal education. [Number of dips refers to the number of liberal education requirements a single course meets.]
- The system is complicated; faculty do not understand it and cannot articulate its value well.

But the system is not completely broken; it just needs tweaking, Professor Schiff said. She made several points and posed several questions.

- There must be more transparency and purposefulness and it must be more overt in its values.
- It could use more flexibility.
- CLE is trying to redesign the model to make it much better.
- Whatever the system, it should be implementable and the goals and pedagogy of liberal education should be valued at the institutional level.
- One point they are asking about is whether there should be a list or matrix; another is whether liberal education courses in the major should count toward liberal education requirements.
- Some advisors tell students to get liberal education requirements out of the way early. That is not a good approach; the mind is different at ages 18 and 21.

- Should there be one lab or two? Minnesota is unique in the country in requiring two, and the requirement may be having an impact on graduation rates.
- What is quantitative reasoning?
- There is a need for cultural diversity and international perspectives.
- If a course meets liberal education requirements, what should be the process for recertification?
- How do liberal education requirements interact with the student learning outcomes?

Their goals are to provide more choice for students and to make students and faculty more purposeful in the discussion and design of courses, Professor Schiff concluded. They have a few ideas about "deliverables."

- Develop liberal education minors (packages put together in a thoughtful way such that students could see their value).
- Instead of seeing liberal education as breadth for all, should they provide the option of depth in one area well outside the major?

Committee members offered a number of observations.

- Professor McCormick said that when he was chair of CLE, they required that every syllabus include information for students about why the course meets liberal education requirements and the goal must be explicit in the schedule of topics, readings, and other assignments in the syllabus.
- The Howe Committee could not anticipate what would happen with the budget model, tuition levels, and enrollment. But the language of the report still resonates, even though it has been lost now with "IMG," the budget model adopted in the late 1990s (the latest budget model arguably makes the situation even worse). Learner outcomes are embedded in the Howe report, which is still very good.
- IT is perhaps the most rigid college in terms of majors, and there might be a rebellion among students if required to take more courses outside engineering—because students do not see them as relevant to their interests. At orientation, students are given a list of double-dipping courses they must take (courses that have nothing to do with their interests) if they are to graduate in four years—which sends the wrong message. The system does need to be made simpler and trying to do two things with one course should not be allowed.
- Students need to understand why there are liberal education requirements and should prepare a statement on what they want to get out of college. The system should also be more flexible, so that if a student misses one area, the work can be accomplished in other ways.
- Professor Schiff reported that Associate Vice Provost Laura Koch has a plan for freshman seminars on 21st Century issues; writing is embedded in them. It would be nice if students had to articulate their vision of what they expect from college, even if they had to change it over their career as a student.

They could also be required to talk about where they received their liberal education, what was good about it, and how the courses fit together.

-- Students should be required to spread out liberal education courses over four years.

-- Sometimes a problem filling liberal education in the major is not a problem with the liberal education requirements, it is a problem with the major. Some majors are expanding, believing that just one more course will make it even better. A college education should be a place to explore broadly—and the University should force it, although some majors would oppose that goal. There will always be a tension between liberal education and external accreditation requirements that put pressure on student schedules.

-- Right after WW II liberal education was framed as understanding western traditions and values. Now there is too much to know and the shift has been to a focus on ways of knowing. The goal is to provide students the tools and grounding in ways to acquire what they need to know.

-- Students see the requirements as a hurdle, not a chance to broaden their education. The number of credits/courses for liberal education is not a big factor. They have a sense that they must fulfill categories or they have not done their job; there needs to be categories but students don't have to fill them all.

-- The liberal education minor is not fleshed out. Could a student prepare a package that met many liberal education requirements? A related question is whether the minor should add value to the major (or not). It would also be helpful if the faculty teaching liberal education minor courses discussed the minor with each other. The packages would not be set up by the colleges; they would be interdisciplinary and cross-cutting and set up by students and their advisors. Individual groups of faculty could also develop something that might be attractive to students.

-- There could be content areas from which students must sample; students can also be asked to think and write about their liberal education.

-- There has been much talk about the need to convince STUDENTS about the values of a liberal education. Students are not convinced because the faculty have not convinced themselves of the rationale for a liberal education—what it is beyond breadth? In Germany, a student is through liberal education requirements before he or she comes to the university, and Europeans are not less educated or less "liberal" than Americans. The values being advanced do not convince society any more. One of the courses he teaches is the first—and the last—course students will take in the field, so whatever is to be done must be done in 15 weeks. There is a temptation to teach to those who will stay in the discipline, not to the 95% who will not, but one is not teaching a liberal education course if teaching to students who will stay in the discipline. "Terminal" one-level courses are very important. (Professor Schiff said they want departments to think about what should be in a terminal course in the field.)

-- The University does not exploit digital media sufficiently; only the course guide is on the web. There needs to be modern search algorithms that allow students to find courses that are linked or related.

-- The requirements must not eliminate breadth; there is already too much silo thinking on this campus.

-- Students should be encouraged to cluster courses more coherently so there are connections among them, not just fill in dots on a grid. Professor Schiff said that in an ideal world, all undergraduates would talk with advisors about their educational goals and develop a plan for their liberal education. That will not happen, but if the University could help encourage more purposefulness or provide options, that would be an improvement.

-- Instructors must model liberal education and demonstrate an interest in more than their own discipline. Students must see diversity in the lives of their instructors.

Professor Schiff said that pedagogy will be important. So will the process for ensuring standards are met in the environment of the new budget model. One suggestion has been to cap the number of liberal education courses any one department could have; another is to place on departments the responsibility for being sure that its courses meet the spirit and values of liberal education (and there are also reasons why doing so might not work).

Professor Ng reported that before the change to semesters, the situation where a course could have two or more general education requirement designations was a nightmare at the Morris campus; now it is simpler because each course can have at most one general education requirement designation. Students can use the web and can identify courses by area. They also fought with departments on major requirements.

Professor McCormick adjourned the meeting at 3:30.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota