

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, March 23, 2005
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Emily Hoover (chair), Dale Branton, Vernon Cardwell, Shawn Curley, LeAnn Dean, Gretchen Haas, Richard McCormick, Christopher Pappas, Emily Ronning, Mary Ellen Shaw, Craig Swan, Joel Weinsheimer, Jenny Zhang

Absent: Victor Bloomfield, Adam Hirsch, James Leger, Karen Seashore, Douglas Wangenstein

Guests: Nathan Wanderman (Student Senate Consultative Committee); Susan Van Voorhis, Tina Falkner (Office of the Registrar)

[In these minutes: (1) evaluation of instruction student-release questions; (2) courses with high percentages of A's; (3) review of liberal education requirements; (4) recommendations for change in the Morse-Alumni award process]

1. Evaluation of Instruction Policy Student-Release Questions

Professor Hoover convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Mr. Wanderman to discuss the student-release questions that are to be included as part of the policy on the evaluation of instruction. She noted that Mr. Wanderman had brought them to the Committee earlier and was now bringing back revised versions.

Ms. Haas asked whether the student-release questions should be included in the text of the policy or established elsewhere so that they would be easier to change in the future. Mr. Wanderman said they did not want to make the policy too flexible so it could be changed every year. The questions would be less useful if they were not consistent. If the policy is structured that way, so the Committee can make changes, it should do so only if absolutely necessary. Things do not change every year, Dr. Shaw assured Mr. Wanderman; if the questions fall under the Committee's jurisdiction, they will not be changed annually.

The Committee spent some time reviewing the redrafted questions and the responses/scales that accompanied them. It was agreed at the end of the discussion that Mr. Wanderman and Professor Hoover would work together on revising them.

2. Courses with High Percentages of A's

The Committee next turned its attention to a list of courses in which the percentage of grades that were A were 67% or more. Vice Provost Swan also distributed copies of responses from colleges

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to an inquiry he had made of them; he had noted the recommendation of the SCEP subcommittee on grading a few years ago that departments should review their grading standards. It would be helpful if SCEP were to provide a summary statement, he said. The colleges offered a range of responses, from "we are appointing a committee" to "we don't see a problem." He said he was not sure he agreed with the latter response.

In some cases (e.g., Music Performance courses) there are high percentages of A's and it might be more appropriate to use an S/N system. The same could perhaps be argued about physical education courses. Some also argue that they set performance standards for a course and if students meet it, they should receive an A. Some 5XXX courses could have a number of graduate students (and, it was pointed out, 5XXX courses are supposed to be PREDOMINANTLY graduate students, although not all are).

What response would be appropriate, Professor Weinsheimer asked? The Committee could identify what appear to be egregious instances of awarding too many A's (i.e., courses that do not fall in the categories Dr. Swan identified) and put them together with the college responses and ask what happened. Or the Committee could say it is not satisfied with the responses. The Committee should not try to figure out why courses have high percentages of A's, it need not prescribe policies, but it can continue to prod.

The students in his college have commented that it would be just as legitimate to ask about courses with a LOW percentage of A's, Professor Cardwell reported. The Committee should address quality of instruction; the data it has now speak to grade inflation. The Committee should not address individual courses that appear to be out of line but whether the course had appropriate expectations and those expectations were met. Professor Hoover agreed the Committee could look at a list of courses with low percentages of A's, but she noted that this list was generated because of a concern with grade inflation.

Professor Hoover also said she thought the Committee might look at what the grading policy means in terms of when it is appropriate to have S/N grading in a course. It would be useful to cite the grading policy, Professor Weinsheimer agreed; there clearly will be a discrepancy between the policy and results for some courses. Professor Cardwell said that curriculum and department committees should also be referred to the policy. They were in the original letter from Dr. Swan, Professor Hoover observed.

One question is "who received this list of courses?" Professor Hoover said. Professor Cardwell said the Committee should not usurp the prerogatives of instructors who design courses with different learning or performance standards, but if there is a set standard, S/N grading would be more appropriate.

For students, Ms. Zhang said, it is frustrating when there is a wide range of results for sections of the same course that have different instructors. It would help to have more consistency across sections. Across semesters as well, Professor Curley asked? Both within and across terms, Ms. Zhang said. Professor Cardwell said it can be a problem if courses with multiple lectures and labs do not have a common exam. Some of the large courses do not normalize scores across sections.

Professor Branton said there are two issues at hand. One is grade inflation, which is very complex. The question Ms. Zhang raised is straightforward: there should not be two sections of the same course with different standards. Ms. Zhang said she would appreciate it if the Committee could fix the latter problem. Professor McCormick agreed; he said it is in the interest of colleges to know when some sections of the same course are outliers. The sections should be monitored; some colleges do so and some may need to be nudged.

Dr. Swan said that if the Committee were interested, his office could try to compress the data on courses with high percentages of A's into a subset that the Committee could focus its discussion on. In terms of the distribution of the data, they were sent to associate deans in the colleges; where they went after that he did not know. He said he could prepare a message to the colleges asking that the data be shared more widely. Dr. Shaw said she believed that publicizing the information more widely among departments would help to address the problem. There is, however, the problem that by promoting the information students could flock to departments/courses that will be seen as places to get an easy A. Professor McCormick said he thought a lot of people would be surprised by the data; they could foster discussions in departments about combating grade inflation. He said he did not believe such discussions were occurring at present.

The Committee has been provided data for only one term, Dr. Falkner pointed out; it should look at another term to see if there are changes. Dr. Swan noted that there are historical data that show broader trends, which the Committee would want to have if it were to think about a wider discussion of the issues. Dr. Shaw suggested making the data available in University reports so that those who are responsible for courses could look at them. Professor Weinsheimer agreed that there should be particular strategies in particular colleges that Dr. Swan could identify, and the data should be distributed (although the Committee need not decide to whom or how today). In any event, however, the data should go to departments. He made a motion to that effect.

Professor Branton agreed that the data should be distributed more widely but said he had little faith that doing so would have any effect on grade inflation. This is a tough problem that it is easier to ignore. The Committee needs to identify problems it can deal with: if a large class with academic substance has a high percentage of A's, there is probably grade inflation; small classes are a different issue; the Committee should identify classes that should be graded S/N. Providing data will not help very much.

The Committee should also draft standards about consistency between sections of the same course, Professor Branton suggested. The last item has two elements, within terms and across terms, Dr. Swan said. There is also the matter of the instructor, Professor Weinsheimer said. Even that is not clear, Professor Branton said; it could be easy to get an A from one instructor and difficult from another, but students may learn more from the difficult instructor. If they need a high grade for their record in order to get into graduate or professional school, however, students will choose the course with the easier A.

The standard for the S in S/N grading is set by the instructor, Ms. Ronning asked? The University standard is C-, Dr. Swan said, but an instructor may set the bar higher.

Professor Curley said he disagreed with Professor Branton and that there is value in providing the information about grades. He said he would like to see units pursue more local solutions before

the Committee acts as a central regulating body. Professor McCormick said the Committee could do both—make suggestions as part of encouraging discussions across the University and making the data available, including suggestions about making courses S/N and the need to police courses better. The Committee should not adopt iron-clad policies to begin with.

The Committee unanimously approved Professor Weinsheimer's motion to make the grading data available to departments.

3. Review of Liberal Education Requirements

Dr. Swan began the discussion of liberal education requirements by commenting that when the University changed to semesters, it did so on a "trust and verify" basis. There was also some concern that while the Council on Liberal Education (CLE) was important, it should not be all-consuming for its members. When Professor McCormick chaired CLE, it spread a review of courses over five years.

The basic structure of CLE requirements is based on the report of the Howe Committee in the early 1990s. The schedule calls for a broader review of the requirements (not the courses) next year. CLE has been developing a list of questions that should be addressed in that broader review. Dr. Swan noted that this is a Twin Cities matter only, and said that the campus is distinctive in having liberal education requirements all across the campus; that is not true at many institutions.

Asked if the current CLE would conduct the review, Dr. Swan said that its membership would be augmented to be sure it is broadly representative.

Professor McCormick observed that the appointment of the Council on Enhancing Student Learning (CESL) came about because of the accreditation effort. Was it thought that they, by developing a system to look at the curriculum on an outcome-based approach, could supplant CLE? When one looks at what they are suggesting, that could be a new way to approach liberal education requirements. Dr. Swan said it is his sense that CESL complements, not substitutes for, CLE. The bigger issue is how to assess the outcomes of a liberal education, a question that several universities are struggling with. Professor Hoover noted that Professor Chomsky and Mr. Ziegenhagen are joining the Committee later this spring to talk about the accreditation process and student learning.

There is a potential tension between the two approaches, Professor McCormick commented. Liberal education requirements are based on an "exposure" model, as opposed to a model where outcomes are assessed. Dr. Swan agreed but said that if the exposure model works, it should be possible to assess it. If it is working, it should still be used. If not, the University needs to figure out a better way to educate students on the principles of a liberal education.

Professor Hoover thanked Dr. Swan for his report.

4. Recommendations for the Morse-Alumni Award

Professor Hoover noted that Committee members had received copies of a set of recommendations from this year's Morse-Alumni committee about changing the way in which dossiers are evaluated in order to make the committee's job easier. One person, a former SCEP chair and member of the Morse-Alumni committee, objected strongly to the recommended changes. It was pointed out that the award is not for outstanding teaching; it is for outstanding contributions to

undergraduate education, which might include program or curriculum development, scholarship of education, and so on. The Committee was urged to leave things as they are.

Committee members reviewed some of the proposed data requests for nominees. One concern was about using average student evaluation data from a department; one problem for some nominees might be that they come from a department with a large number of outstanding teachers, in which case their comparative numbers may not look as good as the data for other candidates. The question also comes up because departments may use different scales. Small departments with elite teachers might have different results from a department with difficult courses. Or from a department with smaller courses or with more upper division courses. These differences will affect how the award committee will interpret the data. There is a valid question about whether the data should be compared to the department or to the college or University. There is also the folklore that if one teaches a methods course, one will be at a disadvantage in student evaluations.

Professor Hoover said the Committee would put this item on a future agenda and asked Committee members to review the proposed changes.

She adjourned the meeting at 2:50.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota