

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, March 29, 2006
1 – 3 pm
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Richard McCormick (chair), William Bart, Vernon Cardwell, Maureen Cisneros, Shawn Curley, LeAnn Dean, Josh Feneis, Eric Ling, Claudia Neuhauser, Mary Ellen Shaw, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Craig Swan, Joel Weinsheimer

Absent: Gail Dubrow, James Leger, Paul Siliciano, Sarah Tuttle, Doug Wangenstein

Guests: Perry Leo, David Langley

Other:

[In these minutes: (1) Committee Business, (2) 2.0 Rule and APR Impact]

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 1:10.

1. Committee Business

Professor McCormick began the meeting by discussing the current syllabi policy. He said he had been approached by Amelious Whyte, Provost's Committee on Student Mental Health, who inquired about what steps were needed to have a syllabus statement that the committee had created to be required on a syllabus. Professor McCormick said that the senate policy was that all courses must have a syllabus, noting that before 2001 it had not been required. He said that Professor Judith Martin and Vice Provost Swan thought it would be good for SCEP to consider the issue of a uniform policy about what is on syllabi. Professor McCormick noted that a syllabus functions as a legal document and is supposed to protect against misunderstanding. However, when too many generic statements are added to syllabi, they tend to become boiler plate, containing too much information that students are inclined to dismiss. Professor McCormick said he was presenting the issue to the committee for discussion and opinion.

Professor Curley said that his syllabi were all on-line, and that he supported syllabi statements being links on the course website, as it seemed that this is where it was headed. Mr. Feneis acknowledged that he skipped over a lot of information that was included in syllabi, and Mr. Ling added that he didn't think students read the information either. He felt instructors should address this or that it be addressed in student orientation. Professor McCormick said he felt that a lot of the statements on syllabi looked like "canned" text, and Professor Curley said that the information should be centrally located somewhere for those students who want it. Professor Weinsheimer said that he had limited his syllabi to things that are specific to the course itself, and that syllabi cannot address everything. He agreed that there could be links on-line, but that students are even less likely to access those. It would be good to inform students but students must take some responsibility for accessing the information. Professor McCormick said that the rights of disabled students to have access to a course is course specific, and that resources and accommodations are made available to those in need.

* 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.

Mr. Feneis asked if professors know when students need accommodations, and Ms. Shaw said that it was the student's responsibility to inform the professor. The issue was that many students have "invisible" disabilities, such as mental health issues. A statement on the syllabus would set the tone that the professor appreciates this, and that the student feels welcome. Ms. Shaw felt it was important to have verbal reinforcement and the acknowledgement of the professor. Professor McCormick said that it was important that other students realize that these students have rights. He felt a link to such statements was sufficient, but it should indicate what it is in such a way that everyone understands what it is. There are always new strategies to get people's attention, Professor McCormick pointed out, and eventually they stop being effective as people are up against an overload of information.

Ms. Dean asked about having website links to the statements as well having the statement written out. Professor McCormick said that a hard copy version would have to have some explanation of what the link is. Professor Cardwell said he did not want the boilerplate as part of his syllabus. In his view, the syllabus was the "game plan" for the course. He suggested creating a boilerplate to be part of the electronic syllabus, but in the printed version there be a brief statement acknowledging the needs of special needs students. Professor Cardwell added that all the detail of the policy statements wasn't needed, and that he favored a brief reference to remind everyone. Ms. Cisneros said that students are used to knowing that they can get further information on the web, and the link accomplishes that.

Professor McCormick referred to Mr. Whyte's request and suggested the committee discuss it directly with him or with the committee on whose behalf Mr. Whyte had contacted SCEP. He pointed out that Mr. Whyte's request spoke directly to mental health issues and that mental health has still not been accorded the same status as other disabilities; mental health issues are still stigmatized in a way that other disabilities no longer are. Professor McCormick reiterated that the objective could be accomplished with a link. Mr. Ling agreed, adding that there were many things germane to a syllabi and that the role of syllabi in a course should be considered as well. Professor Curley suggested that it may require an amendment in how the course is delivered. Mr. Feneis inquired as to what constituted mental illness and expressed concern that it could be abused by students. Vice Provost Swan said that Ms. Cisneros and Mr. Ling were articulating a principle in that the information in syllabi should be specific, otherwise people stop reading, and said that he appreciated Professor Curley's point as well. The education piece is to advise that reasonable accommodations will be afforded the student.

Professor Cardwell asked who fulfills the special needs of the student, and asked if it was the prerogative of the instructor or if it was determined by other professionals. He noted that as an instructor it was not his prerogative to question the directives of professionals dealing specifically with the student. Ms. Shaw reiterated that the issue was the climate of the classroom and students with mental health issues needed to be acknowledged. Professor McCormick added that such issues were gaining higher profile in the University environment, and said reiterated that Mr. Whyte should meet with the committee to further define the request. Ms. Shaw noted that such add-on are advisory but not mandated. Professor Weinsheimer said that there was an assumption in the request that the syllabus is a direct way to reach students and that is not true. The more information on the syllabus, the less privileged and direct a means of communication it becomes. Professor Weinsheimer pointed out that there could be any number of policies on syllabi, and it would only end up being a mega-link to all policies of the University. This defeated the purpose of a syllabus. Professor Spannaus-Martin concurred, saying care should be taken about adding things to syllabi. Professor McCormick reiterated that very lengthy syllabi make it less likely that students will look at most of what they contain. Professor Cardwell suggested the possibility of a boilerplate with links to policies into which instructors would paste the syllabus. He stressed keeping it user friendly but not onerous on faculty. Professor McCormick said that the issue is where the links belong, and noted that the general sense of the committee was to move forward in support of a policy about what gets attached to a syllabi.

Professor McCormick raised the issue of course ratings. He said that the revised policy would be held until the May 4 Senate meeting, as he cannot be present for the discussion and vote on

April 6 and it was important that as SCEP chair he be present for it. Professor McCormick said that according to Dr. Arreola, who gave a workshop/session regarding student evaluations, what we call evaluations should be called 'ratings'. He said that at a recent FCC meeting, a committee member had approached him saying that Dr. Arreola had recommended that our designation of these forms be changed. Professor McCormick recommended that the subcommittee that is to be formed to reconsider our mandated questions could address the issue of the proper designation for the forms. He distributed a summary of recommendations from the workshop with Dr. Arreola as prepared by the Center for Teaching/Learning Services.

Professor Weinsheimer asked what the status of the decision as to whether student comments on the evaluation would be available beyond the department. Professor McCormick said that policy would be voted on in its entirety as it stood now. The current policy that is in the Senate docket adopts SCEP's position, which is that it should be up to units to decide to whom those comments will be made available. He pointed out that even though Dr. Arreola disagrees with this, the debate at the December 1, 2005 Senate meeting and the straw vote supported the SCEP position. The subcommittee will also look at the ideas in the recommendations. Professor McCormick highlighted the issue of clarity for the questions the evaluation forms mandate, saying that Dr. Arreola had pointed out that each question should address only one point, and not two points. Our questions tend to fold in two questions, which waters down the response. The committee discussed the charges for the subcommittee, which were to look at the four mandated questions on the evaluation in light of current research. Professor McCormick suggested that they not address changing the terms "ratings" from "evaluation". These policies say that student evaluations are not the only thing that defines the entire evaluation of an instructor's teaching. Professor Bart inquired about the questions being asked. He said that if students are asked to fill out lengthy evaluations, there is an assumption that all the information will be used. Professor Bart said he would prefer a short evaluation with assurance that the information would be used, especially considering that in his experience, only a few questions are ever addressed in tenure and promotion meetings. Vice Provost Swan said that all the information is used by different people at different times for different purposes, and that along with the four mandated questions, other departments have their own forms with additional questions. Professor McCormick said he felt that four questions were not too many. Professor Cardwell pointed out that one dilemma was that there are four mandated questions for promotion and tenure purposes but the other part is that information is also used to improve teaching and the course. He said he would like to know some things to become more effective and efficient in his teaching. The purpose of the ratings has to be considered. Professor McCormick addressed Ms. Shaw's query about the timeline, and said that the subcommittee would be established this spring.

The committee discussed the composition of the subcommittee. Professor McCormick said that he and Vice Provost Swan had discussed this issue and would recommend that it should be comprised of four faculty, two students, and two staff, and that the two staff members should be David Langley of Teaching/Learning Services and Thomas Dohm of the Office of Measuring Services. Ms. Dean suggested that at least one coordinate campus faculty member be included on the committee, which Professor McCormick agreed was consistent with the recommendation. The committee agreed that this seemed reasonable and appropriate.

Ms. Shaw said that this committee could recommend a broad charge to the subcommittee, and suggested that in addition to the four mandated questions, the committee consider online evaluations and how those should be conducted. Professor Curley agreed but stressed the charge should be stated clearly so that efforts are not duplicated with this committee's work.

Professor McCormick updated the committee on the student release questions, saying that the piloting was being done and that it was in its last stages. He said it was conceivable that it would be on the Senate docket for May.

Professor McCormick said that he had received a complaint about team-taught courses after the last Senate meeting, and that he had received an e-mail saying that the policy does not spell

out what should be done with team-taught evaluations. He said that it was an issue that the committee needed to consider.

2. 2.0 Rule and APR Impact

Professor McCormick welcomed Perry Leo from the Faculty Academic Oversight Committee on Intercollegiate Athletics (FAOCIA). Professor Leo distributed information about proposed revisions to the policy on eligibility and continuation, and offered background information about the proposal. Professor Leo noted out that the issue is that the University of Minnesota has a higher GPA requirement than the Big Ten and NCAA. Professor Leo said that there is a policy in place by which the athletic director can request a waiver to the policy through the committee, after which the decision is reported to the registrar. He noted that the difference between the University's requirements and the Big Ten/NCAA eligibility requirements is not very large, and often an athletic director will choose not to appear before the committee. However, this policy is only in place for student-athletes who are returning to the University. The revision addresses what happens if a student who is not coming back to the University falls in the gap between the University requirements and the Big Ten/NCAA requirements. Professor Leo noted that the motivation for the revision is related to the new NCAA policy regarding APR points. The NCAA calculates APR for each team and assesses how the teams have done in this regard. If APR is not attained, scholarships can be taken away. Hence a situation may now arise in which a student-athlete will lose points by NCAA standards but not by University of Minnesota standards. Professor Leo said that they did not want to lower University standards and so were proposing changes in the policy, which he highlighted in the information distributed.

Professor Leo discussed the reasons for the policy, saying that it also covered transfer students, not just those who decide to go pro, and it gives faculty some leverage. Professor Weinsheimer asked how the U of M requirement was relevant if the APR is the NCAA system, and if only the waiver procedure for students leaving was being discussed. Professor Leo responded that the definition of eligibility is determined by the institution. Ms. Shaw said this allowed for a higher standard and to keep it visible to students. Vice Provost Swan said that it was unclear about students who are suspended and that the University didn't want to give a continuation point in such instances. Professor Leo agreed. Vice Provost Swan referred to a point under the standards for maintaining credits, which states that exemptions from the minimum credit rule may be made for extenuating circumstances by the director of Academic Counseling and Student Services in consultation with the athletics director. Professor Leo said that guidance was needed as to what GPA standard should be used and the charge had come from the athletic side.

Professor Leo said that the entire committee reviews all waiver situations and each case is taken on an individual basis. He stated that the APR and the revised waiver policy gives reasons for coaches to stay focused on a student-athlete's coursework, because failure to do so would penalize the team.

Professor McCormick asked for a motion on the policy. Ms. Shaw moved to approve the policy on condition that the concerns about suspension are addressed with a footnote in clarification. Professor Cardwell seconded the motion. Motion passed on the condition that the issues raised were addressed.

Meeting adjourned at 2:50 pm.

--Mary Jo Pehl