

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, January 17, 2001
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Wilbert Ahern (chair), Shawn Curley, Steve Fitzgerald, Gordon Hirsch, Emily Hoover, Frank Kulacki, Karen Seashore, Geri Malandra, (George Green for) Christine Maziar, Carol Miller, Kathleen Newell, Marsha Odom, Mary Ellen Shaw, Rita Snider, Thomas Soulen, Steven Sperber, Rachel Sullivan, Craig Swan

Regrets: Khaled Dajani

Absent: Prince Amattoey

Guests: Tina Rovic (Office of the Registrar); Jason Reed (Student Senate Consultative Committee)

[In these minutes: (1) various issues (including plus-minus grading and assigning instructor-authored materials to a class); (2) calendars; (3) instructional improvement efforts; (4) peer review of instruction; (5) publication of student evaluation data; (6) issues pending]

1. Report of the Chair

Professor Ahern convened the meeting at 1:05 and welcomed back to the meetings Professors Miller and Sperber, who had been prevented from attending during Fall Semester because of teaching commitments. He also noted that Professor Skaggs had had to resign because he has accepted an interim administrative position in the College of Liberal Arts.

Professor Ahern then reported on what he described as two categories of items: (1) things that had occurred as a result of SCEP actions or other items and (2) questions that had been addressed to him by individuals and how he had responded.

With respect to (1):

-- The Senate adopted the statement on academic appointments and the administrative policy has been taken to the Board of Regents for information. The administration did a good job expressing the spirit of the concerns, Professor Ahern said, and has made a commitment to carry them through.

-- There was a site visit for the proposal to the Bush Foundation for a technology-focused faculty development grant. The visit went very well; one of the site visitors commented that on the basis of his long experience in evaluating proposals, this one was one of the three best he had seen. It is expected that the University will know in early March whether the proposal has been accepted.

* These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate or Twin Cities Campus Assembly; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

-- There is today a site visit for a proposal from the Office of International Programs to the Bush Foundation concerning international study. An early March decision is also expected on this proposal, and the Committee should at some point hear more about it.

-- There will be a conference in February at the Radisson South with a focus on student engagement. One of the featured speakers will be Alexander Astin, one of the foremost scholars of the student experience and author of *FOUR CRITICAL YEARS* and *WHAT MATTERS IN COLLEGE*. The Center for Teaching and Learning Services has more information about it and can help offset the registration fee (on a first-come, first-served basis).

-- Frank Deford spoke today on National Public Radio about *THE GAME OF LIFE*, the new book about the disastrous impact of intercollegiate athletics on higher education and the emergence of a privileged but neglected class (athletes), one that is no longer confined to men. Athlete access to institutions is much greater than any afforded as a result of affirmative action or alumni applications.

-- The amplification of what a "University-sponsored activity" is, in order to evaluate whether a student's absence from class is considered excused, will be taken up at the next meeting.

With respect to (2), questions that have come to him:

-- Is an instructor required to use pluses and minuses in grading? Professor Ahern said he had inquired of the two past chairs of SCEP, Professors Koch and Martin, and had received answers with different emphases but that were basically the same: instructors are not **REQUIRED** to use pluses and minuses. The Senate policy on grading makes their use possible but not mandatory. Dr. Swan related that he has said to people pluses and minuses allow for finer gradations in student performance; he also reported that he had been surprised at how quickly the use of pluses and minuses had spread during the first semester after the University had changed the calendar. Both UMD and the Carlson School have used pluses and minuses for a longer period; the grading distribution for the rest of the University does not look different from the distributions in those two units.

On the face of it, students on the upper end of the grade distribution could be unhappy, Professor Hirsch said; would they have grounds for complaint? The policy says not, Professor Ahern said, and the Senate presentation of the policy made it clear that discretion was left to the instructor. At first the overwhelming majority of his students did not want to make the change, Professor Soulen commented. There was angst among students at first, Dr. Swan agreed, but if one looks at time series data on grades, one is hard pressed to see a difference with pluses and minuses. Presumably, Professor Sperber said, pluses and minuses benefit an equal number of students, if grading is being done fairly.

Does the policy require instructors to indicate whether or not they are using pluses and minuses, Ms. Rovic asked? It does not, but it was suggested that this would be a useful addition to the Classroom Expectations Guidelines. Professor Ahern suggested the Committee revisit the Classroom Expectations Guidelines next year and be explicit about what the policy requires.

-- On the policy on conflict of interest in educational materials (e.g., an instructor assigning readings he or she has authored and will earn royalties on): the policy requires approval. From

whom? Professor Ahern said his answer was that the department chair should approve and the approval should be on record in the department office.

Dr. Swan said there is existing Human Resources policy and that when the draft policy was circulated to the deans, there was agreement between Professor Martin and Vice President Carrier that the approval came at the next step "up" in the organization: department head approved use of such materials by a faculty member and the dean approved their use by a department head (if the department head is the instructor).

Professor Ahern also clarified that there is no University form to fill out. A note indicating approval in department offices is sufficient.

-- On academic appointments, the Senate passed the principles recommended by this Committee along with the Committee on Faculty Affairs and the Faculty Consultative Committee. The administration reported to the Board of Regents on the implementing policy. One faculty member has asked if the new policy has been accepted; Professor Ahern said he did not know. [Subsequent to the meeting, there was an email announcing that the policy had been approved; it can be located at <http://www1.umn.edu/ohr/st/hrpros.htm>, select Announcements and Information, select Academic Appointments with Teaching Functions, select Administrative Policy on Academic Appointments.]

-- Professor Ahern reported that he had received a note from President Yudof enclosing an editorial from THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION contending that students have too many choices in their undergraduate education programs. He said he will respond to the President to learn if there is an issue the President believes the Committee should explore.

-- Dr. Swan recalled that there had been a question from a faculty member about whether email can be used to inform a student about a grade: is the email system considered "secure" from the standpoint of meeting legal requirements? He has been informed that the email system does meet federal standards for secure systems. Students may register and get access to their grades and the system will be able to deliver financial aid.

2. Calendars

Professor Ahern turned next to Ms. Rovic, who distributed copies of proposed calendars for all campuses through 2005-06; she suggested the Committee consider approving for action by the Senate this spring the calendars for 2002-03 and 2003-04 and that it bring for action next fall the calendars for 2004-05 and 2005-06.

The Committee reviewed the calendars and discussed briefly how professional school calendars vary from the calendar for the remainder of a campus and the changes in the UMC calendar.

The Committee voted unanimously to send the 2002-03 and 2003-04 calendars to the Senate for approval.

3. Instructional Improvement Efforts

Professor Ahern asked Dr. Swan to report on instructional improvement efforts that are taking place in the colleges.

Dr. Swan said he had surveyed the deans and had heard from most but that he has not had time to collate the responses. All the colleges are making use of all-University programs; in the smaller colleges, that appears to be the extent of their efforts, while in the larger colleges there are additional programs. He said he would assemble a summary for the Committee.

4. Peer Review of Teaching

Professor Ahern told the Committee that he had received a survey from a CIC colleague asking about peer review of teaching. There was also an essay in a recent issue of THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION on the issue. These two items prompted him to think he should bring the issue to the Committee and ask if it is something it wishes to look into.

Dr. Swan recalled that Professors Hirsch and Sperber had made up a subcommittee in the recent past to look at the University's policies and documents related to peer evaluation of teaching. It clearly is valuable, but the literature suggests it is MOST valuable when initiated by the instructor and is aimed at improvement rather than evaluation. Professors Hirsch and Sperber concluded that it should be done as part of the merit review process and that units should ask faculty to document teaching, submit syllabi, and so on. "There was not a lot of enthusiasm for flying squads of observers," he added. But the subcommittee did say the provost, deans, and chair should be reminded that units are expected to review teaching performance of faculty and documentation will be required as part of the normal review process. It seems that a number of units set up mechanisms that fell into disuse and it was thought that a reminder from the provost would be appropriate.

Dr. Green commented that he did not recall seeing a consistent pattern on reporting the results of peer evaluation of instruction. It was not unusual to see reports based on classroom visits; there are probably more of them in the year before the tenure decisions than in the prior years.

An evaluation of teaching effectiveness is a part of every file, Dr. Swan said. The vast majority of the reports include more than looking at student evaluations. He said he believed that the University is meeting the spirit of the policy adopted by the Senate.

Professor Hirsch pointed out that the promotion and tenure reviews come only rarely so it is important that units include teaching materials as part of the usual merit review process as well. Professor Sperber suggested that while departments could do every person and every course, one could make the case for only doing new courses or new materials (e.g., web-based), which would make the documentation more manageable. Is the department obligated to oversee what happens in courses, Professor Hirsch asked? They are, but he agreed that minute analysis of every course every year would be unnecessary.

Dr. Green inquired what should be rewarded. Faculty should document articles, paper, courses, supervision of students to degrees, but should not receive merit increases for doing the same thing over and over.

Is there a mechanism by which faculty can request peer review as part of the evaluation, Professor Sperber asked? Not usually, Dr. Green said, but at the tenure decision. Beyond tenure, it is not built into the process. It should be, Professor Sperber responded. Faculty members who believe they are doing an excellent job should have that option. Professor Newell reported that they are trying to build it into the post-tenure review process. She noted that professional schools are required to document what they do with the results of student and faculty evaluations of instruction.

Professor Ahern asked when a teaching portfolio was required? (It was 1993.) Probationary faculty preparing them for the tenure decision could use them later. How many departments have them? Some apparently have them but no one looks at them and they are not updated. In others that is not true.

SCEP members' discussion demonstrated that there are a wide variety of practices in the departments with respect to peer evaluation of instruction.

Professor Ahern suggested that he and Dr. Swan consult about the response to the CIC survey and then review it with the Committee.

The CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION article touched on other points, Professor Ahern then commented. One institution is in a consortium to create a structure to support peer review to improve instruction and to bring together best peer review practices that have been demonstrated to improve instruction. Many institutions, however, do not use these practices because they take too much time. The response of those institutions has been: it should not be mandated, but can a climate of peer review be created parallel to that used in the peer review of research?

What is also important, Professor Hirsch commented, is the growing number of activities sponsored by the Center for Teaching and Learning Services. They are very active in early faculty programs but also have an expanding number of groups working with mid-career faculty.

Professor Hirsch said he persists in the idea that it is irresponsible for this kind of institution to not require submission of documentation about teaching beyond student evaluations. Such a policy cannot be defended.

Dr. Malandra reported that the North Central Association accreditation reviews for Crookston, Duluth, and Morris were all positive but that the NCA asked for an interim plan to assess learner outcomes. The Twin Cities will next be reviewed. It is important to conduct these assessments because the University wants to but they will also position it better vis-à-vis the NCA.

There is an unfortunate semantic aspect of peer evaluation, Dr. Green said: review for evaluation versus for improvement [formative versus summative]. If one uses the term mentor it does not carry the same baggage, and using mentors is an expanding practice. If the result of the evaluation does not affect an outcome, no one will pay any attention to it. In the case of promotion and tenure, its use is clear. Merit evaluations are more diffuse, as is how the evaluations are collected and used in the process; this is not under central scrutiny and harder to get a handle on. He emphasized that improvement should be kept separate from evaluation; mixing them up means the improvement will not happen.

Professor Ahern observed that in research, when something is sent out for peer review, it is considered part of the job to evaluate the research. There is an incentive to do well in scholarship. Formative and summative evaluations happen all the time.

What incentives or rewards are attached to peer review of teaching, Professor Miller asked? At the point of tenure, one gets tenure, and the University has done a good job of building in review at the tenure decision. That is less clear at the senior faculty level. In publications, the publication itself is the incentive; there is no such incentive in teaching. One could ask units what incentives are attached to peer review of teaching. She said she was not sure there would be many.

The Academy of Distinguished Teachers is working on this as well, Professor Ahern said. He agreed with Professor Miller: if there is no pay-off (except "I feel better"), no one will do much. If one knows one's peers know, one can also feel better. In a discussion among members of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers, he reported, none of the Twin Cities faculty knew of instances when a faculty member's teaching led to a grant of tenure. On the other hand, all knew of instances where a faculty member's research led to tenure being granted. At a Research I university that outcome is not surprising, he said, but teaching must be kept in the picture.

5. Publication of Student Evaluation of Teaching Data

Professor Ahern recalled that this Committee and the Senate had approved the publication of data derived from 10 questions approved by the Senate on a voluntary basis. That action has been in the process of implementation (delayed until the change to semesters).

Dr. Swan clarified that the results from the five questions required by the 1992 Senate policy are NOT the ones that are released; these are 10 separate questions SCEP and the Senate approved that dealt with teaching style. The policy has been implemented and there are now three semesters of data; the question is how to make them available (there were technical problems with PeopleSoft). The target date is February, and they would be available only to members of the University community. Dr. Swan did not know the number of instructors who had agreed to release the data.

Ms. Shaw asked how students and advisors will be made aware of the data. Dr. Swan said that eventually they will be linked to the course guide, and there will be stories and information about them in the near future.

6. Issues Pending

Professor Ahern drew the attention of Committee members to the list of issues pending and asked for comments in order to help set the Spring Semester agenda. Several items were flagged:

-- There will be much on distance learning coming to the Committee, especially from the Task Force on Distance Learning, and will include such things as faculty control of the curriculum, copyright issues, and entrepreneurialism.

-- Assessment of students learning could have policy issues associated with it. Dr. Malandra said her office is looking at this question; she promised to be in touch with Professor Ahern about it. Professor Ahern commented that this is a hot-button issue and that there is a tension between (1)

student learning and (2) the corporatization of the University, bureaucratization of the University, and trivial accountability requirements. The central issue will be to keep the focus on student learning.

It may be, a la the academic appointments matter, that the Committee should develop a statement of principles that are to drive assessment, Professor Odom suggested.

-- On the Twin Cities campus, there is a group working on retention and graduation, Dr. Swan reported, and how it can do even better than it has. There could be suggestions from the group that will be brought through SCEP to the Senate, such as a policy mandating or encouraging mid-semester grades and identifying first-semester students who are likely to receive a D or an F (in order to give them time to recover). Some CIC institutions do this and some individual faculty at Minnesota do it but the practice is not systematically linked to advising and support. It would be best if such a policy were to be promulgated with strong faculty support.

This is an issue on all campuses and should be a Senate matter, Professor Ahern commented. Dr. Swan agreed, and said that what might be done on each campus could be different.

Professor Kulacki recalled that he had a student who dropped out after the 10th week because he could not keep up. It may be that dropping a course is too easy and students are too cavalier about it. They may be paying tuition but they are not making academic progress. He agreed that scholastic committee approval is required to drop a class after a certain point but said that such approval is routinely granted. Dr. Swan noted that one national expert on higher education has commented that the best predictor of students who graduate is students who TAKE CREDITS. That may seem rather commonplace, but if they are cavalier about dropping courses, they are not making progress.

Ms. Shaw reported that General College does mid-semester reporting and it is very effective. She suggested the Committee might wish to tinker with the cancellation policy.

One place to start might be the first-year seminars, Dr. Green suggested. Six weeks is too late in the term, he added. Developmental intervention strategies could be recommended for all first-year seminars and would be a low-cost, high pay-off effort. This would tell the faculty it is important not only to teach but also to check if students are slipping out so that there can be quick intervention.

Ideally, Professor Kulacki said, the first two years would be more "hands on" education; that would be crucial to addressing the retention problem. And what the University does instead, Professor Miller observed, is offer "low touch" (i.e., high enrollment, low instructor contact) courses beginning the first semester.

The more elite the institution, the more intensive the strategy and the more they reach out to retain students, Professor Odom observed. Retention and graduation is critical for private institutions and there is something to be said for intervention. Students are adults but it is better to keep them once they are at the institution than to recruit new ones.

Does the University have the resources to engage in such intervention, Mr. Reed asked? He reported that he has never met an advisor. Is it usual for students to meet one when advisors have 1000 students each? In upper division he has a faculty advisor so gets help in that way; in lower division, however, he did not and made his own way. That is a question to which the answer is not

obvious, Dr. Swan responded, but if a set of strategies is identified that will help lead to identifying funds to implement them. Responsible colleges embed advising in the teaching function, Professor Kulacki said and the Committee should not advise the Provost to spend a lot of money. The colleges should take the responsibility, he said. At the same time, the best intervention may not be at the department level, Professor Sperber said, if the student's problems are across a number of courses. An advisor sees the whole picture.

Professor Ahern said that this is an issue the Committee should pursue, and then adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota