

Minutes\*

**Senate Consultative Committee  
Monday, November 8, 1993  
2:15 - 3:15  
Room 32 Earle Brown Center**

- Present: Judith Garrard (chair), John Adams, Mario Bognanno, Love Goel, James Gremmels, Eric Harper, Tom Lopez, Irwin Rubenstein, Anne Sales, Rabun Taylor
- Regrets: Lester Drewes, Toni McNaron, Harvey Peterson
- Absent: Amanda Geist, Kenneth Heller, Derek Jensen, Robert Jones, Karen Seashore Louis, Geoffrey Maruyama, Linda Pham, Sandy Pham, Dale Vathauer, Shirley Zimmerman
- Guests: Mary Easterling (Civil Service Committee), Carol Segal, Mike Huyen
- Others: Brian Louis (Minnesota DAILY)

[In these minutes: Issues of user-friendliness]

**1. Report on User Friendliness**

Professor Garrard convened the meeting at 2:20 and recalled that she has appointed a joint task force on user friendliness, with Ms. Sales as chair and with the chairs of the Civil Service Committee and the Academic Professional Advisory Committee as co-vice chairs, to address the issue of user-friendliness on the Twin Cities campus. She said she had wanted a student as chair, because it is understood that it is students who have the major problems with "user unfriendliness," but she and the three task force leaders agree that "unfriendliness" permeates the environment for faculty and staff as well. In addition, faculty members and representatives from each of the three unions on the campus will be added; administrators will also be included on an ex-officio basis. The report of the task force will be due on June 2, 1994. Professor Garrard then asked Ms. Sales to lead the discussion.

Ms. Sales began by noting that it is almost easier to itemize the areas where one does NOT find things to be user-unfriendly. She then read an excerpt from a contribution to FacultyWrites, the electronic bulletin board, that had been provided to her. The text was taken from a letter a student had written to a faculty member, who had in turn provided it to FacultyWrites.

I knew something must have gone wrong the first day I came here. First, I wanted to use a computer--that'll be \$35. I was taking biology, want to use that microscope? That's \$6. Oh, you wanted to actually use chemicals in Chemistry? \$21. And why on earth do we have an industrial strength credit-card style picture I.D. with a barcode, yet still have to carry a fee

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statement to use anything? How can the accounts receivables computer's know I've paid my bills, yet the registration computers don't, and require an override. Why do I need to generate 20 tons of used paper to register for classes, and every time afterward that I make a change? Why did it cost another \$35 to graduate? Why don't students control the students' activity fees? Why are the microbiology labs so low on cash that we work in groups of 6 at times? Why are there so few bike racks? What genius designed STARS? Who wants to limit student employment to students receiving financial aid? Why do I have to pay \$1 for a sticker to use the rec center? And if the Daily is so great, why can't it fund itself?  
[Grammatical errors in original]

Ms. Sales noted that two of the irritants mentioned in the message--the graduation fee and the computing fee--have been eliminated as of this year. While the note represents the views of only one person, it nonetheless conveys the flavor of the range of annoyances that confront students.

As one thinks about user-friendliness, she commented to the Committee, it becomes clear that much revolves around the collection of data and its availability among different systems at the University (such as financial aid, accounts receivable, and registration).

There was brief discussion about whether or not the task force should be system-wide, rather than Twin Cities based; Professor Garrard said she believed the problems were of sufficient magnitude on this campus that the task force would be swamped if its charge were not focused. Many of the problems, moreover, are campus-specific. It was noted, however, that a number of functions are centralized and that they have an effect on all campuses. It was suggested that it would be helpful to have one coordinate campus representative on the task force. In terms of the coordinate campuses, Professor Garrard suggested, perhaps the student and faculty members of the Senate Consultative Committee could serve as the nucleus of a task force on each campus.

Discussion then moved to an enumeration--not intended to be exhaustive--of the kinds of problems that make the campus user-unfriendly.

- The STARS (STudent Accounts Receivable System) system is supposed to provide students with information on what it in their accounts and what is owed. It has had problems doing so; in one case recounted at the meeting, a graduate student has heard nothing in 18 months and has been unable to learn anything except by repeated telephone calls. That makes one nervous.

In a related case, because of the registration system, all of the students in a graduate health sciences program found themselves enrolled in jazz studies.

So it is a case of simple record-keeping not being done and little cross-referencing among the systems. It is for that reason, one Committee member pointed out, that students must carry fee statements. But it is also quite easy to obtain a paid fee statement; all one needs do is register and then drop all classes--doing so will provide a valid fee statement that permits access to all University services. Is that fair? There may not be a large number of students doing that, but the point is the number should be ZERO.

At Wisconsin, for instance, students have an ID card that is run through a machine to validate their status; here one must have an ID and fee statement--or one will not even be admitted to a hockey game with a ticket.

-- Another general problem is the bus service; it has clearly gone downhill since last year--and not because of any fault on the part of Medicine Lake Lines; budget reductions have affected the number of routes and buses. There is no service between the campuses after 8:30, even though Extension classes often run until 9:00 or 9:30. Even mid-afternoon one can wait an hour for a bus between campuses.

-- While it may seem petty, the number of bike racks is tied to how people get to the campus. Fraser Hall is one of the worst examples, a building to which virtually every student must go to register. It is in the center of campus so there is no place for students to put their cars for 20 minutes if they must drive--and if they do find a place, it is not unheard of for them to be sent away, to return another day, because the computers are down. In order to register, students leave their cars in the street, creating a traffic hazard and getting tickets. For those who bike, there is no place to secure them; if one chains them to railings (blocking the handicapped access), the police cut the chains and take them away. And virtually every student must use its registration facilities.

The same is true of the area surrounding Williamson Hall and the bookstore, it was pointed out.

-- Health insurance has presented significant problems for students, especially with the new policies in place. The issue is who is covered and how a student finds out. There is a place on registration materials where one indicates if one wants or does not want coverage, but that can go wrong. If an error is made, it is up to the student to prove that he or she has coverage. One problem is that students are not aware they need to look for the right form when they register to be sure they are covered. Part of the problem is that it is a purely paper system; the form is turned in, but if it is lost or not handled properly, people end up either not covered by health insurance or being double covered and billed for something they don't need and can't afford.

The system is particularly opaque for newer students. But even advanced students may assume they know what's going on--without realizing the system has been changed without their knowledge.

One solution would be if the "output" at registration were keyed to University policies (e.g., that if one takes fewer than 6 credits in Day School and the remainder through CEE, one loses automatic enrollment in health insurance unless special steps are taken; students assume they remain eligible) so that particular issues--health coverage, financial aid, full-time status--were flagged at registration. If registration personnel were trained on these things, it would actually speed things up rather than slow them down, as is now the case.

-- Having one central place to go to for student services would be helpful. Being able to register by telephone, as is possible at most major institutions, would be a significant improvement for students, rather than having to go to Fraser Hall.

- The availability of courses, and the need to register in May for Fall Quarter classes, are problems both separate and intertwined. The shortage of courses students are required to have for graduation is in part the student's own fault--for not thinking ahead--and a problem in advising. The difficulty of registering in May for Fall Quarter is that many students do not know if they will have the money or be able to return--but may need to enroll early if they are to obtain the courses they need to graduate.

It isn't clear what the middle ground should be, it was acknowledged--how long should the University hold options open for students? One option might be to give preference to seniors who need a particular course. And, it was agreed, that preference should perhaps be mitigated by a "last-minute" change of major--these are all factors that the task force and others will need to consider.

There is a clear sense among students that course availability is a major contributor to delays in graduation, although they have no data to support the view. Is this, inquired one Committee member, a case of 50 noisy people or 500 people with a serious problem? Students surmised it is the latter.

- The hiring of TAs Fall Quarter is a problem for graduate students. Departments try to evaluate demand during Spring Quarter but people looking for TAships often do not know until a week before Fall Quarter if they will receive one.

This is not entirely an issue of University user-friendliness, responded one Committee member. Departments have provided signed contracts in January for the following Fall Quarter, only to have the student decide at the last moment to take another job, leaving the department in the lurch. And the department won't hold a TA to a contract, knowing he or she would hate to be in the class.

Are courses all filled, with no drops that could provide leeway? asked one Committee member. That only compounds the problem, pointed out another. Students register for more courses than they need in order to be sure they get what they want--and then drop those they decide not to take. That, of course, blocks other students from enrolling in courses they need. Better advising would be a first step; a penalty for cancel/adds would also help so that students are discouraged from "course shopping" for faculty or grading systems or requirements. That, it was said, is unhealthy academic behavior that needs to be controlled.

One can be hesitant to penalize students for taking a course for two weeks and then concluding they do not like it, said one of the Committee's guests.

One constraint is the quarter system, observed another; at the two-week point one is already well into the work of a course, so those who want a course but do not get in until late are at a disadvantage. The structural result is that one must make decisions quickly. Is "the mother of all solutions the semester system?" inquired one Committee member; others thought not. Late enrollees would still be at a disadvantage.

- There is a problem with advising as well, said one Committee member. It often does not take into account the future needs of the student in order to graduate. That is partly a student responsibility but they do need better advising. One improvement would be advising by faculty members.
- Summer session financial aid presents problems as well. For a student on financial aid (for school and most living expenses) for summer session, the policy that tuition charges are all taken from the first installment of aid leaves the student with virtually no money. (In contrast, course fee payments from financial aid for the regular academic year are distributed over the year.) Part of this is an issue of continuity between the financial aid and registration offices and differences in policies in the two offices. In financial aid, said one Committee member, "lots of policies assume students are stupid, or they will screw up, or they are out to commit fraud." Some policies are required by federal regulations; the decision about deduction of tuition, however, is not.

It is also a legitimate point that questions of understanding often arise--what students see as a financial aid policy may in fact be a student accounts receivable policy--but they nonetheless blame the financial aid office. But if a student does try to fix a problem by calling the office they believe responsible, it will take a LONG time to get it fixed unless they are very articulate.

These policy differences between financial aid and student accounts receivable, reflected one Committee member, do not seem like a big problem. This is a reflection of the general University disease that each unit looks at a problem only from its own perspective, answers it its own way--but when the answers are taken together, they present a problem.

- In the last few quarters there have been problems for students with physical or learning disabilities in approaching professors or getting access to classrooms. In some cases, students with disabilities have been humiliated by the faculty member, which leaves the student with no recourse but to withdraw. There are no clear guidelines for faculty to follow in responding to students with disabilities. Learning disabilities in particular are not understood by most instructors (e.g., the legitimate need for more time on an exam). The general University record on accommodating the needs of students with disabilities is not that good. (One minor example noted was the Coffman Union elevator that has not been working for some time--but there is no braille sign for the blind telling them it is out of order. Another was that it took weeks to get a reading machine moved from one library to another.) This, observed one Committee member, is a smaller part of the larger and well-known problem of the University's infrastructure falling apart.
- Part of the foregoing problem, it was said, is that policies must apply to the majority of students but there must be bypass mechanisms for students with special problems--there have to be ways that pieces of the system can help students. Sometimes individuals can work the problems out themselves but often they cannot.
- The task force should also deal with elements of user-friendliness that affect faculty and

staff, such as student rudeness in class, students not living up to expectations (in part a faculty problem because they do not set expectations high enough). If a student is serious, there should be an effort to participate--but students will sit with the DAILY open, as if the faculty member cannot see. This, commented one Committee member, may be attributable--in the words of one faculty member--to the general fall-off in manners. It also reflects the pattern of TV-watching at home, as if classes were Monday Night Football through which one can chatter and do whatever one wishes--and many students may not even be aware of how inconsiderate they are.

One faculty member he has had, said one Committee member, says in the introductory class that he "will not put up with this crap." Faculty members, it was said, need to be more forceful about behavior.

This should be taken up by the task force, said another Committee member. Students see a problem in that people are rude to them and don't listen to them or pay attention; the backlash is a result of years of dealing with people who are irresponsible or inconsiderate. What's needed is a mechanism for a cultural change. Faculty horror stories are legitimate, as are the student horror stories. Students are often ugly to one another as well, observed one Committee member, and it's unpleasant to watch.

-- Another irritant is that for students who take evening courses on the East Bank, they can pay \$1.75 for parking if they are early enough to get to the Morrill Hall ramp; otherwise they pay \$3 - 4 for the same period. People do not understand the differential in rates--why they can pay \$1.75 all day but if they come in the evening they must pay twice as much.

Professor Garrard thanked the members of the Committee and said she looked forward to learning of the work of the task force; she adjourned the meeting at 3:25. Professor Garrard then convened the Faculty Consultative Committee for an hour to discuss the issues to be raised with the Board of Regents at 4:30 that afternoon.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota