

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs
Tuesday, January 28, 2003
2:30 – 4:30
238A Morrill Hall

Present: John Fossum (chair), Carole Bland, Carol Carrier, A. Saari Csallany, Jesse Daniels, William Garrard, Richard Goldstein, Darwin Hendel, Robert Jones, Theodor Litman, Cleon Melsa, Todd Powell, Dwight Purdy, Kathleen Sellew, Larry Wallace, Carol Wells, Timothy Wiedmann, Aks Zaheer

Absent: Kent Bales, Terence Collins, Wade Savage

Guests: Nan Kalke (CAPA); Dann Chapman, Jackie Singer (Employee Benefits)

[In these minutes: (1) changing the Tenure Subcommittee to a standing Committee of the Faculty Senate; (2) Post-Retirement Health Care Savings Plan; (3) emeritus status for P&A staff; (4) evaluation of instruction]

1. Tenure Committee

Professor Fossum convened the meeting at 2:35 and turned to Professor Garrard to lead a discussion of a proposed amendment to the Senate bylaws which would change the Tenure Subcommittee into the Tenure Committee, a committee of the Faculty Senate.

Professor Garrard explained that the proposal, to make Tenure a full Faculty Senate committee, would restore the committee to the position it held up to 1989 (at which time the number of Senate committees was reduced from 41 to 19). The reasons for the change are (1) that the subcommittee lacks direct communication with the Senate and the Faculty Consultative Committee (so messages and content are filtered through this Committee and FCC) and (2) it would be to the advantage of the committee to have the appointments made by the Committee on Committees. There have been proposals from the Subcommittee this year that have been tabled by the Faculty Senate; it would have been helpful to have direct communication with the Senate so that that situation could have been avoided. Another reason for making the group a full committee is because it would give tenure a higher and more appropriate profile in the governance system, given the importance that faculty attach to the entire subject of tenure.

The charge to the proposed new committee, Professor Fossum noted, enumerates more fully what a Tenure Committee should do than the current charge to the subcommittee. Professor Garrard agreed but said that the proposed bylaw does not differ from what the subcommittee actually does.

Professor Wiedmann said he was never comfortable creating more committees. Professor Garrard said that while in general he agrees with that sentiment, in this case the subcommittee is already

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essentially operating as a committee, with regular meetings and a set of responsibilities, and it will just be more efficient if it is a standing committee of the Faculty Senate.

The Committee then voted unanimously to approve the proposed bylaw.

2. Post-Retirement Health Care Savings Plan (PRHCSP)

Professor Fossum called on Professor Goldstein to provide a report on the PRHCSP. [Note: this discussion refers only to the FACULTY plan; whether P&A staff, civil service staff, or bargaining unit staff would want to adopt such a plan will be decided in other venues.]

Professor Goldstein said the effort is going into hibernation until the University knows more about the budget situation; the salary increase amount (whether they will be minus, zero, or plus) will affect whether the plan can be adopted. In addition, the plan could be managed by Minnesota Life, with disbursements through Employee Benefits (as is currently the case with the dependent care and health care reimbursement accounts); it will take time to work out that system. The Retirement Subcommittee would have pushed harder on this plan if there were new funds involved, but it is reluctant to pursue it if all of the funding must come from individual faculty retirement accounts. Thus the picture is now clouded, but they will continue to work on preparing a proposal for the Faculty Senate, should the time become appropriate to present it.

Ms. Sellew asked what the approval process would be. Professor Goldstein said that for this proposal, it would go from this Committee to the Faculty Consultative Committee to the Faculty Senate, and once approved there it would go to the administration and the Board of Regents. From what he has heard, the faculty strongly favor the proposal and the administration is very positive--but the new budget situation will have an impact on whether or not it can be seriously considered. He said he understands that the P&A staff have developed a plan that is identical to the faculty proposal; the civil service staff will need a more complicated plan because there is insufficient funding in their retirement plan to cover the cost of a PRHCSP and because of the rules about accumulated vacation and sick time. It will be up to the civil service staff to decide how to proceed. The faculty route is more or less straightforward.

Professor Fossum said it is depressing to read that Senator Day is suggesting that the state freeze all salaries and that the University do the same.

Professor Fossum asked Ms. Singer if someone who has already retired may take a pre-tax deduction from a retirement account for health care. Ms. Singer said she did not believe that was possible; the only provision for health care is itemized deductions (except for a hardship withdrawal from a retirement plan, in which case the individual pays taxes on the withdrawal but does not have to pay the penalty). The ability to use non-taxed funds for health care is the advantage of the PRHCSP. If what Professor Fossum asked about were possible, Professor Goldstein observed, there would be no need for a PRHCSP. Except perhaps during a transition period, Professor Fossum pointed out.

Professor Goldstein said he did not want the PRHCSP to go away; it is a good plan and the faculty need to keep talking about it. As the budget situation gets clearer, Professor Fossum said, there are major issues to face, including this matter and health care costs. Why does the plan await clarification of the budget, Professor Zaheer asked? Because it calls for the 1.5% contribution from the University, Professor Goldstein said; it would be possible to start the rest of the plan, or have the faculty absorb the

entire cost themselves, but that does not seem to the Retirement Subcommittee a good idea. Doing so could result in a decrease in take-home pay for faculty, Professor Fossum pointed out; Ms. Singer said it was thought the PRHCSP would not be palatable if there were no salary increase and a 1.5% reduction for the plan. It will be very difficult to figure out what happens with the budget if there are cuts of the magnitude of \$150 million from the base, Professor Fossum said. The situation will be clarified by April, Professor Goldstein said, so could come to the Faculty Senate at the last meeting of the year.

Professor Goldstein congratulated Employee Benefits on providing the new policy covering emergency travel and referral when someone is out of the country (Medex Travel Assistance). The policy covers everyone at the University, including retirees under age 65. Professor Fossum said he had learned that the policy cost only \$47,000; Mr. Chapman said that was correct; it was less than 1/10 of 1% of the total UPlan cost. It provides only for limited services, so has limited liability for the company; it facilitates service to get the individual the right care at the right place in a timely manner.

Professor Fossum asked about the trend in medical costs, this year versus last year. Mr. Chapman said they had increased 8.7%, 2002 to 2003, reflecting the benefits of the University separating from the state plan. He said he expects the University will see the same increases from 2003 to 2004 as the community at large, perhaps on the order of 12-13%.

3. Emeritus Status, P&A Staff

Professor Fossum welcomed Nan Kalke from CAPA to present a proposal on emeritus status for P&A employees; the Committee had invited the proposal. The draft language was a duplicate of the current Regents' policy for emeriti faculty, amended to make it appropriate for P&A staff.

The Committee reviewed the proposal and made a number of suggestions. Committee members expressed reluctance to support giving emeritus status after only five years of service--and voiced some sentiment for changing the faculty policy as well (because it also only requires five years of service). Some suggested that the requirement should be for 10 years of service. At the same time, the University wants to encourage people to continue to contribute, which a ten-year requirement might discourage.

Dr. Jones said that there needed to be a parallel administrative procedure prepared before the policy could be brought to the Board of Regents; there is such a procedure for the faculty policy.

Professor Fossum said he believed the Committee generally supported the proposal, although it needs more work and administrative procedures; he urged that the revisions be made promptly and that the redrafted proposal be brought back to the Committee at its next meeting.

The Committee also discussed the eligibility of non-regular faculty for the emeritus title. At present only regular (as defined in the tenure code: tenured) faculty are eligible, but there are many contract and other faculty who give long years of service and who should also be recognized with the emeritus title. It was agreed that the Committee should also revisit the faculty emeriti policy.

4. Subcommittee on Evaluation of Instruction

Professor Fossum told the Committee that there are various issues related to evaluation of instruction that need attention and that he has had a number of communications with faculty identifying

problems. He said he would like the Committee to discuss the issues and then he would ask for volunteers to serve on the subcommittee, along with two individuals to be appointed by the Committee on Educational Policy. There is considerable faculty interest in addressing the problems, he said, and making changes; the most frequently-mentioned difficulty involved threatening or insulting comments on the evaluations, especially directed towards women.

The issues include problems with current items on the survey instruments, problems with student evaluators, problems of handling raw data, and negative side effects of the evaluation program. Committee members made several observations.

-- Comments on evaluations often reflect student perception but have no fact about why the student would have that perception (e.g., the instructor made politically incorrect statements). The student may be the oddball, but the comments go in the file and are potentially damaging to the instructor. It would be helpful to structure questions so instructors would know the context in which students make comments. It is not a simple task to figure out what affects the comments on evaluations; one learns very little from the comments, empirically.

-- Comments are intended to be useful to specific instructors to guide in course changes; they are a poor basis on which a department head should judge teaching. An important issue is what decisions are made on what basis. One suspects that if there were a survey across all departments, doubtless there would be some that engage in very damaging practices.

-- Excess weight is given to outliers, comments or ratings that can affect evaluation and raises; instructors are damned if they upset someone--but that is inevitable if one is really teaching. The use of medians would help alleviate the impact of outliers.

-- The fundamental problem is that evaluations are too simple. The Center for Teaching and Learning conducts four evaluations: student, peer, administrator, and self. The process would be better if the student evaluations were only one of four.

-- It is important to protect (1) the statistical validity of the evaluations and (2) the identity of the student. In some cases, there are no transcriptions of the written comments so the handwriting is not eliminated; students know this happens so their confidence in the system declines. Physics uses a computerized system, which would also allow for screening of comments. It is important that a student (from the Graduate and Professional Student Assembly, preferably) be included. While the evaluations are supposed to be administered by students, with the instructor absent, in some departments the practice is not observed. Students do not want to be identified because negative comments/marks could affect their continuing relationship with a department. And a graduate student can rarely make negative comments because the classes are too small; the same may be true for juniors and seniors in some classes.

-- In the past there was an effort to make the results of student evaluations available to all students. The faculty were concerned about several items, however, so an additional set of questions was developed. That system has been implemented; has anyone reviewed how it is working? It should be an item for the subcommittee. Both the Carlson School and the Medical School have been using a public system for a number of years; the results should be examined.

-- Who oversees the current system? At one point there were a number of staff at Measurement Services who processed the forms as well as assessed the validity of how they were used. Since a reorganization, there are only staff to process the forms. The Center for Teaching and Learning does a good job of putting evaluation in context but there is little institutional attention to what the evaluation results mean.

-- Would it be possible to do the evaluations on line? One concern is with identification of the person filling out the survey. There are also questions about storage and who has access to them; on line evaluation, however, does generate more comments.

-- There have been times when student evaluations have been wrongly used in merit reviews; they need to be looked at very carefully. Written comments should be provided only to the instructor. On any given day the comments can depend on the attitude or mood of the instructor or the student, so it is better to look at all parameters. Peer evaluation is better than student evaluation; a colleague can be more helpfully critical of instruction than can a student. One must also not forget the reason for such evaluations. One of the big reasons for course evaluations is to aid in helping the instructor improve the course and, if needed, improve the instructor's method or style in teaching the course. A course evaluation should not be used to penalize instructors or jeopardize their merit reviews. When any given instructor has a recurrent history of poor reviews it becomes a matter that should be dealt with between the instructor and his or her department head.

-- Rather than having student evaluations for one course per year, as University policy requires, it would be better to have every course evaluated. The numbers of evaluations are bigger, there is a better base, and one can make pretty good judgments as a result.

Professor Bland observed that Professor Hendel and others on campus know a great deal about evaluation; she urged that these individuals be called upon to assist the work of a subcommittee. And the subcommittee should not be confined to SCEP and SCFA members, she suggested. Professor Hendel said that if the subcommittee is to address all the issues, it will not have a small task--but the work is important and must be done. It will, however, require a lot of effort.

Professor Fossum said he would meet with Professor Sampson after the subcommittee is appointed. He said he would like to see this work move forward and have suggested changes by the end of the year. He then adjourned the meeting at 4:00.

-- Gary Engstrand