

Minutes*

Faculty Consultative Committee
Thursday, September 29, 2011
1:30 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Chris Cramer (chair), Elizabeth Boyle, Thomas Brothen, Colin Campbell, Nancy Ehlke, Janet Ericksen, Caroline Hayes, Walt Jacobs, Russell Luepker, Kathryn VandenBosch, Richard Ziegler

Absent: Linda Bearinger, Avner Ben-Ner, Peter Bitterman, Carol Chomsky, Elaine Tyler May, Jan McCulloch, James Pacala, George Sheets

Guests: President Eric Kaler

Other: Amy Phenix (Chief of Staff, President's Office), Jon Steadland (President's Office)

[In these minutes: (1) committee business; (2) discussion with President Kaler]

1. Committee Business

Professor Cramer convened the meeting at 1:30 and foreshadowed upcoming events. One, there will be a meeting of Senate committee chairs the next day to hear what they expect to have on their agendas. Two, the schedule for the Committee next week includes a discussion with the Academic Health Center (AHC) FCC of the report of the AHC Executive Steering Committee. He reported that he has been contacted by a number of people about the report, who are concerned that the report ignores the larger question, which is why the AHC exists at all, with a wrapping around those colleges, when other colleges do perfectly well without such a wrapping. The Committee on Finance and Planning will take up the financial questions associated with the report; this Committee will look at the organizational and structural issues.

Professor Cramer turned next to the role the Committee should have in fostering an intellectual endeavor (e.g., a symposium) focused on clinical research and patients who are unable to give informed consent. Professor May had suggested earlier that this was a top-down affair, Professor Cramer recalled, but it was top-down not from the administration but from this Committee. This Committee, however, does not want to have to identify the people who would run such an event, and then be seen as favoring one view or another. He said he leaned toward recommending that the Committee not seek to organize an event. Committee members agreed that the topic remains timely and merits consideration by any appropriate group of local, interdisciplinary scholars. However, because organization of such a topical symposium is well outside the purview of the Committee, it concurred that it would not pursue the proposal further.

* 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.

The Committee voted to ask Ms. Hippert in the Senate office to prepare the language of a proposal to add a seat in the University and Faculty Senates for the faculty at the University of Minnesota, Rochester.

Professor Jacobs reported that he had spoken with Professor Cramer about the possibility of having college public-relations professionals help faculty members respond to the media, and about having college public-relations staff talk with the Committee about strategies faculty members can use to be better advocates for the University in the media. Those who read these minutes may not even know that their college has a public-relations person, Professor Cramer added; he said he would like to see a multi-pronged approach, including a conversation with the Deputy Chief of Staff with responsibility for University Relations. He also said that the relationship with the coordinate campuses should be discussed, in response to a query from Professor Ericksen.

Professor Luepker said that there is interest in the staffing for public relations. Schools have such staff; the AHC has a number of employees in public relations as well, as do some centers. Everyone who is in the public eye would like to have a media person; the question is, what is the best way for a large organization to handle public and media relations? There is no question about the need for expertise in public relations, but must it exist in every school, division, and department?

The question is interesting, Professor Cramer said, and while the administration might like more control over the message, local units can be more nimble. Most faculty members are not good at public relations and could be helped with some instruction, Professor Luepker said. There are resources and media training that the faculty do not know about, Professor Jacobs observed. And the President is interested in communications and the ability of the institution to tell its story well.

Professor Cramer next reviewed the issues that had been sent to the Committee in response to the message to all faculty members asking for their suggestions for issues the governance system should take up. There were none that were not already on the list or that had not already been dealt with, he said, and responses have been sent to those who made suggestions. In some cases, issues have been referred to committees for further discussion with the administration.

Committee members discussed issues before some of the committees that report to this one, and also discussed issues related to the budget and the legislature.

Professor Ericksen reported that the Morris campus is at the lowest number of tenured/tenure-track faculty members in many years (about 91, and it has been as high as about 120 in the near past); this decline comes at the same time they have a large incoming class. Finding temporary instructors is more difficult at Morris than in the Twin Cities. They are conducting nine tenure-track searches this year, and hiring these faculty is especially important because the faculty at Morris do all the advising; temporary faculty do not advise, so using them simply increases the workload of the remaining faculty. Moreover, if a search fails, in the past the position has reverted to the pool and divisions had to again make a case for it. The longstanding agreement that there would be no fewer than three faculty members in any one discipline is out the window; at least one has only one. When there are new faculty positions, the four division heads review the needs and negotiate, and take their recommendations to the chancellor, who makes the ultimate decision. How much pressure do faculty members feel to simply fill the line, rather than necessarily get the best person, Professor Cramer asked? Considerable, Professor Ericksen said.

2. Discussion with President Kaler

Professor Cramer now welcomed President Kaler to the meeting and invited him to share with the Committee his thoughts on a variety of subjects.

The President began by thanking Committee members for participating in the inauguration; he said he appreciated the involvement and would be glad to amplify on anything he said in his inaugural speech.

The provostal search is ongoing and he appreciated the feedback from the Committee about the candidates.

The President reported that he has begun an effort to increase operational excellence and is in a continuing discussion with senior administrators about how to achieve it. He is considering bringing in a consulting group to help, and while he is normally wary about consulting groups, this one has done good work at the University's peer institutions. He would use them selectively, not for a review of the entire institution. He is also reviewing past University reports, many of which have good ideas. The question is how best to involve this Committee and other constituents in the decision-making process and how to implement the decisions across the institution. There are significant opportunities: If the University can stop doing something, and no one notices and no one is upset, then it should probably stop doing it. In doing so, it can take costs out of places, move more nimbly, and put more money into classes.

He has been meeting with the state's political leaders, the President related, and is focusing on helping them see the value the University brings to the state. The University, at the same time, must be clear and direct about what it is doing. He told the Committee a few of the stories he has been able to use and observed that the institution has a great story to tell. But he will need people to help him tell that story, he said, people who will open their labs and classrooms in order to show what they do.

With a new provost, once hired, the University will move into higher gear on the program and center review process. It will be streamlined and simplified but the reviews will be rigorous. The President said he would work with governance system to establish the criteria for the reviews.

He has spoken with Professors Cramer and Jacobs about revisiting the issue of the confidentiality of letters of recommendation that are sought for promotion-and-tenure files. He said he finds it interesting that the letters are available to the candidate; he is reviewing the history of the discussion here about the practice and also looking at the practices at the University's peers. He said he may return to the Committee on the topic if he concludes the question should be reopened. There is clearly diversity among the disciplines in their view of open letters, and any change would also require a change in state law.

Committee members offered comments on several of the President's points.

-- Professor Cramer reported that Committee members had heard from many people about the inauguration and the predominant view is that it was a great event.

-- Professor VandenBosch asked, apropos of the consultants, what would be the high priorities for them to examine and what would be the timeline? President Kaler said he is first looking at previous studies and would then ask an outside group to look at the situation. It is, however, early days, and once

he has digested the earlier reports and received counsel about them, he will then issue a Request for Proposals if there is a decision to use a consultant. One question he would ask a consultant to look at is the overall organization of the University, and look at the span (of supervisors) and levels (distance from the president). The idea is to reduce the number of levels and increase the span.

Would this be campus- or system-focused, Professor Cramer inquired? System, the President said, but the bulk of the operations is on the Twin Cities campus. Professor Cramer recalled that the President had promised that administrative costs would go down each year of his tenure as president; the President responded that he would use the next few months to identify what the administrative costs are. Professor Cramer observed that in the case of the Graduate School, one can see savings at the central level but there is hiring at the college level, and while there may still be savings, perhaps less than what might be thought. The President agreed that the assessment of savings must be honest, and this is related to his earlier point about doing things that perhaps need not be done.

-- Professor Cramer asked the President about the motivation for reconsidering the confidentiality of letters of recommendation and how it fits in the larger scheme of things. The President said it is related to helping programs be as excellent as they can be, which includes hiring the best possible faculty members, mentoring and helping them, and evaluating them. He said he brings to the issue the view of his own field, which believes it difficult to be rigorous in evaluating candidates when the candidate can read the letters. He said he believes the evaluation is more rigorous if the candidate cannot read them. If there is a concern that a letter may be unfair, in his view, that is the reason to obtain eight or nine letters—if one of them is negative but the others are glowing, one can reach the appropriate conclusion. With open letters, one must read between the lines, and he would rather be told directly that the candidate is someone the department should not hire. The President said he realized that some disciplines find the open letters to be acceptable.

Professor Boyle said she was not opposed to seeking to make the letters confidential but does not see open letters as a major problem. Most letters in her field are quite candid, perhaps in part because of the power differential between an assistant and full professor. Those with more authority feel free to speak.

Professor VandenBosch said that it is the rare case in her department when a candidate asks to see a letter of recommendation. That will not be apparent, however, to a reviewer when he or she receives the statement about open files. She asked whether it would be possible to allow candidates to waive their rights to look at letters of reference, such as is sometimes done for students applying to graduate and professional schools.

It is a problem in some fields, President Kaler said, so he would like to explore the option for confidential letters of recommendation. In his view, that is a better approach, but if many at the University do not see open letters as a problem, he will not pursue the matter.

Professor Cramer reported that his department routinely receives letters from potential evaluators saying that under the Minnesota law requiring open letters, they decline to write a letter. Professor Ehlike said she has seen only one such refusal, and the faculty in her department do not ask to see the letters. President Kaler observed that the interest of a candidate in the letters is binary: If the candidate is promoted and /or granted tenure, the letters do not matter, and if the candidate does not receive tenure, he or she will want to see the letters.

-- Professor Luepker related that Vice President Pfitzenreuter had spoken with the Committee on Finance and Planning about planning for the FY13 budget and had talked about setting aside funds for salary increases, if there are dollars available, which is a big "if." There has also been some talk about whether the increases should be across-the-board rather than, as has been the case for many years, based solely on merit. What is his experience, he asked the President? President Kaler said that (1) there are many people at the University making a very modest wage, and he would like to see those wages increase, and (2) he believes that the University lives in an environment where merit should drive salary recommendations. Without having an algorithm in mind, he said, he could see that some part of any increase might be across-the-board at the lower end of the salary scale, but said it should be based predominantly on merit.

-- Professor Cramer asked the President for his thoughts on how to foster even greater excellence across the University; he (the President) had said that Minnesota should be mentioned in the same sentences as Michigan and Virginia and that it should be promoting the story of how excellent the University is. The President said he will ask the faculty and alumni to convey that message to their legislators.

-- Professor Cramer also alluded to the President's reference in his inauguration speech about faculty members who may not be achieving at a level one would like, what does he envision? He asked the President how to achieve a change in culture so that the faculty appreciate that post-tenure review protects the faculty as a whole by ensuring that the many are not tarred by the brush of the few who are not performing at even adequate levels. President Kaler said he has not looked at post-tenure review; that is a central faculty responsibility, but it is important to examine. If someone is not as productive as he or she should be, if not able to accomplish at the level of peers, the institution should help them. The faculty are bright and talented people who should be assisted in seeing that they have other options to pursue professionally, whether in the system or outside of it, and they should be guided to those rather than left in their positions without help. It would also help to be able to say to the legislature and public that there is a rigorous process to evaluate people annually and that they cannot hide behind a tenured position. Even though some may still be sensitive about tenure because of the debate at the institution in the mid-1990s, it comes down to faculty members meeting the expectation of the public that if people have well-paying jobs, they are performing them well.

-- Professor Cramer noted also that the President had spoken strongly about diversity in his inaugural speech and asked if had any further thoughts on the topic. President Kaler said he needed to speak to the importance of diversity and of the need to pay continuous attention to it. If one is trying to find the most qualified person for a position, and does so in an unemotional way, people of color will emerge, but if one cannot enable the scope of the search to do so, and simply hires someone one knows, the institution will not achieve diversity. Professor Cramer noted practices in his department, which include questions to faculty after candidate visits that focus on skill sets, not the candidate, and suggested to the President that best practices could help. President Kaler agreed and noted that as dean he had increased the number of women on the faculty, and did so by insisting that the list of candidates be diverse; when women were interviewed for positions, they got hired.

Professor Hayes asked how the President defines diversity. It varies by the field, the President said; in some fields, it is gender diversity. There are fields where there are weaknesses that need to be addressed.

-- Professor Cramer noted that the last few times he had had occasion to be in the President's office, he had seen undergraduates leaving before his own appointment. He asked how the outreach to students was being received. The President said that it is still early, and there are many constituents, but he is making appointments with faculty and students. He said he needs to understand the experiences that they are going through.

-- Professor Jacobs inquired if the President, in concert with the new provost, had plans for any initiatives to improve the undergraduate experience. President Kaler said that he believed Vice Provosts McMaster and Rinehart are doing an excellent job in a variety of activities related to undergraduate education and that he had no new projects at this time. He said he would like to encourage more experimentation with best practices in teaching, but that responsibility will fall to the provost. He added that he has been a provost and he will be careful to let the provost do the provost's job.

Professor Boyle observed that there is pressure to increase undergraduate enrollment—at a time when there are fewer TAs to help in teaching and less support. She told the President about a significant increase in the size of her writing-intensive course and the reduction in support to teach it, and about examples of empty classrooms in certain buildings—because they are relatively small classrooms and there are few classes that small any more. President Kaler said he was aware of large-class issues and had no instant answer. But he said he would be thinking about them in formulating the six-year capital plan and would also try to find savings that would allow colleges to hire the faculty they need in order to drive the student-faculty ratios down. There are also innovative ways to teach large classes, he said.

-- Following a brief conversation about the future of Big Ten athletics, Professor Cramer thanked the President for joining the meeting, and adjourned it at 2:55.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota