

Minutes\*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy  
Wednesday, November 28, 2012  
2:00 – 4:00  
238A Morrill Hall**

Present: Alon McCormick (chair), Thomas Brothen, Lee-Ann Breuch, Emily Combs, Charlene Ellingson, Nic McPhee, Thomas Michaels, Kristen Nelson, Jane Phillips, Leslie Schiff, Henning Schroeder, Elaine Tarone, Cathrine Wambach, Susan Wick

Absent: Barbara Brandt, Megan Chock, John Cwodzinski, Robert McMaster, Tim Olson, William Ziegler

Guests: Anne Edvenson, Assistant Dean Majka Woods (Medical School)

Other: Assistant Vice Provost Suzanne Bardouche (Office of Undergraduate Education)

[In these minutes: (1) issues in graduate education; (2) report to the Faculty Consultative Committee; (3) change in the Medical School grading system]

**1. Issues in Graduate Education**

Professor McCormick convened the meeting at 2:00 and turned to Vice Provost Schroeder to discuss a number of issues that the Committee had asked him to address.

Dr. Schroeder distributed a handout that addressed the several issues. He began with graduate program metrics and assessment.

**Graduate Program Metrics**

On July 25, 2012, a memo from the Provost and Vice Provost Schroeder was sent to all college deans that outlined the plan to form an extended Quality Metrics Committee with one representative from each college and Duluth. The Committee was asked to fine-tune the list of metrics that will be used to determine funding allocations. Furthermore, "colleges are now encouraged to develop and explicitly convey to their own units the criteria and metrics that will be used to distribute funding within the college." The memo stated that "the spring compact meetings with the collegiate units will include a focus on each college's quality criteria and plans for graduate funding."

The Committee has been formed and met three times during the last few months with another meeting scheduled for December. Recommendations from the Committee to the Provost are expected by early 2013. SCEP, together with other governance bodies and groups, will be consulted throughout spring 2013.

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\* 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 Graduate School maintains a large amount of graduate program related data, including metrics data, on its website. To access those data, visit <http://apps.grad.umn.edu/programs> and choose the relevant campus. Click on the specific program of interest and choose "Program Statistics" from the list below the table. There are five categories of data available, including "Graduate Student Progress."

### **Graduate Program Assessment**

As indicated at the October 3, 2012 discussion with SCEP, the Provost Office, the Graduate School, and the Office of Undergraduate Education are working together to develop a preliminary action plan and guidelines for academic program review.

A group of faculty, staff, and graduate students has been assembled to begin work on developing graduate student learning outcomes and assessment. A charter for the group is currently being finalized and the group will seek the official endorsement of the Provost. There is significant support from the group to adopt a "bottom up" approach to this process, allowing individual programs to define the relevant outcomes for their students and the evidence that should be collected to assess learning outcomes.

Dean Schroeder said that graduate and undergraduate programs would be reviewed simultaneously and it is hoped that there will be a document for deans to use. In terms of outcomes, the SCEP subcommittee is considering the skill sets that all graduate students should have as a result of the work in their programs. They are drawing from a diverse list of universities that have gone through this exercise; the subcommittee will review and recommend the outcomes.

Professor McCormick recalled that Provost Hanson had indicated there will be a connection between the undergraduate and graduate reviews; will it be a comprehensive review or two connected pieces? If external reviewers are brought in, Dean Schroeder said, a holistic approach will be more fruitful, especially when graduate and undergraduate endeavors are closely intertwined.

Professor McPhee inquired if there is an expectation that there will be external reviewers for strictly undergraduate programs. At Morris it is not common to have external reviewers for individual programs. It is too early to say, Dean Schroeder said. Vice Provost McMaster is drafting a statement on reviews of undergraduate programs that will be merged with the one on review of graduate programs; the intention is not to be more bureaucratic, it is to streamline and improve graduate and undergraduate education. Professor McPhee said he had the sense there will be parity between graduate and undergraduate programs in reviews; when will the reviews start? When will they see them at Morris? The Twin Cities campus is to be re-accredited in 2015, Dean Schroeder pointed out, and the effort is driven by that deadline in addition to the desire to have meaningful review processes in the colleges. They expect to have the process ready to go by April, 2013. Once in place, there will probably be a certain amount of back-and-forth between the colleges and campuses to improve the process.

Professor McCormick asked about the learning outcomes group. The plan is to design 5-7 outcomes that all programs should seek, Dean Schroeder said, and to draw a distinction between Masters and Ph.D. programs. This is separate from the review process that he and Dr. McMaster are developing. They will continue to consult with this Committee on the process—and they will allow

programs to define outcomes that are meaningful in the discipline. It may be that there are 4-5 general outcomes and some would apply more than others in a program, Professor Tarone commented. There is a huge range of programs so learning outcomes must be general and programs must define where they fall in each one. They will start with outcomes for Ph.D. programs and will not try for global outcomes that include professional and Masters programs, Dr. Schroeder said; they have different emphases.

Professor Breuch noted that the three faculty members from this Committee are part of a group of 14 that includes representation from the Office of Measurement Services, the Council of Graduate Students, etc. The Writing Enhanced Curriculum has come up repeatedly as an example of how departments break down expectations to fit the specific disciplines. In that case, there were templates; with learning outcomes, departments would map skills they expect to instill in graduate students. Professor Tarone clarified that departments would identify which learning outcomes, from the list, they would emphasize.

Dean Schroeder next presented data on completion and attrition data for graduate programs. The Committee reviewed briefly the data but did not have an extended discussion of them. (See the appendix.)

Based on student feedback provided to Graduate School staff, some of the most common reasons why a student leaves a program can be categorized into three main areas:

- I. Financial issues – lack of funding, exacerbated for students who are the primary or sole provider for their families
- II. Personal issues
  - Students' own physical and/or mental illness or disability, with depression and anxiety perhaps being the most common in this category
  - family obligations such as caring for children, parents, and/or other family members
  - lack of family support
  - struggling to find a balance between working and pursuing a graduate degree simultaneously, or being offered a job before degree completion
- III. Academic issues
  - students realize that the program isn't what they envisioned or right for them
  - students realize (or are informed by their faculty) that they cannot meet (and/or have not met) the academic standards for success in the program, and so they leave on their own or are counseled out of the program
  - students experience conflicts with their advisers and/or others in the program
  - students experience discrimination and/or harassment
  - students experience negligent, non-existent, and/or dysfunctional advising, and as a result they give up
  - students cannot get the necessary feedback to move forward, they continue to be asked to make changes with no end in sight, they receive conflicting feedback, or they are caught in the middle of departmental in-fighting

- students unable to find the right "replacement" after their primary adviser left the University
- lack of support for students who intend to pursue a non-academic career after graduation

Although much of the information above is anecdotal, findings from the Ph.D. Completion Project – which includes an annual student survey of the 14 participating Ph.D. programs – indicate consistently that better financial support and advising & mentoring are the two key factors that would decrease time to degree and improve student satisfaction. More information about this project is included in the next section.

The Committee discussed with Dean Schroeder several of the issues that cause graduate students to depart from a program. While the program cannot control personal issues, it can control whether it informs students in a timely manner about meeting standards; Dean Schroeder agreed. There is no policy on what is to happen if an adviser leaves the University or dies; every student has a committee and it is the program faculty's responsibility to be sure that the advising continues. It might be appropriate to be more specific about what is to happen, and when, perhaps via best practices or even a policy, to be sure students are not left in the lurch, Professor Nelson suggested. Dean Schroeder agreed that a policy might be appropriate, given the number of students who change programs because of adviser departure or death.

Dean Schroeder turned next to graduate-student satisfaction and the issues that led to the unionization vote. The Committee discussed the handout but did not get into most of the particulars in the time available at the meeting. (See the appendix to the minutes.)

### **Graduate Student Satisfaction**

The University's Council of Graduate Students (COGS) has been conducting a biannual survey to collect data on graduate student experiences for currently enrolled students. The most recent survey was conducted in spring 2012, including all graduate and professional students. A full report on the findings will be available in the next few weeks.

In addition, the Graduate School asks all doctoral graduates to complete an exit survey to rate their graduate studies experience. Collectively, the overwhelming majority of doctoral students who have successfully completed all their degree requirements reported various aspects of their graduate studies experience to be "Good", "Very Good", or "Excellent". It is important to note that the exit survey is being conducted at the time of graduation, which may have a tendency to heighten the level of satisfaction.

The Graduate School has been an unfunded partner of the Ph.D. Completion Project that was initiated by the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). An annual survey is sent to currently enrolled students in 14 participating Ph.D. programs to gather data on their doctoral experience, including aspects generally related to graduate program environment and climate (e.g., questions about advising and mentoring, conflict and discrimination, financial support, curricular processes, the kind of information students receive from their program, etc.).

Responses from the April 2010 survey showed a decrease in advisor satisfaction between the third and fourth year of graduate studies and again between the fourth and fifth year. About 8% of respondents shared that they had experienced discrimination and almost 14% experienced conflict in their graduate program. Of those who reported experiencing conflict and/or discrimination, the most common source cited was other graduate students.

Overall, respondents identified the most positive aspects of their graduate program to be the research experience (21%), interaction with fellow graduate students (20%), and knowledge gained (16%). On the other hand, respondents identified time management (19%), financial support (15%), and advising & mentoring (13%) to be the least positive aspects of their graduate program.

Ms. Combs reported on various elements of support for unionization and some additional reasons for it.

Professor McCormick asked if there are any implications for educational policy. Professor Wambach observed that there is no notice requirement for tenured faculty members—they can be gone tomorrow if they accept another position. Someone must teach a class because a faculty member left on short notice, and that someone could be a TA. Ms. Phillips commented that she would be surprised if the University could impose a notice requirement; that may be part of employment law. Professor Nelson said that much of what graduate students talk about are also things that the faculty experience; she wondered if, in terms of policy on undergraduate education, there should be a limit on the number of students a TA can be asked to serve, because asking them to deal with more and more reduces the quality of education. Committee members discussed the possibility of a policy and whether data from peer institutions might be available. They noted a decline in support for faculty members even with large classes (which means faculty members will reduce the amount of writing they will require) and the wisdom of capping the number of undergraduates a TA has to be responsible for.

Professor Wick suggested the Committee could collect best practices from departments where graduate students feel they have a voice. It could recommend them as a way to treat graduate students as professionals rather than day laborers.

Professor McCormick thanked Dean Schroeder for his presentation.

## **2. Report to the Faculty Consultative Committee**

Committee members discussed what matters should be brought to the Faculty Senate for discussion and what the expectations of the Faculty Consultative Committee are with respect to the issue of grading, grade compression, and providing contextual information. One focus was on the distinction between providing information to students and changing faculty behavior. Another was catalyzing a faculty discussion about grading. There may also be a need to talk with the Committee on Faculty Affairs. Another focus was graduate student training in grading and consistency in multi-instructor courses.

Professor McCormick said he would prepare a draft message for the Committee to send to the Faculty Consultative Committee.

### **3. Change in the Medical School Grading System**

Professor McCormick next welcomed Assistant Dean Woods and Ms. Advenson from the Medical School to advise the Committee on a change to the Medical School grading system. Dan Woods explained that by University policy adopted by the Faculty Senate, the Medical School is exempt from the policy on grading and transcripts (as is the Law School), but it is required to report to this Committee any changes in its grading policy. They have a process in place to make changes that involves both faculty and students voting on them.

The Medical School adopted a standardized grading system two years ago, across both campuses (Twin Cities and Duluth) because accreditation requires that the grading be the same, Dean Woods said. The two campuses did things differently before it was adopted. They looked across the country at peer practices and concluded that a pass/not pass/honors system would be best. They are working on standardizing what "honors" means, but in general it means in the top 15% of the class. There are no separate honors credits, there are just three "grades" for courses, she affirmed in response to a query from Ms. Phillips.

Dean Woods said the controversial part of the policy is the language that sets the "pass" at 70% on the final exam (and all courses are required to have a final and all course grades are criterion-referenced).

Professor McCormick commented that this Committee has discussed why it might be appropriate to use pass/not pass grading for courses that are criterion-referenced. The Medical School system adopts that approach, with the slight twist of adding an honors level. Is that controversial? Very and it still is, Dean Woods said. And they now have students not passing courses who would have passed before—but who also struggled with board examinations. For the Twin Cities, the policy has improved faculty testing and assessment. As an educational psychologist, she believes that the Medical School was doing a good job before the change in policy; with the new policy, it is doing a really good job.

Professor Brothen observed that the pass/not pass grades are criterion-referenced but the honors designation is norm-referenced. Dean Woods agreed but said they are moving to a criterion-referenced honors designation as well. Some are uncomfortable with the idea that everyone could achieve honors in a course. The number who do so now varies with the course; they are working with the faculty on the issue. She also clarified that honors in this case is simply a transcript designation on the transcript and unrelated to the University's honors program for undergraduates. Ms. Bardouche explained that she sometimes receives questions from graduate students about degrees with honors or with distinction and tells them that those designations only apply to undergraduate degrees. She suggested the Medical School think about changing the nomenclature or make it very clear what the honors designation in Medical School courses means.

What happens if a student does not pass a course, Ms. Phillips asked? They have an academic standing committee that deliberates about a student who failed, discusses the question with the course director, and that makes a decision about whether a student will be permitted to continue in Medical School.

There is no class rank in the Medical School, Dean Woods said in response to a question. They write letters for each student to provide as much information as possible when students are applying for competitive positions. They also, in a change, leave a "not pass" on the transcript even if a student later passes the course or achieves honors in it. They can remove the "not pass" grade in horrific situations. Incompletes are not allowed. The percentage of Medical School students who do not pass courses is very low.

Professor McCormick thanked Dean Woods and Ms. Edverson for joining the meeting, and adjourned it at 4:05.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota

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Appendix, abstracted from the handout from Dean Schroeder.

### **Completion and Attrition Data for Graduate Programs**

As shown in the table below, the completion rates for doctoral students have mostly been trending upward since the fall 2000 cohort began. International students have significantly higher completion rates, while rates for students of color tend to be lower and more variable.

Six-year completion rate for doctoral students based on year of entry, Twin Cities campus

	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Male	42.6%	46.4%	45.7%	43.8%	42.0%	47.5%
Female	39.7%	43.9%	43.6%	42.1%	41.9%	46.7%
International	46.8%	51.9%	50.8%	53.3%	51.3%	51.8%
Students of Color	30.2%	29.9%	40.0%	36.8%	34.3%	33.0%
All Graduate Students	41.1%	45.2%	44.7%	43.0%	41.9%	47.1%

Data for individual graduate program can be accessed on the web (see instructions above) <http://apps.grad.umn.edu/programs>. It is important to note that trends over time may be more relevant than absolute values.

### **Issues that Led to the Unionization Vote**

In March 2012, eligible graduate assistants were asked to vote in an election to determine whether or not the group would be represented by a union. Of the 4,393 eligible voters, 2,999 cast votes and 1,857 voted against the unionization of graduate assistants.

Throughout the unionization effort, the following issues were raised in support of a union:

- the importance to have a voice "at the table" when it comes to graduate assistant appointments including pay, benefit, and working conditions/hours/terms – especially during times of budgetary constraints
- the variety and amount of fees that graduate students have to pay. They are seen as being out of control, and some union organizers suggested that some or all of the fees should be covered or waived as part of the benefits for graduate assistants. Coincidentally, some colleges have decided to waive the collegiate fee for all of their graduate assistants.
- there is great pay disparity among graduate assistants, even if the work is very similar (from \$17.08 per hour to \$26.61 per hour)
- for teaching assistants, pay is not adjusted by class size even though the workload is much heavier with a large class [they do not mind teaching a large class—but do not want to be given notice the day before the semester begins that they will doing so]
- while other University employee classes periodically have across-the-board raises, graduate assistants' raises are determined by their individual college or department; some colleges continue to pay most or all of their graduate assistants the minimum allowable wage set by the University regardless of length of service or performance. The University has not raised the minimum allowable wage for graduate assistants in several years
- the University allowed some colleges or departments to place their graduate students in a job class that pays a stipend but without tuition or health benefits, although these students perform basically the same functions as graduate assistants.
- lack of consistency across colleges and departments in the types of benefits that are available to graduate assistants. For example, some departments provide a certain number of paid vacation days to their graduate assistants while others do not