

Minutes\*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy**  
**Wednesday, February 14, 1996**  
**1:00 - 3:00**  
**Room 626 Campus Club**

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Avram Bar-Cohen, Anita Cholewa, Elayne Donahue, Gayle Graham Yates, Megan Gunnar, Jeffrey Larsen, Robert Leik, Judith Martin, Glenn Merkel, Ryan Nilsen, Mark Schuller, W. Phillips Shively, William Van Essendelft

Regrets: Paul Cleary, Robert Johnson, Thomas Johnson

Absent: Darwin Hendel, Helen Phin

Guests: Vice President and Dean Mark Brenner

Others: none

[In these minutes: Teaching awards, undergraduate and graduate; Semester standards for students in transition; grading policy changes; Semester Conversion Standards; Twin Cities Undergraduate Course and Curriculum committee; tuition remission for graduate assistants]

## **1. Teaching Awards**

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and began by asking for advice on how the University should respond to the request from the Higher Education Committee of the Minnesota House of Representatives to designate an outstanding teacher. The Higher Ed committee wishes to recognize one outstanding teacher from each of the higher education systems in the state.

Committee members discussed the possibility of selecting one of the ten Morse-Alumni award winners to receive this award (which was done two years ago, but it was thought the award at that time was a one-time event). The Committee was reluctant to identify a Morse-Award winner, if this is to be a regular award from the legislature, because it would simply create nine more losers--the Committee makes no distinction between the ten faculty who win the Morse-Alumni award each year. One possibility would be to simply draw by lot one of the ten names. One concern was that restricting the pool to the Morse winners would preclude consideration of a lot of other outstanding faculty. The possibility of selecting an individual from the PREVIOUS year's Morse-Alumni winners was also considered; the Morse-Alumni nominating committee could perform this task. With more lead time, the colleges could be asked to nominate individuals separately for this award.

It was agreed that Professor Koch would inquire whether or not this will be a regular annual award, to learn if it is worth spending time on identifying a way to select someone to receive the award.

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She then raised with the Committee the question of whether to establish an award, parallel to the Morse-Alumni award for undergraduate education, for graduate and professional education. She reported that she has received a number of inquiries about this and asked the Committee if it had any interest in pursuing the subject.

It was noted that at least in CLA, there is nothing to preclude receiving the college award on the basis of graduate teaching. Keeping the Morse-Alumni award for undergraduate education is important. One would need to be persuaded there is a need for this award, beyond expressions of interest by a few people.

Professor Koch agreed to explore the extent of interest in creation of such an award.

## **2. Semester Transition Standards**

Professor Koch then reported that she had rewritten the semester transition standards to make them more general. The Change to Semesters Implementation Task Force will be responsible for the detailed work of administering the change. The plan would be to have SCEP approval before fall of 1998 for implementation during the fall.

One concern is how advisors will be trained before the fall of 1998, and thus be able to work with students. Course materials will not be ready before 1997, but the committee should have information about curriculum, programs, liberal education requirements, and so on, ready even before the curriculum is approved. Information should be available early in the spring of 1998, so that training can begin during that summer--and so that if SCEP sees anything wrong, it will have time during the quarter to recommend changes.

Committee members agreed that advisor training needed to come before most everything else, because students coming in the fall of 1997 will need advising about the change.

A question was raised about language calling for all students to be individually advised about their programs prior to enrolling in the semester system. It was agreed that the nature of the advising should be left up to colleges and departments. There may be a difference in the kind of advising students receives, depending on whether or not they have declared a major. The point is that departments should be aware that students will need guidance during the change. The fact that advising budgets may be reduced in some colleges because of cutbacks, and that personal access to advisors may be too limited, means the printed materials available to students must be very good. It may be that the Committee will wish to point out the importance of advising and the need to retain funding for it.

One question is the magnitude of the problem; how complicated will this be for all students? This may not be as big a problem as people imagine; with things like on-line advising and group advising, the advice could be delivered quite well. The Committee should not be too prescriptive.

It was agreed that the standard should not call for "individual" advising in every case.

Updates on departmental and college plans for the transition will be needed each fall; the students

coming in next fall will be at the University during the transition, and they will need information before fall of 1998.

Students should be encouraged to take liberal education and sequence courses before the change to semesters, said one Committee member. Is there a lag in completing requirements, asked another? Will there be seats for them? Probably there are in the day school classes. It may be useful to run simulations of some of these students to see if they could finish. Professor Koch agreed to inquire about these issues. Institutions that have made the change have found that their four-year graduation rate increased and course-taking patterns improved.

### **3. Grading Policy**

Professor Koch reported on a few issues that have been raised. Several points raised by CLA have been addressed in the policy. The Carlson School has conducted research on the views of its students on plus/minus grading; the majority are neutral or positive about it.

It was reported that the Minnesota Student Association does not like the policy because faculty may not be consistent in giving pluses and minuses, and students know faculty cannot be made to use them. As a result, MSA will oppose the policy if it votes in favor of a resolution being proposed. SCEP should continue as it has, it was said, and present the policy to the Senate; the MSA vote will likely be divided.

No one can do anything about faculty who give only As, or only Cs, Ds, and Fs, either, pointed out one Committee member. Those are philosophical issues with the faculty.

MSA is also opposed to the policy provisions about repeating a course (the draft required that the first grade of C or S or better be the only one counted in the grade point average); MSA wants the last grade to be the one that counts. MSA has not thought about the possibility of averaging the grades. It was suggested that an MSA member could move, on the Senate floor, to amend the policy.

It was reported that the Registrar's office, for about \$20,000 to \$25,000, can program the computers so that a "get out of jail free card" withdrawal could only be used once.

### **4. Semester Conversion Standards**

Professor Koch reported that she has been receiving a number of messages about the calendar, particularly from IT, and wondered why these people had paid no attention to the calendar debate that has been going on for the last five months. One proposal that has been made calls for a split fall semesters, with two weeks of classes and final exams after the holidays. This is a calendar that only about 2% of the institutions in the country have, and no one on SCEP believes it attractive or desirable.

One complaint is that exams go up to December 23rd in the 1999 calendar, but that is likely the case for many schools on semesters. It happens in at least two or three of the other Big Ten schools. It is not particularly odd, agreed another Committee member.

The Senate has indicated its satisfaction with SCEP's work thus far, it was said, and unless

someone brings up new points in the debate, SCEP should continue to foster discussion on the standards as they stand.

It was agreed to incorporate three clarifications suggested by department chairs in a recent meeting with Professor Adams:

- Make it more explicit that most students would be able to complete their degrees by enrolling only during fall and spring semesters, but departments, with college approval, would be authorized to offer required courses for majors during the interim. This latter allowance does not represent new policy; at least one department has for many years required a three-week session in August. The Undergraduate Course and Curriculum Committee will, for the Twin Cities campus, evaluate majors as well, and can monitor the extent to which non-regular courses are required.
- The language authorizing departments to offer less-than-full-semester courses should be made clearer, but it also needs to be understood that there will be only one registration period per semester. CEE now offers courses in many formats, and will want to continue to do so, in order to be responsive to the needs of students, even after there is only one registration system. The semester system, in that respect, is MUCH more flexible than quarters.

One big issue in scheduling less-than-full semester courses would be room scheduling. The Committee should NOT say that only 14-week courses will be approved, but those courses should receive priority in scheduling. The policy should give permission for shorter courses; the details of how they would be offered should be left up to the units.

- No department would be obligated to offer courses during the interim. Some departments very much wish to use it; others may have no use for it at all.

Discussion turned briefly to a memo from Dr. Zetterberg about the merits of a May versus a January interim. One Committee member pointed out that the memo did NOT speak to the concern of a number of people, the cost of a third registration period. Students could register for a May interim when they register for spring semester, so there would be no extra registration period; or they register for a May interim at the same time they register for summer session courses. Others were less certain students would know, 14 weeks in advance, what they might want to register for during an interim, and many summer session students may not be able to register in May. The memo also speaks to the problems of graduate and professional schools, and ignores the fact that the three other campuses are exclusively or overwhelmingly undergraduate.

If the Senate approves the calendar principles that SCEP has recommended, the identification of the actual calendar will not occur until next year, and it is at that point the decision about a May versus a January interim will be made.

## **5. Twin Cities Undergraduate Course and Curriculum Committee**

The Committee deliberated briefly over editorial points on the proposed bylaw amendment creating a Twin Cities Undergraduate Course and Curriculum Committee (UCCC), and unanimously approved it being presented to the Senate for information.

The intent is that the work of the UCCC will not duplicate college curriculum committees, although the work of the two may overlap; the primary focus of the UCCC will be to look at overall programs on the Twin Cities campus. The UCCC will NOT necessarily look at packets of course materials; it will look at possible duplication of courses, the number of courses in a field, and so on.

Some concerns were expressed about creating another committee, one that will make work for itself, and whether or not this is an administrative task, one that the provosts should be responsible for.

## **6. Tuition Remission for Graduate Assistants**

Professor Koch next welcomed Vice President Brenner to the meeting to discuss tuition remission for graduate assistants.

This is a topic of increasing sensitivity, Dr. Brenner began, especially in IT, and rightfully so. When he first saw the numbers with the change in graduate assistant (GA) fringe benefit costs, he knew immediately this was a problem becoming more dramatic. The draft letter to Deans, Directors, Department Heads, and Directors of Graduate Study he circulated to the Committee is becoming more and more refined, and is being used as a means to carry on discussion. There appears to be consensus on some points but not on others.

What he has learned, he said, is that the cost to support a GA is not unique to Minnesota; what is unique is the rate at which the cost to employer has risen so dramatically. When the program was started, the fringe benefit cost for GAs was included in the pool of fringe benefits for all academic employees; that has been determined by the federal government to be inappropriate, so there is no turning back.

Dr. Brenner recalled that Dr. Peter Zetterberg had chaired a committee to look at how public institutions are dealing with GA fringe benefits; they learned that the total cost of student support is about the same at the University's peers. The distortion here is the rapidity of the change. If tuition were to continue to rise faster at Minnesota than at its peer institutions, then the University would have a problem.

There are a few things that can be done to provide relief, Dr. Brenner said, but they are only minor; the only dramatic relief will come if the University decides to put more money into GA fringe benefits-- and there is no source of funding short of imposing retrenchment.

He and Dr. Infante agreed that the tuition policy needed to be considered, so the proposal has two parts: first, an alternative way to collect tuition from graduate students; on this point, consensus seems to be building. The second part is how tuition remission benefits for graduate assistants should be paid. There is no "magic bullet," Dr. Brenner warned; GAs are expensive.

He explained the alternative tuition plan to the Committee, which would go into effect 7/1/96, if approved, and which carries a 7.5% tuition increase. All students registering would pay the base tuition charge of \$30 (a base cost to have a student here, charged up front to ALL students). Graduate students enrolling for 1-5 credits would pay \$750 (plus the \$30). They considered a per-credit charge, which would have been \$260 per credit; assuming that most students take 3-4 credits per term, the 1-5 credit tuition band is cheaper. The cost would be \$1500 for 6-12 credits (plus the \$30). For 13-16 credits,

tuition would be \$380. There are some students taking 13-16 credits, primarily in professional masters programs. Over 16 credits, the charge would be per credit, at \$200 per credit.

One question is why the band is changed from 7-15 to 6-12 credits. The reason is that tuition remission, in this proposal, will pay for 6-12 credits, but not more.

In addition, there will be a continuous registration charge of \$150 or \$300, depending on whether the student is paying his/her own way, and would be charged to all students once they have finished their prelims and have paid for the required 36 thesis credits. The cost would be much less at that point. Which means, said one Committee member, that a faculty member would be more willing to take on a graduate student (who needs funding) who has passed prelims, because it would cost less, and would be LESS likely to put on a grant a student in the first two years of his/her program. The change is also intended, Dr. Brenner said, to push students to finish their prelims sooner.

Someone must pick up the expenses of the first- and second-year students, he said, especially as the University moves toward a policy of high tuition, high aid, while grants will pick up students who are more advanced. One possibility might be to expand the fellowship program for students in their first or second year. Whether or not that is pedagogically sound may vary by field; in some cases the students may just "float" for the first two years, while in others they may be involved in research from the first day.

A student who takes more than 12 credits will have to pay for the credits; tuition remission will not cover them. It is his understanding that there are hundreds of graduate students enrolled for 18 credits, and many of those are people who will go off aid the next quarter or so who are buying their thesis credits. In doing so, they are driving up the cost for everyone, because costs are pooled so all participants are paying. What is needed is an environment where students take their prelims by year three or four; the University should not wait until the fourth or fifth year to determine if the student is suitable to be a candidate. The exam, he reminded the Committee, is a PRELIMINARY exam. It is to everyone's advantage for students to take their prelims as early as possible. When they have completed the 36 thesis credits, they then have a lower continuous registration charge.

The idea behind this comes from a consideration of what is educationally sound for the GA. How many courses should a GA take? On a 50% time appointment, the GA is supposed to be working 20 hours per week; such an individual cannot, in reality, take more than 12 credits. A number of the University's peers cap tuition remission in the same way, and for the same reason.

Asked about a possible negative impact on interdisciplinary studies, which can take more credits or time, Dr. Brenner said this should not affect interdisciplinary studies. There is a national concern, he pointed out, that programs not be designed to take 7-8 years to get through; they should be 5-6 years. The time to degree has been increasing in the last few years; a national report recently called on institutions to monitor this, as well as a balance between specialization broader educational experiences.

There are a few 1-credit courses at the graduate level, observed one Committee member, especially in Education; this makes a one-credit registration in the Graduate School prohibitively expensive. Is there anything that would preclude charging a flat amount for the first credit or two? If the credits are not toward a degree, they could be taken through CEE, Dr. Brenner pointed out, or taken that way and

switched to a degree program later. This policy is aimed at regular graduate students and is intended to encourage them to get through their programs. He agreed, however, to think about this problem.

The second issue is how to pay for the tuition that is charged. There are two possible ways. One is to continue to recover the cost as part of the fringe benefit package, as a percent of salary. Employers who have GAs with low salaries under-recover the amount needed; those with high salaries (which may be driven by the market) over-recover. The alternative mechanism is to impose a direct charge on employers--whatever the true course charges are for a GA will be paid by the employer. That means a change in what programs pay, and would put pressure on departments to have students complete their course program sooner, since there will be considerable cost savings to hire GAs who only pay continuous registration. This alternative would require a lot of administration to operate, and would be job security for department accountants.

Those who have grants cannot get increased funding and cannot get fellowships to pay this increasing cost, it was pointed out; the only alternative is not to hire graduate students. That would not be healthy for programs, Dr. Brenner agreed. Cannot money be pulled from somewhere to support graduate students? There is a slight possibility, Dr. Brenner said, in that a fund was set up to help, but it is going to be for those on grants who were affected by the federal government shutdown and had an unplanned gap in funding. The amount available is very small, in any event.

There are one or two senior officers, Dr. Brenner reported, who are suggesting the University rethink whether tuition remission ought to be an entitlement. It could be offered to those whom the University recruits, but not the students who show up at the door and who are given an appointment. His concern is that the University be as competitive as possible.

Dr. Brenner then reviewed with the Committee a table of data showing the longitudinal fringe benefit rates for GAs with various salaries. The plan he has proposed, he said, offers cost containment once students complete their programs, but does have slightly higher costs for those who have not; there would also be a 10-15% savings if students are encouraged to graduate earlier. The savings from this plan will occur because the costs would go much higher than under the plan, if nothing is done, and there are immediate savings for departments that have students whose only tuition charge will be continuous registration.

Professor Koch thanked Dr. Brenner for his presentation, and promised that SCEP members would think about the proposal and let him know of their reaction. She then adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota