

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Tuesday, April 4, 1995
1:45 - 3:30
Room 626 Campus Club

Present: Kenneth Heller (chair), Anita Cholewa, Elayne Donahue, Ron Hustvedt, Robert Johnson, Judith Martin

Regrets: James Cotter, Manuel Kaplan, William Van Essendelft, Darren Walhof, Gayle Graham Yates

Absent: Jeff Bauer, Megan Gunnar, Darwin Hendel, Laura Coffin Koch

[In these minutes: Review of policies on class schedules, final exams, and grading; a resolution on the semester system.]

Professor Heller convened the meeting at 1:45 and first introduced Ron Hustvedt, a new student member of the Committee from the Duluth campus.

1. Senate Policies on Classes and Schedules

The Committee then continued its review of Senate educational policies. Ms. Cholewa reported on policy recommendations with respect to existing Senate policies on classes and schedules. She reported that changes are recommended:

- Change the existing policy requiring the Minneapolis campus to begin at 8:30 a.m. and the St. Paul campus to begin at 8:00 a.m., which is currently violated, to one which requires first-hour classes begin on both the Minneapolis and St. Paul campuses at 8:00 (and that there continue to be 15 minutes between classes).
- Change the policy which now requires all classes to be given in 50-minute blocks to one which allows classes on Tuesday-Thursday to be taught in 75-minute blocks but which requires them to start at the beginning of a regular class period. (8-XXX courses would be exempt from all schedule control if they are held in departmentally-controlled rooms.)

There was discussion of the "user unfriendly" nature of a class schedule which requires a calculator to determine the starting time of a given class, which could be eliminated with 10 minutes between

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classes, versus the difficulty that would face students in getting to the next class.

- That no student be permitted to register for classes which overlap. (There is no such prohibition in place at present.)
- Change the existing policy that requires six days of final examinations to one which the final exam period could be either five or six days, depending on the calendar. Reaffirm the existing policy, prohibiting administration of final exams during the last class period or any time before the scheduled final examination time. Create an exception to allow for the lab portion of a final examination in lab courses to be administered at the last lab meeting.

Ms. Cholewa agreed to bring back the revisions suggested at the meeting for final approval at the next meeting of the Committee.

2. Senate Policies on Grading

Professor Heller then turned to Dr. Donahue for a report from the subcommittee that reviewed grading policies.

Dr. Donahue first reported that there appeared to be only one policy dealing with transcripts, and that requires that GPAs appear on them. The Committee agreed that there probably ought not be Senate policy dealing with transcripts and that the one policy on the books should be repealed.

Discussion then turned to the variety of grading systems now used across the colleges and campuses of the University. In part because of the necessity of keeping previous grading systems operative, and in part because of the several grading systems in use, it was said that there are 40 ways to calculate grades at the University. There is no doubt a cost associated with maintaining this many systems, including the confusion it generates for students. Committee members expressed dismay.

Professor Heller noted that the Assembly policy on grades (which covers only the Twin Cities campus) establishes the grading policy, and that only ONE exception has been granted. The Carlson School was granted authority by SCEP to experiment with plus/minus grading from 1991-96; all other units are required, by Assembly policy, to use the stipulated grading system. It is evident that a number of units have practices that violate Assembly policy. One Committee member observed that there could be three different grading practices being used for students taking the same course.

There was considerable sentiment among Committee members to reiterate the Assembly policy and to recommend that the SENATE adopt a policy so there would be a uniform grading system for the entire University. This would be a simplification for students transferring between campuses and some colleges. It was agreed that representatives from the Carlson School should be invited to report to the Committee on their experience with plus/minus grading for the last several years. Senate policy would be University-wide, and any provision for exceptions from the general policy, it was said, should ONLY be for experimental purposes: to determine if the general policy should be revised. If the plus/minus grading system is an improvement, it should be used everywhere. If not, it should be dropped everywhere.

In response to a query, one Committee member observed that all grading is imprecise, but that most faculty believe they can tell the difference between "A" and "B" work. How much finer the scale could be leads to debate; most would not say they could tell the difference between an 87, an 88, and an 89, but most probably WOULD say they can differentiate between an "A-" and "B+"--and that "B+" and "B-" work are very different. Students have generally opposed the plus/minus grading system, for reasons that have never been clear. It appears to be acceptable to Duluth students.

One Committee member inquired if the Committee should suggest an enforcement mechanism for the policies. Professor Heller observed that if the administration accepts the policies, then it is the job of the administration to enforce them, but it must report back to the Senate on its actions.

The Committee concluded it would aim to bring all these policy revisions to the Senate at the first meeting of Fall Quarter, 1995.

3. Resolution on Semesters

The Committee then turned its attention to the resolution that Professor Heller drafted pursuant to discussion of the semester system at the meeting the week before. The resolution does not endorse (or oppose) the semester system; the discussion of whether semesters are better than quarters, which are preferred by students and faculty, and the costs involved in switching has taken place repeatedly already. In view of the changes associated with U2000 which might have to be redone if the University subsequently switches to semesters, and the interest of the public (as expressed by the legislature) in a uniform semester academic calendar throughout the state, and that comprehensive reports and studies of all the issues exist, the resolution says the University should either make the change or decide not to change--but that it should get on with the decision promptly. The resolution also declares that if a change is to be made, it should be done with adequate planning and resources.

Following several editorial suggestions, it was agreed that a final version would be circulated by email to the Committee for review, and then forwarded to the Senate Consultative Committee for placement on the Senate docket. The resulting resolution read as follows:

WHEREAS, there would be utility for the University to change to a semester system in order to be more compatible with other institutions of higher education throughout the state and nation, and

WHEREAS, a change to semesters would require an extensive revision of University courses and curriculum, and

WHEREAS, U2000 envisions improvements to University courses, curriculum, operations, and infrastructure which would need to be redone if the University were to change to a semester system,

THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED that if such a change is to take place, the administration must, before the beginning of the next academic year commit, the University to a definite target date on which the change would take place, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the implementation of the change from quarters to semesters must include a sufficient budget to acquire adequate faculty time and resources to accomplish the transformation in an educationally sound manner, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that any semester calendar must not result in a loss of instructional time and must be consistent with the education, research, and outreach missions of the University, and

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED that the planning process for a change from quarters to semesters must take place in close consultation with the Senate governance system and with academic units.

COMMENT:

For many years, the question of changing from a quarter to a semester system has divided the campus community. It always raises the specter of having to redo any real academic restructuring at the University. With the improvements in the University envisioned by U2000, it is time to either commit to changing to a semester system, and incorporating those changes into U2000 plans, or commit to keeping the quarter system for the foreseeable future.

The relative merits and costs of the two systems, the issues of the changeover, and faculty and student preferences have already been studied in great detail in University reports of the 1985 Semester Working Group (Robinett), 1986 Analysis of Academic Calendar Survey (Hendel), and the 1988 Materials to Support a Decision to Convert to a Semester System (Kvavik).

From these reports, it is clear that there are strengths and weaknesses to either system, and that there is a legitimate difference of opinion as to which is superior for the academic and the research enterprise. For example, relative to the quarter system, semesters may allow students to spend more calendar time to learn course material in greater depth but reduce the variety of courses which would be taken in an academic career. It is also clear that there is bureaucratic simplification which results from reducing three to two the annual cycles of registration, classroom assignment, and grading. This simplification would help relieve the overburdened academic infrastructure of the University, which has suffered in a constant climate of budget cuts.

In addition, more institutions of higher learning, both within the state and across the nation, have changed to the semester system over the years, generating difficulties in coordinating our calendar and academic structure with the increasingly interdependent milieu in which the University operates. The awkwardness of translating between quarter courses and semester courses affects the approximately one-half our undergraduates who are transfer students, and it may handicap our ability to attract students from other institutions who wish to participate in our summer academic program. As improvements in communications technology facilitates sharing of courses between institutions, the incompatibility between semester and quarter courses may become an increasing problem.

The discussion about the change has been held repeatedly in recent years; it is time to make a decision.

Professor Heller then adjourned the meeting at 3:20.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota