

MINUTES*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, January 27, 1999
1:00 – 3:00
Room 238 Morrill Hall

- Present: Judith Martin (chair), Darwin Hendel, Gordon Hirsch, Laura Coffin Koch, Darcia Narvaez, Kathleen Newell, Martin O'Hely, Jeff Ratliff-Crain, Palmer Rogers, Tina Rovick, Richard Skaggs, Suzanne Bates Smith, Thomas Soulen, Steven Sperber, Craig Swan, Susan Van Voorhis
- Regrets: Robert Johnson, Christine Maziar
- Absent: Shumaila Anwer, Laura Beauchane, Angela Bos
- Guests: Peh Ng (University of Minnesota, Morris); Michael Handberg (Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost)
- Others: Linda Ellinger (Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost)

[In these minutes: Morris calendar change; grading subcommittee report; first-year seminars; changes in K-12 standards; the one-stop center]

1. Morris Calendar Change

Professor Martin convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Dr. Ng to discuss the request from the Morris campus that it be permitted to begin its Intersession immediately after the conclusion of Spring Semester final examinations, rather than waiting a week (as called for in the University's "uniform" calendar).

Dr. Ng reported that her office had conducted an informal poll of students and faculty at Morris, and learned that both groups wished to begin the Intersession as soon as examinations were concluded. Most Morris students are full time, and then go elsewhere for summer jobs. They want the Intersession to begin and end as soon as possible, so they can then go to summer employment--rather than try to work for 10 days, return to Morris, and then go back to their job. Faculty feel the same way: they want it done so that they have a longer summer. There is also a concern, Professor Ratliff-Crain said, that if the one-week gap is not eliminated, the Intersession term at Morris will not work.

* These minutes reflect discussion and debate at a meeting of a committee of the University of Minnesota Senate or Twin Cities Campus Assembly; none of the comments, conclusions, or actions reported in these minutes represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

The plan is to offer 5-8 courses that would be unique, that do not fit into the academic year or summer session. They would not be required courses.

After brief additional discussion, the Committee unanimously agreed to recommend to the President that the exception be approved for one year. The Committee is scheduled to have a discussion of the "uniform" calendar later in the year, and it will likely then make broader policy recommendations about such variations from a uniform calendar.

Professor Martin thanked Dr. Ng for joining the meeting.

2. Report of the Grading Subcommittee

Professor Martin now drew the attention of Committee members to the report of the grading subcommittee (of which she had been appointed as chair by her predecessor as SCEP chair, Professor Koch), and recalled that the report had been prepared in response to questions from the Faculty Consultative Committee about whether "grade inflation" was a problem at the University. The subcommittee examined a great deal of data on grades earned (primarily by undergraduates), not all of which are included with the report.

The general conclusion of the subcommittee was that the data are fairly convincing that grade inflation occurred during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and that the changes "raised the line" on any graph of grades awarded. Since that time, grades have been relatively stable. There appears to be a slight trend to increasing grades in recent years, and the subcommittee talked about whether or not this is a problem: are high grades being assigned willy-nilly, or are the students better? In recent years, incoming students have had higher ACT scores, and high school rank has also increased. It was also pointed out that the University increased its admissions standards, so in the last seven or eight years students are better prepared.

The subcommittee did not reach the conclusion that there has been grade inflation, but did consider the trends and made four recommendations.

The first is that every course syllabus be required to include the language from the Senate's Uniform Grading and Transcript Policy on grading standards (i.e., an A "represents achievement that is outstanding relative to the level necessary to meet course requirements," a B "represents achievement that is significantly above the level necessary to meet course requirements," and so on). Professor Martin explained that it has been the experience of several faculty that if the grading standards are on the syllabus, students can better understand grades. Some faculty may be unfamiliar with the language, and it could provide encouragement to be more careful about the grades they give. The subcommittee also recommends that a mandatory element of every syllabus be the Senate language providing that each credit of a course is to equal 3 hours of work per week for the average undergraduate student, in order that students are aware of the workload expected.

The second recommendation is that each department and program discuss the meaning of the Senate grading standards for its courses and programs and the expectations faculty have for students in their field of knowledge.

The third recommendation is that data on the mean grade point average by designator and course level, as well as the percentage of As awarded by designator and course level, be prepared for each Fall Semester. The fourth recommendation is that these data should be reported to the Senate, circulated to all deans and department heads, placed on a website, and printed in the DAILY.

Committee members made a number of points in the discussion that followed.

-- Making public the grade distributions might cause students to enroll in courses that give higher grades, although the subcommittee believed that students enroll in courses for reasons other than the grades that are awarded.

-- The proportion of grades other than A should also be reported, so that the disappearance of C and D grades could also be noted. To include only As suggests the primary concern was with grade inflation.

-- There is concern about the relationship between grades awarded and the results of teaching evaluations, and the importance of teaching evaluations for faculty in decisions concerning promotion and tenure and merit salary increases. The data suggest that if one is an entertaining instructor and gives high grades, one attracts a lot of students. (The subcommittee considered this issue, and believed it better to "let the sun shine in" and create peer pressure, if needed, to moderate grading behavior. That is also the point of the recommendation about departmental discussions; if there is a sense that a faculty member is drawing students because of high grades or entertainment, there could be talk about change in the department norms.) It was suggested that a cover letter to the colleges and departments be sent which explained this position.

-- The data on grade distributions assume an evenness of comparison among programs, but some undergraduate programs screen students, which would have the effect of reducing the number of low grades. Students must apply to some programs. If they are pre-selected, should they be compared to undergraduates at large or only with a certain group? This could be comparing apples and oranges. (It was pointed out that the data and graphs are by college and program, and those within the programs presumably know what they are doing.)

-- There should be a recommendation that there be discussions of the meaning of grades at the COLLEGE level as well as departmental. At the same time, department chairs will want to see grades for all departments across a college, to see how they measure up in comparison. Department discussion should include how a unit stands vis-a-vis its peers; college discussions should be directed to helping departments.

-- Professional and graduate students should not be included. (The data include grades for 5-XXX courses, which in many instances include both graduate and undergraduate students. Dr. Swan agreed to find out if graduate and professional student grades could be deleted from the data.)

-- There can be fluctuations in the grades awarded in courses, depending on the courses offered and the students who take them. Use of the same term each year (Fall Semester) is important, in order to build a cumulative record with validity, but there need to be "use with caution" stickers attached to the data.

-- The data should not be published in the DAILY, where they can too easily be misunderstood, and where they might create a disincentive for students to perform well. In order to bring down the percentage of students who do well, it will be necessary to increase the percentage of those who do not. In addition, many faculty see themselves as people who work with students to help them improve, not people who profess and expect students to perform; grading on the curve is not the common viewpoint held by most faculty. Posting the data on a website is acceptable, where individuals must seek it out.

With modifications along the lines suggested in the discussion, the Committee unanimously approved a motion to forward the report to the Senate Consultative Committee with a request that it be placed on the docket of the February Senate meeting.

3. Report on First-Year Seminars

Professor Martin turned to Dr. Swan for a report on the first-year seminars. Dr. Swan asked that the discussion be considered informal, as the data are preliminary and his office is in the middle of analysis. He then distributed a handout with preliminary information that had been gleaned thus far.

Dr. Swan touched on the highlights of what had been learned. One issue that arose was workload, about which the University (and faculty) may need to be clearer in the future (that is, these are not high school courses, nor are they "fluff," but they are serious university work that students must TAKE seriously.) There was a gap between student expectations and reality about workload, and in some cases workload may have been too great.

There needs to be discussion about selection of faculty to teach the seminars, and discussions with the faculty about expectations--and an expectation that faculty will talk with students about expectations as well.

It was suggested that the seminars be promoted at orientation, and also the expectations that accompany enrollment in the seminars.

Professor Martin thanked Dr. Swan for the report, and asked that a more thorough report be provided to the Committee as soon as his office is prepared to present it.

4. Changes in K-12 Standards

Professor Martin next asked Professor Koch to report on changes in K-12 standards and the implications of those changes for the University.

Professor Koch distributed a number of handouts concerning the new K-12 standards (the Profile of Learning) and commented that the subcommittee appointed to consider this subject has not yet started work because it is unclear the Profile will stay in place as designed, be modified, or eliminated altogether. There is also a group composed of University and MnSCU representatives examining the standards.

The major difficulty is that the instructional program envisioned by the Profile of Learning is very different from the University's preparation standards. The testing and expectations in mathematics, for example, do not correspond to the University's requirement for courses in geometry, algebra, and so on. The translation between the Profile of Learning and the University's preparation standards is not easy. There is also the problem that these are state standards, while the University accepts students from outside Minnesota, and students in Minnesota go elsewhere for college. It is, however, students who are currently in 9th grade who are covered by the standards, so it will be a few years before the problem directly confronts the University.

Committee members discussed the standards. One concern is how elements of the Profile will be matched to University requirements; another is a concern that subject areas the University is concerned about could be eliminated. There is also worry that there will be a mismatch between high school and University curricula, because the high school curriculum may change drastically while the University's will not. Another is how Post-Secondary Educational Options courses will apply in higher education, and whether college courses will meet the Profile standards.

One Committee member observed that it is difficult enough now to find grounds to tell a student that he or she is not ready for a University degree because he or she has not learned basic things; that will be even more of a problem if standards in the Profile are even more amorphous and make it even more difficult to make assumptions about what students know.

At the same time, the idea of the Profile is to change learning activities, and students could come to the University with very different experiences. In some cases, they are not experiences the University would reject, such as doing independent research.

Professor Martin asked that Professor Koch keep an eye on the topic, and convene her subcommittee to make recommendations when it seems timely to do so.

5. The One-Stop

Professor Martin welcomed Mr. Michael Handberg to the meeting to inform the Committee about web development projects, their timeline, and academic services that will be

available. Mr. Handberg distributed several handouts, and reviewed the efforts underway in such areas as advising, registration support, grading, financial aid, and the like.

One project is the One Stop, which will be available for students on the web, by telephone, and at a walk-in center. They are looking at a similar project for faculty for teaching and research, although are uncertain about the need for a walk-in location.

Committee members discussed the proposals with Mr. Handberg.

-- The use of the web to submit grades raises serious security concerns. Mr. Handberg agreed, and said there is need for discussion between faculty and computer people about this. Moreover, even if it is possible to submit grades on the web, some will not use it, so an alternative mechanism must remain in place.

-- The advising services provide information to faculty about their advisees, such as career and academic information, the academic program, transcript, admissions data, holds, and so on. Faculty should NOT be able to look up information on students who are not their advisees, it was maintained by a number of Committee members. Mr. Handberg noted that a number of faculty in each department have such authority, but must sign a release form indicating they understand the University's policies on information; they must also have a student ID number, which is not readily available to anyone. Information is made available on a need-to-know basis, Ms. Van Voorhis added, and anyone who releases it to others could subject the University to a lawsuit. Not all faculty will have access to information about students. It was suggested that making information about themselves available to others should be at the discretion of the students, and that they should have to key in a password to permit access for a discussion with faculty. Mr. Handberg also said that there will be a flashing message on each page of student data warning that the information is private and not to be released.

-- Mr. Handberg said that they need to know what information is important to faculty. How to alert them that a one-stop or equivalent has been established is also a question; students find theirs, but a roll-out for faculty needs discussion.

Mr. Handberg commented that most web services are interesting and exciting, can lead to streamlining of processes that currently rely on paper, and can provide a lot of benefits. (One example might be ordering textbooks on line, and obtaining copyright permissions.) Many things could be accomplished more quickly.

Professor Martin thanked Mr. Handberg for his report, and adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand