

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
February 7, 1991 (Evening)**

Present: Thomas Clayton (chair), Martin Conroy, Edward Foster, Roland Guyotte, Michael Handberg, Ken Heller, Karen Karni, Karen Seashore Louis, Marvin Mattson, J. Kim Munholland, Clark Starr, Jennifer Wesson

Guest: John Howe, Chair, Task Force on Liberal Education

The meeting was called to discuss the draft report of the Task Force on Liberal Education. Professor Clayton welcomed Professor Howe to the meeting and invited him to make some preliminary comments.

The report is a long one, Professor Howe began, but the Task Force believed the length necessary to provide a sense of the reasoning process it went through as it reached its conclusions. The agenda of the report is an important one for the University. It is necessary to understand why the recommendations are what they are; the document thus serves an educative function as well.

It is necessary to understand the context and the restraints in which the Task Force functioned. The recommendations are campus-wide, intended to apply to all undergraduate colleges on the Twin Cities campus. They are intended to be incorporated within the 180-credit norm for a degree--although that norm is something of a fiction (only 6% of the 1989 graduates had 180 or fewer credits). The recommendations are not intended to extend the time to graduation. Questions of graduation rates, tuition and student debt, and legislative funding for full-year-equivalent students are all reasons for honoring the 180-credit limit.

The Task Force recommends adding some liberal-education course requirements beyond those which now exist. However, what we try to do with the existing number of credits, and how they are defined, is just as important as the number of credits. Within the 180-credit limit the Task Force tried to include a significantly broadened definition of liberal education.

The final constraint the Task Force had to take into account was the very different requirements of the majors across the campus: The B.S. and B.A. degrees as well as the professional degrees. These vary significantly in the number of credits they require; history requires 53 credits while there are others which go well over 100. Pre-major requirements, in some cases, extend the major requirements into lower division.

The agenda is not only important, it is complicated and difficult. There were "heavy debates" within the Task Force and considerable disagreements--some of which remain. The report nonetheless has strong consensus support; it is not a "clumsily brokered" document. It represents an effort to achieve a balanced and integrated program of liberal education. Professor Howe encouraged the Committee to think about the report as a whole and how the parts relate to each other.

*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.

Some will find the report lacking in some regards, Professor Howe observed, while others will see it as too ambitious and demanding. Finally, the Task Force tried to keep its eyes on the future, beyond the financial stringencies of the moment, to try to lay out an educational program which carries the University considerably beyond its present situation.

Professor Munholland, who also served on the Task Force, next observed that one intriguing proposal is to try to make liberal education continue through all four years rather than be a hurdle one gets over before going on to other things. This attempt comes through in a number of places in the report.

Professor Louis, also on the Task Force, pointed out that the Task Force came down firmly believing that of the 180 credits for a degree, all ought to be college-level work. Not only does the report reinforce the increased preparation standards, it goes beyond "seat time" and assumes that students will have studied and learned; if they do not know the materials, they will need to do some remedial work. The report tries to address what is a serious problem for some departments: students enter ill-prepared, and in an effort to avoid loss of credits try in vain to pass courses for which they are unprepared. This wastes their money and faculty time, and creates an undesirable environment.

The second important point, she said, was the attempt to try to marry the two definitions of liberal education. One emphasizes the content; the other emphasizes attributes such as critical thinking, writing, speaking, and so on.

Professor Guyotte, an ex-officio member of the Task Force, said he had been impressed by the systematic way in which the Task Force tried to educate itself--by going through about a foot and a half of material. It reviewed an enormous amount of material, including what other peer institutions have done. Although there are some pioneering elements to the report, by and large the University would not stand alone in terms of what senior public institutions are trying to do.

One question that has been raised by a number of students, one Committee member reported, is why work with computers was not included in the recommendations. Professor Howe responded that the Task Force never fully addressed the matter, although it did consider communications skills, such as writing (and to a lesser extent speaking). The ability to work a machine, however, seemed to be of a different order, not of the same substance and consequence as writing, speaking, and framing thoughts clearly.

One Committee member commented that a computer is like a pencil; what's the question? Some students, it was said, do not view it that way; the University teaches certain skills to prepare them for society. Computers are relatively new and some students believe they should have been forced to learn about them--but were not, and were therefore let down. There are, Professor Howe pointed out, only so many slots on the liberal education agenda that can be filled before it includes a large number of requirements. The Task Force had to decide what the essential elements of a liberal education are, which have to do with ways of thinking, acquaintance with certain fields of knowledge, and basic academic skills and competencies.

This exchange raises a related point, it was said. A necessary component of a liberal education in this society is being able to deal with technology. This is the deeper issue: not how to use the technology

but how to be in control of it. Modern citizens must know that they do not have to know how to use computers; it is old-fashioned to think one needs to know how to use computers. Students come to the University, however, and have a 19th-century outlook on the world; in some ways it is frightening. Part of a liberal education is to know what the knowledge base is and how people should function in our society. The document is light in this respect.

A liberal education, it was argued, should be a melding of the arts and sciences, a combination which can provide a "whole-world picture" of some sort. To be weak in any one area is to not have a liberal education. One piece of this, it was agreed, is quantitative skills and the ability to deal with data. There are certain qualitative and quantitative skills upon which modern society is based; not to know things about the universe is as bad as not knowing about Shakespeare. Not to be able to read a graph is as bad as not being able to read English. If one read the report with a closed eye there would appear to be a conspicuous absence of attention to science and technology, or at least a lack of balance.

Given the diversity of the Task Force, it was said, the effort was to find the right balance. There was a consensus that the program should produce a well-rounded requirement, which is the reason the math requirement was strengthened and lab work was added to the science requirement. The idea behind the science requirement is for people to know how the work is done, but it also provides for one course which would permit an interdisciplinary approach to problems in science--which might include technology. That one course is intended to be imaginative and problem-focused in order to give students a grip on the issues.

What comes across, nonetheless, it was said, is "oh, by the way, there are science requirements, too." The report, for instance, notes "two dimensions of contemporary life that command special emphasis in a program of liberal education suited to our times"; this is where one might find a call for being able to deal in a competent manner with modern technological society. Instead, however, the two factors are an international perspective--with which no one would argue--and multicultural dimensions of the nation. Nowhere is there mention of the problem of technological illiteracy.

Professor Howe responded by noting that the report includes a math requirement, which the present system does not. Introducing students to mathematical modes of reasoning and describing the universe is a significant step. Second, he said, three courses in science are required: one each in the biological and physical sciences and a third course intended to connect modern science with applied problems or situations. This appears, it was rejoined, to be talking about science as a technical skill rather than a world outlook.

This document, one of the Task Force members commented, speaks to what is different between 1991 and 1965--the last time these requirements were dealt with. This 1991 requirement puts teeth into the 1965 science requirements. The areas of international perspectives and multicultural dimensions are highlighted because they represent fundamental changes. The same is true for science--this document calls for more science.

One of the student members of the Committee voiced enthusiasm for the language of the report but said there was no basis for comparison with existing requirements. The requirements are the same as the ones which now exist for CLA, for instance, except that they require less math. What are the campus-wide requirements? Professor Howe distributed a sheet comparing existing and proposed requirements.

Also unclear in the report is what students are being encouraged to do and what they are being required to do. The wording describing a second language requirement is an example.

Professor Munholland explained to the Committee the evolution of the Task Force language. Inasmuch as all entering students are required to have completed two years of a language, it was at first thought that one could fulfill the language requirement if one additional quarter were taken (the beginning quarter of a second college-level year). The language faculty, however, said that this would not provide a sufficient grounding in a language to make the requirement meaningful. The Task Force then considered requiring a full second (college) year of a language but it became apparent that was logistically impossible, considering the other liberal education requirements being proposed. As a result, there is hortatory wording that language study begin earlier, at the pre-college level. If students came in with three or four years of language study, one additional quarter would strengthen the learning. At one point a suggested date in the mid-1990s was proposed, but this, it was thought, would lead to rebellion among language teachers at the high-school level. He also told the Committee that a second language was rated lower than other items in the survey of University faculty, so a strong recommendation would likely have encountered resistance--especially since it would have required three to six quarters of a student's time.

Would the new-student colloquium be organized by college, Professor Howe was asked, or would it be one course organized for all new students. It is expected that they would be significantly tailored by college, he said. He also affirmed that these would be new courses, noting that they have been tried at various large public universities, more or less successfully. The rationale for the courses is contained in the report; the goal is to "position" students, as they enter the University, to think more carefully about their education and the values and purposes of a liberal education--within the context of an academically-grounded small course of two or three credits.

The next point raised by one Committee member was dissatisfaction at having breadth requirements satisfied by introductory courses for a major--in the sciences, especially. They spend considerable time on tools--one needs to know certain things in order to be able to go on to the next course. For a non-major, however, this is counter-productive. Professor Howe responded that the Task Force makes this specific point: Most existing introductory courses, in their present form, would not be suitable. Those existing courses which meet the educational objectives of the curriculum would be acceptable, but the recommendations impose a different kind of burden on most introductory courses. The report does allow, it was noted, the introductory course in a field, for a major in that field, to count in the breadth requirements; for non-majors, however, a different course would be needed.

One of the student members of the Committee reported on discussions that had been held with a student group in CLA. There is a perception, among CLA students, that they are surrounded by technology--and it's all happening "over there" [in IT]; it's something really big, it's got to be really important." Students take courses over there, in introductory physics or calculus, but they are unrelated to the huge world of technology. There is a sense that they are missing out on something "out there."

Professor Howe related that the Task Force found itself debating, repeatedly, over what should be required and what should be encouraged, and how students could be helped to take more responsibility for deciding their own academic agenda. This debate gets to the question of how much should be required. If there were an infinite number of credit hours available, the report could require everything

everyone on the Task Force wanted--a 370-credit degree, to pick a number at random. That was not seen to be the right way to go. The Task Force reviewed a number of departmental majors which prescribe almost every course a student is to take, which is also not good pedagogy. In addition, the Task Force is establishing a floor, although it is hoped that the colleges will not substantially modify the requirements--which could inhibit student transfers across units.

The most one can do, with this kind of program, is to introduce students to various things, Professor Howe commented, to give them a grounding in the study of the humanities or the sciences. After that it is the student's responsibility. Some of the introductions will generate interest or curiosity; others will not, depending on the student. He cautioned that students need to be careful in calling on the University to require things of them.

On this matter, one faculty member of the Committee said, what is being talked about is technology as environment--something greater and more sweeping. It is this to which students need access, and there is good reason to develop such a course and to require it.

There are excellent things in the report, he continued, and there are a lot of things in the report that "I don't like at all." One general point about the report: The language in the appendix about the curriculum should be moved into the text of the report; right now the content of the report is in the appendix. Another suggestion made is that the requirements might be provided to able and well-educated people outside the University for review. A variety of views might be obtained; the point is that there should be some ideas beyond those which come from inside the University. "We are preparing people for a world that most of us don't live in," it was said; faculty members have relatively little to do with the extramural world. Valuable perspectives could be obtained.

On the question of requirements, it was said by another Committee member, students are required to do many things. Without a countervailing requirement they will not do what is nice because they cannot. Students might realize they should take certain courses, but mundane demands usually preclude their doing so. Unless the entire system is to be changed--which is unlikely--there must be strict requirements to compete with existing strict requirements. If there is a major which stipulates every single credit, not permitting the liberal education courses, there must be negotiation with the department. It must be told that something must go; the University cannot simply pile more and more on students.

There are more constraints and requirements on students in this report, Professor Howe observed, than exist in the present system. It is certainly arguable whether there should be more. The Task Force was frustrated when it bumped up against credit requirements in majors in IT, Music, Human Ecology, and others. The Task Force had no control over those requirements and he agreed that conversations need to be held--unless the University is simply to add on to the student's time and costs. The Task Force was not in a position--and was told so several times--to change the major requirements established by professional associations. It is a real problem, he concluded.

That is not an argument, it was argued by one Committee member. If the University does not have control over the majors, who does? The Task Force is exactly the group of people who should bring pressure to bear if it finds that some departments are unreasonable and standing in the way of a well-rounded education. This puts considerable political burden on the Task Force, another individual observed in response. One of the Task Force members also reminded the Committee that the President

had explicitly told it not to take on this issue.

Professor Howe told the Committee that these issues will come up. The faculty in engineering and Human Ecology will contend that they cannot accept these recommendations, much less stronger ones. The "collective we" will have to face this issue, he agreed. Another Task Force member agreed that it did not confront the question of identifying "majors which seem to be choked because of their own requirements." The Task Force instead attacked by other devices, such as calling for a senior project. Departments found this proposal intrusive; a number did not want to require it. Another device is the recommendation for a course, a small group, in the major which addresses the theoretical and philosophical issues raised by that major. The Task Force did intrude on departments, therefore, but did not address the problem of credit requirements.

One Committee member suggested that some revisions in the later part of the report would be in order. The use of the "CE" designator for Citizen Ethics courses could be confusing for those in Continuing Education, it was observed, and the use of the term "intensive" normally means "in depth" but, in this report, means "remedial." Professor Howe solicited suggestions from all Committee members on how the language of the report could be clarified.

Another Committee member inquired about the funding implications of the report. The projects, for instance, will cost considerable money. And it appears the recommendations will have to be funded internally. Professor Howe reported that the Task Force has received cost estimates, both for one-time "tooling up" expenses as well as for recurring costs. Figures have been developed, he said, but that matter is largely an administrative response. It has been recognized, in informal conversations with administrators, that the costs are significant but realistic--within the context of reallocation.

There is in the document considerable discussion of multicultural and international perspectives, it was noted. One resource the University has, but which it uses very poorly, is foreign teaching assistants. His department, one Committee member reported, has been training and observing TAs and has discovered something it considers horrifying: Our students are xenophobes. They have foreign TAs who are terrific, who do everything right--"but the students chew them to pieces" because they have a slight accent. "They are absolutely destroyed by the students." This isn't racism, it's "difference-ism." They are just as good as the American TAs, and some are better; the talents are usually greater because they are so carefully selected. That they are "torn apart" is not their fault. The business of multicultural toleration and international perspectives could start at home with the students; they could be told that these TAs are a great resource, people who come from all over the world and who bring different insights into things. The Task Force should talk about using foreign TAs for multiculturalism and internationalism.

Professor Louis was asked about a comment she had made that the report was perhaps not as bold as some might like. This agenda, she responded, represents a substantial change for this university. It is not a radical educational proposal, however, if one considers the range of models that exist. The report joins traditional disciplinary knowledge with cross-cutting themes, competencies, and perspectives that have not previously been required at the University. This is not an uncommon strategy, Professor Howe added, in large universities. Minnesota, it was also pointed out, is at the end of a wave in the reform of undergraduate education that began in the early 1980s. (A radical proposal, Professor Louis explained, would have been to organize the entire curriculum around a set of key questions, questions which would have to be addressed in every course.)

One Committee member, following up on that possibility, contended the courses required by the document would still be a hodge-podge; some skeletal organization, with groups of courses following certain themes, would have been useful. This, one of the Task Force members responded, simply does not work in a large university with faculty members and students of such diverse perspectives and expectations. The Task Force could not agree on any set of questions that could be used to organize courses. Others on the Task Force, it was noted, made radical proposals; most fell away because they were felt to be inappropriate to a large, complicated organization which must, in Minnesota, be many things to many people.

Another Task Force member drew attention to the "implementation" section of the report, particularly the call for creation of a new "Council on Liberal Education." It must be recognized that some parts of the report will remain "in process"; the Council could develop a variety of requirements, such as a cluster of courses.

There are, nevertheless, linking themes that could run through the courses, it was argued. Granted, no group of people might ever be able to agree on what the themes should be, but it could come up with ten such themes that could be used. Students might also present their own themes. Any such approach would help to get away from the cafeteria-style education, with a piece here and piece there and no linkage between them.

Professor Howe explained that the description of the agenda of the "diversified core" should address these concerns. The report speaks at length about the inadequacies of the present "free form" system whereby a student can select almost any course. This reports gets away from that through a set of specially-developed courses overseen by the Council on Liberal Education and admitted to the core in an entrepreneurial way. The intent is to give the core integrity and linkage and balance. If the differences between what is being proposed and what exists is not evident, the report is not well-enough written.

Next, Professor Howe was asked about transfers. The report, it was said, is not very specific. Dr. Foster commented that the University is claiming that it is trying to move more in the direction of encouraging transfers. The President has said the University wishes to reduce lower division, wishes to push students to the community colleges, and wishes to shift resources to upper division and graduate education.

Professor Louis explained that the Task Force was cognizant of this effort. The Task Force observed that system articulation is an essential goal, since most transfer students come from within Minnesota. If clear criteria for the University's courses are established, and well-communicated to other institutions, they should be able to ensure that students take courses which will meet the University requirements. The Task Force also urged people to take part of their liberal education courses during upper division enrollment, so they will be exposed to what the University believes is a liberal education. There will also be a point--if a student transfers in to the University with a large number of credits--that the student will have to be exempted from some of the requirements. That point, however, was not defined; it varies by department. The main issue is articulation, however, so that students who go to community colleges know what they need to do.

Moreover, just as University students lose ground when they transfer between colleges internally--

and they will continue to lose some ground--any transfer will not be without cost except for the most diligent and foresighted student. There is no way to avoid this general problem of cost of transferring. Dr. Foster told the Committee that even as the University increasingly encourages transfers, the number of students transferring to the University is dropping dramatically. The students appear to be going to the State Universities instead. There are a variety of possible explanations for this phenomenon.

The Task Force did examine the Q-7 report of the State University System; many of the Task Force proposals are consistent with that report. Professor Howe noted that the Task Force raised a number of implementation questions which will need to be addressed but which the members of the Task Force had neither the time nor the expertise to address. The transfer issue is one of them. The Task Force assumed, Professor Louis added, that the articulation agreements and transfer arrangements will be made clearer in the future.

Dr. Foster reported that the State University System has worked with the Community College system to modify what is required for an Associate of Arts degree. For those students who actually complete the A.A. degree, it has also been agreed, they will not be required to take additional lower division work at the State Universities. Professor Howe said he understood--but if that were to be the case for the University, one can inquire why the Task Force has just spent six months elaborating undergraduate degree requirements suited to the University environment. Presumably, it was said, because the student who comes here for the full four years will have a better education. The University could also work with the community colleges for changes in their curricula. Moreover, Professor Louis observed, the Task Force would be very uncomfortable with the proposition that students who transfer after two years would take none of their liberal education course work at the University.

One Committee member asked how the mission of the University might be affected by another four-year institution in the Twin Cities; would the Task Force recommendations differentiate the University's role if there is a competing institution? Professor Howe acknowledged that the question is good one, although it will in any event be a number of years before such an institution might be established. The prospect did not in any way enter into the deliberations of the Task Force. Nor is it clear how such an institution would affect the agenda set out by the Task Force.

Dr. Foster also observed that presumably the Task Force tried to recommend an undergraduate education most compatible with an urban research university. Metro State, he said, is a different kind of institution and will not be a research university. If the recommendations better shape undergraduate education to the University, they should help differentiate between the two. Professor Howe concurred.

One Committee member said it was his impression, given the impetus to increase the graduation rate and decreasing the time students spend at the University, that there is sentiment for devising mechanisms for putting all students into a "lock-step-four-years-and-you're-out" program. How this could be accomplished, with students coming from other institutions and facing these requirements? Dr. Foster commented that the lock-step plan is simply not the right one for this urban university. Professor Howe agreed, even while improvements in the time-to-degree could be made.

One Committee member expressed support for the recommendation calling for the small group or seminar experience within the major. This is something that undergraduates only rarely see. Learning about the background and divisions in the discipline help students to think more clearly about the courses

they take. Another Committee member inquired why the small group experience was merged with the recommendation calling for instruction in the evolution, tensions, and stress points of the disciplines. Must those two be wedded; must the discussion take place around a small table? (The question was left unanswered.)

It was argued by one Committee member that there is much emphasis in the report on the "attitudinizing" approach to higher education--in contrast to the disciplinary and content, of which there is little evidence in the report. That is, there seems to be a greater emphasis in the report on currently correct social attitudes than there is on the higher learning it is essential for students to acquire to be productive and constructive citizens in technologically oriented world that is increasingly demanding while individuals well educated enough to respond to the demands are becoming fewer and fewer.

Nor, it was said by one Committee member, is there very much in the report about academic standards. If Minnesota took only the top 10 or 12% of the students many problems would be solved. The University is forced on other expedients, such as preparation standards and portfolios, which will not accomplish what is needed--which is to obtain people qualified to do the work. Admissions standards could have been addressed, true, but the thrust seems to be less academic than attitudinal--tending more toward social engineering than academic advancement.

Many different kinds of curricula can work, it was said. One can knock the cafeteria approach, but it doesn't matter whether the curriculum is completely prescribed or completely unregulated, insofar as even opposite extremes may have merits of their own. One advantage of the cafeteria is that it forces people to make their own connections, and also plays to serendipity in a way that a designed program does not. The British system might be considered; if the University believes its students will become better prepared in secondary schools, maybe they need less liberal education than is presently called for. In the United Kingdom, most of the basic liberal studies are completed before students come to higher education, at which time they specialize. The system may not make much difference if allowance is not made for the kind of students who will enter it.

In this view of this Committee member, for the varied students who come to Minnesota, a small-class requirement for all students, new or not, seems undesirable as well as uneconomical. Some students want such classes, some do not, and it is not necessarily the case that classes are good just because they are small. Small-group discussion often communicates shared interests, a good thing in itself, but it is not necessarily the best way to stimulate rigorous thinking, much less communicate knowledge. Small classes work best with those who want them and are well-prepared for discussion and ready to contribute to it. It also seems doubtful, it was said, whether a lot of time spent early on trying to define liberal education and relate it to oneself is worth while, when learning and judgment that constitute it come only with long and thoughtful study. The provision of alternative views of the discipline, one of the student members said, is useful, rather than knowing only the point of view of one faculty member, but this need not be accomplished in a small group. Such a course, another observed, should come late in an academic career.

Committee members exchanged views for some time over the usefulness of small group seminars and attention to the structure and history of a discipline or a capstone course. One Committee member pointed out that the Task Force is recommending that every major develop a course which pulls the major together--something that is a necessity if the graduates are to understand their field.

Professor Howe was asked if the Task Force had considered whether semesters would be better than quarters for providing overviews of a field. He said that it had not and personally believed it was possible to construct the courses within the framework of one quarter.

The Committee adjourned at 8:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota