

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
November 20, 1990**

Present: Thomas Clayton (chair), Michael Handberg, Ken Heller, Robert Jones, Karen Karni, Karen Seashore Louis, Clark Starr, Susan Wick

Guests: Geoff Gorvin (Footnote), Vice Provost Anne Hopkins

1. Report of the Chair

The Morse-Alumni award revisions, Professor Clayton reported, were put in place; the Committee should feel it has accomplished something worthwhile.

2. Discussion of Evaluation of Teaching

The subject next taken up was evaluation of teaching; Professor Clayton began with two comments: (1) CLA sent to all budgeted units a document and called for materials to be returned by December 3; they address the development and evaluation of effectiveness in teaching. Units are expected to define procedures for regular teaching evaluation. It is, he suggested, a major administrative operation with limited content. One of the exhibits includes a form from Indiana University; another was from the School of Management. (2) He received a memo from Gary Engstrand noting that there is a robust--voluminous, in any event--literature on teaching evaluation and that perhaps two or three seminal pieces might be useful to the Committee. The Committee agreed it would like to see such articles but that it would also take up the topic in the meantime.

Committee members discussed various issues related to the evaluation of teaching. One individual reported on a meeting where department chairs had aired views on the matter. Some faculty members feel teaching evaluation will result in a popularity contest in departments and the integrity of teaching will be damaged because faculty will do whatever they can to obtain positive evaluations; others do not find that proposition credible. Others believe it is impossible to measure good teaching and reduce it to numbers; others disagree and believe that there are systematic questions which can isolate useful opinions if the evaluation is conducted correctly. Yet others feel the current system is "corrupt" while others wish for an honors system in collection and use of the evaluations. There was, it was concluded, considerable faculty antipathy to evaluation.

On the positive side, however, the Carlson School of Management has a comprehensive program of evaluation: All classes are evaluated and there are stringent procedural rules guiding the evaluations (including anonymity, which has been a problem in some units). The School asks faculty to sign a release form--over 80% do--so that anyone can see the summaries of the evaluations.

It was reported that the MSA project, which has been planned for some time, is in abeyance because the individual involved has been removed and is suing MSA. The plan had been to mail

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questionnaires to students' homes and request that they be returned by mail--which would have been very expensive and methodologically questionable. Funds, however, had been received from central administration to publish the results--which funds are not being used at present but earmarked for teaching evaluations.

Is a concern, one Committee member inquired, the administration of the forms and the integrity of collection and retention? The collection system must be cleaned up, it was said. Another problem is that forms do not measure teaching very well. The biggest problem--perhaps as a result of the first two--is that the forms are not used for anything.

The forms might nonetheless not be used for anything, another Committee member observed. The University is 20 years behind most other institutions in this respect, it was argued; at most places the issue is whether the process will be controlled by the student organization or controlled by the faculty. Some schools have both. The size of the University presents a problem, in any event.

The question which must be addressed is the purpose of the evaluation, one Committee member observed. According to those who know something about teaching evaluation, if the purpose is to identify the top 15% and the bottom 15%, the evaluations work well. In between the evaluations are less accurate; assessing who is in the 60th percentile and who is in the 45th is subject to variability in the data. For identifying those who have big problems, for purposes of promotion or tenure, they are useful and reasonable. The form used at Minnesota has a reasonable balance of "soft" and "hard" questions so that this purpose can be accomplished.

If the purpose is to differentiate among the great mass of faculty, however, the evaluations will be less successful. It is difficult to discriminate among faculty on teaching ability, in the mid-range, for purposes of merit salary increases, for instance.

If, on the other hand, a purpose of the evaluations is as a diagnostic tool for the faculty member to improve his or her instruction, the existing form is almost useless. Faculty may need to devise specific questions, for their courses, to obtain sensible and useful answers.

Using a checklist instrument, there appeared to be agreement, makes the particular questions almost irrelevant. Written comments, however, can provide much more information.

One college, it was reported, is considering much greater peer (faculty) evaluation of teaching, although the effort and time required in order to obtain an accurate assessment is monumental. Another unit examines syllabi (e.g., how old is it?) and obtains some peer evaluation.

It was also suggested that use of evaluations will, over time, provide a reasonably accurate picture of what is occurring in the classroom--rather than one set of evaluations from a single course.

Another function of evaluations at many universities, it was pointed out, is to help students make choices about courses. The present form at Minnesota does not perform that function at all. The right kinds of questions are not included (e.g., if you had it to do over again, would you take this course?). The evaluation must then address both the course itself as well as the faculty member teaching it--especially in those instances where there are multiple sections of the same course.

Something that has not been done, but which should be, is the evaluation of an instructor as an instructor--review of the evaluations of several courses taught by the same faculty member. Such a collection of evaluations should provide an overview of the work of the instructor. The reason students may take a number of courses from the same faculty member is not because of the courses; it is because the particular faculty member is doing the teaching.

Syllabi are available to students, it was noted, but very few ever look at them. That may be because students are in no position to judge which syllabi represent a good course and which do not.

This entire matter is "spongy," although one issue upon which all seemed to be in agreement is that the existing form is not very useful except possibly for the purpose of identifying "dogs" for the tenure-granting review. And in those instances where only one course per faculty member per year is evaluated, and the faculty member has the right to choose which one, it may not even serve that purpose (although it is also likely that in most departments assistant professors are required to have virtually all courses evaluated).

The purposes of the evaluations should affect how they are conducted. If they are to provide information to students, it was argued, then the students should administer them. The results would have no connection to the decision-making procedures of the University. If there is to be such a connection, then the evaluations must be conducted in a procedurally sound manner--which may destroy their usefulness to students. Trying to do everything with one format may not be possible. Others commented, however, that the two purposes could overlap. Providing information to the faculty member, for the purpose of improving teaching, and providing information to the students, are not incompatible, it was said. Both, however, may not provide adequate or sufficient information for the tenure decision or merit salary increases. Departments, in the latter case, have widely varying practices.

Committee members discussed the kinds of questions which would be useful and the extent to which essays and computer forms could be used.

Professor Clayton said, at this point, he would welcome suggestions from Committee members on how this topic should be pursued and invited notes to him on what to do. There should be agreement, he said, on what it is the Committee wishes to do. It was suggested that information should be gathered from 10 or 12 peer institutions on their practices in evaluation of teaching.

3. Discussion of the Preparation Standards

Professor Clayton next welcomed Vice Provost Anne Hopkins to the meeting to discuss the preparation standards.

Dr. Hopkins began by explaining that shortly after she arrived at the University she began working with the Council of Undergraduate Deans on the common entry point and the high school preparation standards. Much work had been accomplished but more remained to be done. It is on these two items, therefore, that she has worked at greatest length.

Dr. Hopkins distributed to Committee members copies of the brochure being provided to high

school students to inform them about the University's preparation standards. There has previously been considerable confusion about the requirements, especially the second language requirement in CLA. The pamphlet now lays out the requirements clearly.

The CLA language requirement included proficiency testing on entrance and on exit. The preparation standards were adopted by the Board of Regents as "seat time" requirements. CLA had worked with high schools teachers and counselors on its collegiate "graduation requirement." CLA recommends that incoming students complete three years of a foreign language, a standard which will permit students to enter the CLA curriculum without repeating that which they should have learned in high school. Other colleges, however, do not wish to require three years of a second language.

The preparation standards are now in effect, Dr. Hopkins noted; as of October 1 high school students are being admitted for the Fall of 1991 and it is to those students that the standards apply. There remains some public confusion about the requirements, she reported; people do not understand that the standards are part of the admissions decision: If students have not completed the requirements it will adversely affect their likelihood of being admitted to the University. The impact will vary by college of application and by timing of application.

It is also now the case, she told the Committee, that students who have not completed the requirements may or may not be admitted to General College as an alternative. As previously agreed, GC is decreasing its enrollments; it is also reshaping the composition of its student body; its goal is to serve disadvantaged students.

Dr. Hopkins said she is optimistic about the result of the adoption of the standards. A large majority of students had already begun to meet the standards prior to the Fall, 1991, applicants. There are some students, however, who will still not have met the standards; that situation will be evaluated. December 15 is the deadline for priority admissions; it will be useful to see how "full" the colleges are, once this deadline has passed, compared to previous years, given the new preparation requirements.

The Council of Undergraduate Deans (which includes a combination of deans, associate deans, and collegiate directors of undergraduate studies representing all campuses) was asked to decide how deficiencies in preparation requirements for admitted students would be made up. She distributed copies of a document dealing with application of the preparation standards (a copy of which is attached to these minutes).

Does this mean, Dr. Hopkins was asked, that a faculty member should orient a class toward a group of students who may not have met the preparation standard--and thus make it a course below normal university standards? The assumption is, she said, that all the students will enter the class prepared for it. Those who are unable to make up the deficiency in this way will have to take a high-school class equivalent. The scientists involved with the preparation standards, Dr. Hopkins pointed out, argue that high school science is sometimes very weak--which raises another set of questions. Issues raised both in this respect and in connection with transfer students suggest that competence should be considered rather than merely "seat time."

There was brief discussion of the use of competency tests; most existing tests, Dr. Hopkins said, do not test for what the University wishes to see accomplished in high school course work. Competency-

based tests have not been developed in a wide range of subjects. The extensive competency test development in second languages done at the University was also discussed.

Apropos the proposed State University System preparation requirements, Dr. Hopkins said, it would be best if the University and State University System could reach agreement on preparation standards. Such an agreement would have the greatest impact on the State and on the allocation of resources in schools. For purposes of ease of communication, fairness to students, and impact on the educational system, a uniform set of standards would be most beneficial. Reaching such an agreement, however, may be complicated. The State University System, for instance, might be unwilling to give up its arts requirement, something the University does not have. One issue which arises is whether or not a student would have flexibility to pursue more vocationally-oriented courses or non-academic activities, particularly in smaller schools.

Dr. Hopkins agreed that the problems with preparation requirements for transfer students may be difficult. These questions have not been addressed (such as the extent to which preparation standards would apply to transfer students; students who enter community colleges do not have to meet them, for instance.) Another issue, it was noted by a Committee member, is whether or not courses taken at a community college to make up high school deficiencies will be accepted for graduation credit by the University (the only subject this would probably arise in would be mathematics). Courses which are essentially high school courses are not now accepted by the University, Dr. Hopkins pointed out.

Mathematics is treated differently from other subjects because it is much more sequential than other disciplines. Students can, it is said, make much larger leaps in learning in other fields than they can in mathematics. A problem she has been informed of, Dr. Hopkins commented, is that freshman courses in Composition and Rhetoric may not identify students who can and cannot write well; this came as a surprise to her. This is an issue which will need to be explored. The Task Force on Liberal Education, it was noted, will have recommendations about writing and completion of requirements early in the student's career and will presumably address these issues.

Other Discussion Issues Dr. Hopkins said it would be useful for the Committee to identify for her the important issues of undergraduate education. There are so many potential agenda items that some guidance would be of help.

Dr. Hopkins reported, in response to a question about program reviews, that she sits in on the exit interviews with external reviewers. Based on her limited experience to date, her impression is that the external reviews deal very little with undergraduate education (although the self-studies do). She believes it would be appropriate for SCEP to look at program reviews. It would perhaps be useful to itemize those things which it would be most helpful to know about every undergraduate program which is reviewed-- which items could then be addressed by the external reviewers. One Committee member, however, said it was his experience that much of the substance of the reviews is devoted to undergraduate education; whether the right questions are asked is a different matter. Dr. Hopkins agreed that the issues of interest need to be better articulated and examined (amount of faculty time spent teaching undergraduate classes, quality of undergraduate advising, and perhaps a few other central issues); it might be more appropriate for SCEP to raise the questions than for her to do so. Program reviews vary by vice presidential area, another factor which would be need to be considered.

Another issue being discussed by students is the reshaping of CLA; the Agenda for Action, it is feared, may be reflecting the interests of the graduate programs rather than what is needed for undergraduate education. Dr. Hopkins disagreed. Existence of any particular department should make no real difference to an undergraduate if there are faculty members present to teach the appropriate subject matter and support is provided for the major program.

There was discussion of the cultural pluralism requirement (and the shortage of faculty/courses available to meet it). There must be a balance, Dr. Hopkins said, on all curricular issues so that objectives can be accomplished within the resource constraints that exist. The resource question may not have been as carefully considered as it should have been when the cultural pluralism requirement was established, she noted. CLA is currently working a solution to this problem.

Another problem, said one faculty member of the Committee, is that there are no good spaces for students to meet--small places that are reasonably comfortable. The existing space is horrible. Dr. Hopkins said that the issue is recognized and that as buildings are built and remodeled much more student space--study and lounge--is being put in. The extent to which this is a problem varies by building and by quality of space. Dr. Kvavik and the Space Advisory Committee are paying a lot of attention to this issue and the University is trying to get at it. Much remains to be done.

The Committee adjourned at 5:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota