Minutes[*]

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, October 15, 1997
1:00 - 3:00
Room 238 Morrill Hall

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Elayne Donahue, Darwin Hendel, Gordon Hirsch, Thomas Johnson, Robert Leik, Judith Martin, Kathleen Newell, Kevin Nicholson, Craig Swan, William Van Essendelft, Gayle Graham Yates

Regrets: Palmer Rogers, Jessie Jo Roos, Tina Rovick

Absent: Avram Bar-Cohen

Guests: Vice Provost Ann Hill Duin

[In these minutes: distance education, grading policy, student evaluations of faculty]

1.   Distance Education

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Vice Provost Ann Hill Duin to discuss distance education, technology, and related matters. She also extended congratulations to newly-designated Vice Provost Craig Swan, who will serve as an ex officio member of the Committee.

Dr. Duin distributed copies of a draft letter to deans, directors, and department heads containing operating guidelines and procedures for "technology enhanced learning." The purpose of the effort, she told the Committee, was to better coordinate the use of resources and strategies in distance education. She described briefly her activities.

One Committee member inquired if anyone had any sense of the potential of distance education to extend the reach of the University or to make it a better place. Experience with televised courses does not make one optimistic, and many are uncomfortable with the learning that is said to take place. How will this improve anyone's education? Dr. Duin said there has been no University-wide needs assessment study; they are pilot testing in target areas to assess needs.

In terms of the quality of the education, it appears that undergraduate and Masters programs could be delivered completely through distance education, while Ph.D. programs could not. Work with the Graduate School suggests distance education can be a rich experience for students, but it is also faculty-intensive.

Discussion touched on a number of points.

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--   what is new: in the past, delivery was by print, one-way video and two-way audio; now both are
        two-way and more effective. The biggest change is asynchronous delivery on the web, so students
        can work at their own pace, whenever they want to. It is possible to provide both synchronous
        sessions (all students meeting at the same time, on the web) and asynchronous learning.

--   many uses of technology are for students on the campus; technology can also be used with students
        who faculty also see in class as well as students who faculty will never see. There is a continuum
        now, rather than the strict segregation that existed before.

--   there is a question of admission; who are the students? Current students plus their logical
        successors? Or could there be programs with only distance education students? Or will they be
        special students, with others in degree programs? Will programs be certified? Will they be
        blended with degree programs already in place? Distance education could consist of all of these
        things.

--   there is also the question of quality control; not all are entitled to attend the University. This bears
        also on the integrity and quality of courses, as well as whether students are at the appropriate level;
        the University knows about its students when they are admitted, but may not know that in distance
        education courses.

--   the faculty, and this Committee, must be involved and responsible for distance education; up to
        now, said one Committee member, there is great enthusiasm in the administration and apathy or
        lack of awareness among the faculty. Dr. Duin said she finds faculty are excited about the
        prospects and the technology, even allowing for the fact that these are those who have adopted it
        earliest.

--   who is estimating the long-term costs of these initiatives? There is a tendency to vastly
        underestimate the costs at the beginning, and a danger that something will be started that cannot
        later be controlled; who is looking out for this possibility? There are classrooms designed for
        distance education, and they are being continually upgraded; the technical support needed is
        phenomenal.

        Dr. Duin explained that most wise programs or initiatives develop plans and "close to cost"
        budgets. She agreed that people are extremely concerned about costs and correct estimates. ITV
        costs a great deal, to set up a classroom; she and Committee member also discussed projection
        systems and Internet connections to a local classroom, which costs about $15,000 - a definite
        difference and one requiring little technical support.

--   what is the motivation behind expanding distance education, asked one Committee member? It is
        not the faculty, who already have too many students. Why assume the University must jump on
        this train? Dr. Duin explained that the Distance Education Council has met for more than 3 years,
        representing many faculty who have done tremendous work in this area. The motivation is a focus
        on learning (versus instruction): learners want modules, courses, certificates, and programs based
        on their needs, as work and learning are converging. Most important, many want this delivered to
        their homes and work places; working with "cohorts" of online learners, Dr. Duin said, research
        shows they have in most cases a very rich learning experience.

Dr. Duin responded to these questions by saying that future investment should focus on scalable and digital technologies, not on high-cost items. The motivation is for the learners; there will be many students with laptops who will be able to take advantage of technology-enhanced learning (which is not the same as distance education); if it is not needed by the learner, then it is not appropriate.

Another concern, Dr. Swan said, is that outside universities and Microsoft could put the University out of business. Distance education can be abused; it must enhance education. Moreover, the Western States Governors' University is partially a response to expected bulges in enrollment at a time when there is no expected increase in investment in infrastructure, so states are looking for less expensive alternatives. If this kind of education works, Minnesota students will sign up. It was agreed that if Mr. Gates wins if the University cannot offer something that he cannot.

--   one general concern is that digital technology may work to the disadvantage of certain populations (i.e., those from lower SES backgrounds), and may make it more difficult for minority students to obtain higher education.

--   the enthusiasm for digital technology ignores the socialization experiences of an undergraduate, which is not confined to course work.

--   who is coordinating efforts with MNSCU? Dr. Duin said that she is, noted the programs offered in partnership with MNSCU through Rochester, and described additional activities under way. Others noted that there is a legislative mandate to merge libraries so users have access to the total resources and that MNSCU appears to be using ITV to deliver courses among its campuses, not to provide distance education outside the metropolitan area. In order to avoid competition with MNSCU, Dr. Duin said, Dr. Bruininks would like to see more partnerships with them.

After a few additional exchanges, Dr. Duin said she would welcome comments on issues of distance education and on operating guidelines and procedures.

Professor Koch thanked Dr. Duin for coming to the meeting.

2.   Grading Policy

Professor Koch reported that she had been asked to inquire of the Committee if it would be willing to reconsider the uses of the "W" and "O" grades. The "O" is given for outstanding performance in Medical School; other colleges in the Academic Health Center would like to use it for such things as senior papers.

Professor Koch proposed that the "free" W be within each college (rather than just one for the student's entire time at the University). There was concern that with the availability of the one "free" withdrawal in each college, students will transfer among colleges in order to obtain repeated opportunity for the "free" withdrawal.

After very short discussion, during which Committee members found little merit to making these changes in the grading system, it promptly voted unanimously to not revise the system.

3.   Student Evaluation of Faculty

Professor Koch asked Dr. Hendel to report on the status of student evaluations of faculty.

Dr. Hendel recalled that he chairs a subcommittee asked to report to the Committee on questions that students would find useful in evaluation of faculty and the results from which would be available to students. They have done much consulting, and developed a list of 17 questions that would address student needs and help with course selection. There is a website with the questions, but they have not received sufficient commentary. He explained the steps that are being taken to ready a report for the Committee and the Senate.

The Committee also discussed a proposed student press conference about student evaluation of teaching, as well as politicization of the issue generally. Committee members cautioned about allowing the issues to be dealt with inappropriately, or creating expectations about specific outcomes from the process. Mr. Nicholson assured the Committee that the Student Senate Consultative Committee would coordinate activities, and that while some may be impatient, all expect that the issue will be addressed by the Senate.

The idea of student evaluations being made available to students has been treated as an unambiguous good, said one Committee member; are students considering any of the negative implications of publishing the results? Are people being invited to present another side? It was said that students have been made aware of faculty objections, and that it is best for the proposal to go through the Senate, in order to obtain a result acceptable to both students and faculty.

Dr. Hendel, responding to comments about what might happen if no system is approved, said the effort will be successful, and the University will develop a system that does not exist elsewhere and that will be worth the time and effort. Other institutions have made existing information available, not that which would help students in course selection. Professor Koch said she would like to reach agreement on this matter, for the good of students.

4.   Policy Assignments

Professor Koch next established a series of ad hoc subcommittees responsible for review of the remaining Senate educational policies which have not thus far been evaluated (including honors, housing, international education, credits and degrees, obligations of faculty and students with respect to the classroom, faculty responsibility for advising).

It was also agreed that Professor Graham Yates would move forward with the committee to nominate individuals for the award for outstanding contributions to graduate and professional education.

Professor Koch adjourned the meeting at 3:00.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota