

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, October 21, 2009
2:00 – 4:00
238A Morrill Hall**

Present: Cathrine Wambach (chair), Joseph Bartolotta, LeAnn Alstadt, Norman Chervany, Megan Evans, Kaleb Kalinowski, James Leger, Richard McCormick, Robert McMaster, Cody Mikl, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Peggy Root, Paul Siliciano, Erin Sperling, Elaine Tarone, Michael Wade

Absent: Shawn Friedland, Kristen Nelson, Donna Spannaus-Martin

Guests: Vice Provost Arlene Carney, Karen Zentner Bacig (Office of the Provost)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) legitimate absences from final examinations; (2) online course evaluations; (3) peer review of teaching]

1. Legitimate Absences from Final Examinations

Professor Wambach convened the meeting at 2:00 and asked Committee members to look at the policy Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences. The current language of the policy specifically excludes final examinations, and it was agreed the Committee would take up that omission after the review of educational policies was completed. Professor Wambach said those revising the policies were reluctant to simply apply the existing policy to final exams because they are a special case. Any policy must balance the needs of both parties. The Student Ombuds Service hears regularly from students and faculty about absences from final examinations and about when a student can make up an exam. The Committee needs to consider legitimate reasons for absence and when an exam can be made up. (One extreme situation, a story she cannot verify, Professor Wambach related, was that a medical student doing surgery missed a final exam and was not allowed to make it up until the next semester.)

The language of the current policy reads as follows:

1. Students will not be penalized for absence during the semester due to unavoidable or legitimate circumstances. Such circumstances include verified illness, participation in intercollegiate athletic events, subpoenas, jury duty, military service, bereavement, and religious observances. Such circumstances also include activities sponsored by the University if identified by the senior academic officer for the campus or his or her designee as the basis for excused absences. Such circumstances do not include voting in local, state, or national elections.

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

2. It is the responsibility of students to plan their schedules to avoid excessive conflict with course requirements.
3. A student must notify instructors of circumstances identified in (1) as soon as possible and provide documentation to the instructor to verify the reason for the absence. In the event that the University declares a pandemic emergency (e.g., flu), the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost or designee may waive the requirement that students are required to have documentation from a physician for illness.
4. If a student is absent due to circumstances identified in (1) and has complied with the notification requirement, the instructor may not penalize the student and must provide reasonable and timely accommodation or opportunity to make up exams or other course requirements that have an impact on the course grade.
5. The authority to determine what constitutes an excusable bereavement absence and religious observance rests with the Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs and Provost.
6. Instructors are encouraged to accommodate students who wish to participate in party caucuses, pursuant to Board of Regents resolution [See <http://www1.umn.edu/regents/minutes/2005/december/board.pdf>, p. 147]
7. This policy does not apply to final examinations.
8. Colleges and academic units may establish specific criteria for notice and completion of work to implement this policy.

Ms. Phillips said that the language in #1 covered what a policy should cover: events outside the student's control, except for intercollegiate athletic competition, events in which are not supposed to occur during study day and finals week. She also suggested that there might be an appeals process, in the case of final exams, for when a student believes the instructor is being unfair.

Professor Wambach said she has heard from faculty members about students who were absent, and believed they had a legitimate absence, but the faculty member did not agree—and it would take several hours to prepare a new final exam. Faculty put a lot of time into final examinations so they need to be sure that a student's absence is legitimate and that they will be at the exam barring a catastrophe.

There will always be some gray areas, Professor Chervany said. If the policy allows the faculty member to make the decision about the legitimacy of the reason for the absence, there needs to be a mechanism for appeal. The appeal and decision needs to occur with 24-48-72 hours, because making the student wait until the next semester is unconscionable.

Professor Ng asked whether, if a student is hospitalized (for example), and the only work left for the course is the final examination, is it permissible to use the "I" to give an incomplete? Technically, since the grading policy requires a written agreement to give an I. Vice Provost McMaster, however, said he thought it was within the spirit of the grading policy: The student said he or she must go to the hospital and the faculty member says he or she will give the student an I. It is

still important that something be in writing about what is expected to happen, Professor Wambach said, but this policy should perhaps mention use of the I as a possibility.

Professor Siliciano recited two different instances that can arise. A student may say that he or she got tickets to Brazil and needs to leave the country early; his response is that he or she needs to take the final when it is offered. A student may need to start an internship and ask to take the final early, a request he would consider legitimate.

Professor Wambach asked Vice Provost McMaster his views, and whether there should be a timeline. Dr. McMaster said that while he worried about creating a rule for the rare case, when it does happen, it is a problem so it probably will help to have a rule. What about a student who missed the final but could take it the next day, but the instructor says "no" and that the student must wait, Professor Leger asked? There needs to be a fast appeal and decision, Ms. Phillips said, agreeing with Professor Chervany, and should not require the involvement of a lot of people or committees. It should perhaps be handled within the college, Professor Root suggested. The appeal is to protect the student from instructors who are not being fair, Ms. Phillips said; most instructors will be fair, and this is the "jerk" clause. It also protects instructors against students pushing in the gray areas, Professor Chervany said.

Mr. Mikl asked what #3 meant. If someone is sick, Professor Wambach explained, they can notify an instructor in advance that they will be unable to attend an upcoming class. In the case of a car accident, obviously a student cannot email in advance, but the policy says the student is expected to notify the instructor as soon as possible. In the case of an emergency, the student may not be in a position to let the instructor know for a week.

Ms. Evans asked if participation in a University-sponsored activity was a legitimate excuse from a final exam. It is not, Professor Wambach said, and such events are prohibited during study day and finals week.

Vice Provost McMaster suggested language that would give the instructor and student some flexibility (e.g., allow the student to be graded on the work up to the final). Or the grade as it stood, even with a zero on the final, can go on the record and be changed later. What about students who are leaving for study abroad, or leaving for the summer for an internship, Professors McCormick and Wambach asked?

Professor Chervany suggested that #4 can provide for reasonable and timely accommodation that is acceptable to both. If it is not, the student can follow the procedure in the college. It would help to define what is timely and acceptable, and it cannot be the faculty member saying "to heck with you" or the student demanding a makeup final on Tuesday afternoon. He added that he did not believe final examinations should be singled out as the only disagreement about absences that could be brought through (appealed to) the college mechanism for review.

In the Academic Health Center in some cases, Professor Root pointed out, a student must demonstrate competence before he or she can proceed to the next course. And AHC students will consider it unfair if another student receives more time to study. Professor Siliciano agreed that the student and instructor could decide to dispense with the final, or if no accommodation is possible, base it on the prior work. Professor Wambach pointed out that the grading policy prohibits offering an

option to one student that is not available to all students in a class, and some students could argue that their grade was negatively affected by the final exam and want it eliminated.

Professor Wambach said she was concerned that #1 in the current policy includes items that would not be a legitimate reason to miss a final examination (athletics or activities sponsored by the University), but otherwise it could apply to finals as well as other absences. She agreed with other Committee members that solutions must be reasonable and timely and mutually agreeable, and if there is no agreement, a college office should mediate.

Mr. Bartolotta commented that the Committee first talked about something that came up suddenly that prevented a student from taking a final exam, but other parts of #1 address activities that one can or will know about in advance (e.g., a burst appendix versus jury duty). Which is the Committee's concern, something sudden or a larger issue? In the case of finals, the absence is legitimate if it is unpredictable at the time, Professor Wambach said. If something comes along, Ms. Phillips said, the student should talk to the instructor, because the policy does not speak only to reasons that come up suddenly.

Vice Provost McMaster said he was worried about the "mutually acceptable" suggestion from Professor Chervany. He worries, he said, about students who are recalcitrant, and the faculty member should have the right of final decision. That is where the adjudication mechanism comes in, Professor Chervany said.

On the basis of the discussion, the Committee agreed on a set of changes to the current policy in order to make it applicable to final examinations as well.

2. Online Course Evaluations

Professor Wambach now returned to a topic that has recurred in Committee conversations over the last several years. She noted that the Committee has debated the use of online course evaluations but never resolved, nor has it addressed the question whether it is permissible for an instructor to give incentives to students to complete an online evaluation. In the Academic Health Center, student grades can be withheld unless a student signs into the course evaluation site (but the student may choose not to do an evaluation); that option, however, is not technically possible to offer to the entire University.

The question today, Professor Wambach said, is whether instructors should be permitted to offer incentives to complete an online evaluation form.

Professor McCormick wondered if it mattered what the incentives are. He said this Committee has been through many discussions about online evaluations and the worry is about the low participation rate and resultant bad data. He said he believed faculty would be more willing to use an online SRT form if the response rate were higher. Do some colleges use an online form? Some instructors do, Ms. Phillips said.

When instructors wanted to offer extra points for completing the online evaluation, Dr. Carney said, they needed the names of students who had completed the form. That information has been released; she and Dr. Bacig brought this practice to the attention of Vice Provost McMaster and said

they had a problem with it. While the instructor will not know who wrote what on the forms, they would know who completed the evaluation (BEFORE they turned in their grades).

In survey methodology, Mr. Bartolotta reported, incentives do not work well and can affect the results. This situation presented a dilemma, however, Dr. Carney responded, because the instructor had promised the extra points. And the offer was on the syllabus, Dr. Bacig added. This is an important issue but they had to let the current practice go, Dr. Carney said, but it would be helpful if the Committee were to provide language. She noted that the Academic Health Center does not use the University system but has instead contracted with CourseEval, and the response rate for professional students is high. She said she did not know how easy it would be to incorporate a change in the system but it is not possible now because the Office for Information Technology does not have the staff. If the Committee believes a change is important, it could convey its view to OIT. Ms. Phillips said it would be helpful to have a financial analysis of the cost of the change versus the cost of continuing to use paper SRT forms.

Professor Chervany asked if there is any evidence about how much the response rate would increase by adding incentives or sanctions for completing the online form. If it would increase the rate from 20% to 25%, when the paper response rate is 80%, it would not be worth it. Unless a change can lead to a response rate equal to that achieved with paper forms, it should not be made. Dr. Carney said she would want to pick a group of classes and do a study to see if a change would make a difference. Professor Chervany speculated that unless an online evaluation is done in class, it will have a lower response rate, and the online forms require a reliable technology. The Crookston and Rochester campuses use online evaluations successfully, Dr. Carney reported. Are there incentives at Crookston, Professor Wade asked? There are not, Dr. Bacig said; students bring their laptops to class. That isn't feasible to require on the other campuses because students may not own a laptop (students are required to have a laptop Crookston).

Moreover, Dr. Carney pointed out again, every semester Dr. Bacig hears from students who realize they evaluated the wrong professor when they filled out the online forms. Is she saying that the data from the online evaluations are flawed, Professor Ng asked? Some may be, Dr. Carney said, but not all. And sometimes students reverse the scale, so will write a comment that this is the best professor he or she has ever had—and then give the person the lowest possible numeric score. Professor Root reported that the response rate for online evaluations in her college (Veterinary Medicine) is not good, which was not true when they used paper forms. She said she also routinely receives evaluations for courses she didn't teach.

Professor McCormick commented that undergraduates are not professional students, and the Academic Health Center has better response rates to its online evaluations than the rest of the campus does with paper forms. If the University is to use online evaluations, that problem must be solved.

Professor Chervany said that if the University wants to use electronic evaluations, which do reduce cost, they have to be done in the classroom. If it wants to use online evaluations, they could produce bad data, so instructors should be told to use them at their own peril. The best is electronic, in class.

Professor Wambach asked what the difference is between faculty receiving a list of those who completed online evaluations and being at the class the day students fill out paper forms. They do not

give extra credit to students who fill out the paper form in class, Dr. Carney said, and faculty members are unlikely to know all the students in a large class, where attendance is not typically taken.

Ms. Alstadt said that in night classes, most students do not bring laptops because they don't want to haul them around, so electronic evaluations might not work as well. The most effective way to get students to do the online evaluations is to offer extra credit for logging in. That is motivating students.

Professor Leger said he believed there were two separate issues to discuss. First, Dr. Carney has stated the most significant problem with rewarding students for participation is anonymity (the instructor must know who filled out the form in order to give extra credit, compromising student anonymity.) Second, what are possible ways to increase the student response rate to on-line surveys? He noted that the first issue significantly restricts what can be considered as solutions to the second.

Professor Ng asked if instructors are allowed to give incentives for filling out the paper forms in class. She answered her own question; they are not. Just because a form is electronic rather than paper does not make it right to give extra credit to complete it.

Professor McCormick said that incentives that involve grade calculations compromise anonymity and should not be allowed.

Dr. Carney said that her office needs to send out something quickly for spring semester, if the Committee recommends that extra credit incentives for filling out online evaluations are not to be permitted. Sending it now will be people time to take language off their syllabi. The ban would apply to paper as well as online evaluations, Professor Wambach said.

Professor Root asked how long the online forms are available to undergraduates after a course is finished (two weeks). That responds to the problem of carrying a laptop, she said. The response rate is still low, Dr. Carney said. Students receive three reminders, Dr. Bacig added, so for five courses, a student would receive 15 reminders at the end of the semester. The last 15 minutes in class is a lot different from two weeks of Internet access at home, Ms. Alstadt said; filling out the rating form online takes from the student's own time versus in-class time for the paper forms.

The Committee voted unanimously to ban incentives for completing online student rating forms.

Professor Wambach then reported that she and Dr. Carney attended a conference at Purdue, where they learned that some classes have better online response rates. A very small number, Dr. Carney amplified, and it came in a pilot study. Many institutions have decided to mandate online evaluations and it was a novel concept to some that a faculty governance body would discuss the issue. Professor Wambach said she wondered if a culture of using online forms develops over time; Dr. Carney said she has heard from places that are considered successful that their response rates are still low, although higher from professional and graduate students.

Professor Wade asked if students are encouraged to provide information. They are, Dr. Carney said; they are told that the information will be used in promotion, tenure, and merit decisions and also to improve the course the next time it is taught. Professor Wade suggested an ad campaign,

to the effect that since tuition is going up 10%, students should fill out the forms and have their say. They have not done that, Dr. Carney said, and would use focus groups to find out what would encourage students to complete the forms. Students she has communicated with are glad to know the results are used, but she remains concerned about a 40% response rate if the data are to be used in personnel decisions and serve as the primary information about teaching effectiveness.

3. Peer Review of Teaching

Professor Wambach turned to Vice Provost Carney and Dr. Bacig to inform the Committee about recommendations on peer review of teaching.

Vice Provost Carney related that about two years ago she assembled a committee composed primarily of members of the Academy of Distinguished Teachers from across the campus, graduate and undergraduate, to develop recommendations on peer-review of teaching. It is clear from the files that in terms of the evaluation of teaching effectiveness, most of the emphasis is on the student-rating-of-teaching (SRT) numbers. The policy approved by the Faculty Senate requires peer review, but little is done. A few units have classroom observation but the rest is spotty. She brought together this group of experts and charged it to develop a set of best practices in the peer review of teaching. The recommendations are not mandatory.

Dr. Bacig said they believed that if tools were provided, that would help, and she reviewed the rubrics the committee developed, which can be used for both formative and summative purposes. They are not etched in stone, she said, and can be tweaked. They see them as a foundation that can be built upon, and the rubrics will be made available in MS Word. The idea is to have more peer review than now occurs.

Beyond classroom observation there should also be things like syllabi review, Dr. Carney said (e.g., it doesn't provide enough information or it is too ambitious).

Professor Siliciano said he liked this idea very much and thought it should have more teeth. He also urged that the scales on the rubrics have the same number of points on the evaluation scale as the SRT forms so that the data are similar. Evaluators spend a lot of time on evaluation; how do they ensure consistency? There was a lot of discussion on that point, Dr. Bacig said, and it goes to the question of how to balance doing a good job of peer review versus not doing it at all. They wanted to recommend something people would use, something that was not overly burdensome.

They are willing to partner with the Center for Teaching and Learning to put information online, Dr. Carney said, and could also provide workshops. They would not, however, like to see the same two people in a department doing the peer review for everyone. There could be mentors if a department uses them.

How would the peer reviewers be chosen in the department, Ms. Alstadt asked? Would they have achieved tenure? They would, Dr. Carney said. Probationary faculty would be reviewed by associate professors and professors with tenure. Sometimes it might be Academy members, sometimes it might be the department chair. She said that she did, when she served as department chair, and she also reviewed every syllabus every semester.

The recommendations have a strong personnel focus, for promotion and tenure, Ms. Phillips commented. And merit decisions, Dr. Carney said, and for formative assistance, Dr. Bacig added. And to help people out of a slump, Ms. Phillips said. This would be a significant amount of work for a department, she pointed out, but the payback would be high for probationary faculty members. The payback would diminish over time, and she said she hoped this would not require the work of four Academy members every term. Dr. Carney said she expects that will depend on the culture of the department. The document says that peer review should take place every year, Ms. Phillips noted, but it could be that best practices might differ. Dr. Carney said that in their view, if departments adopted even a portion of what is recommended, the situation will be better than it is now.

About who will do the peer review, Professor Tarone said she would want the group that prepared the report to evaluate her, or she would like to be evaluated by people from the Center for Teaching and Learning. It could be a problem if the wrong person evaluates faculty member, and there might be different views about what good teaching is, so there should be thought given to who does the review. That is part of the peer-review issue, Dr. Carney agreed. The policy says it is to be done. Peer review is called for in some departmental 7.12 statements. The recommendations do not anywhere say who should do the review, and it is a great question.

Professor Root reported that she and a tenured associate professor went through peer review and found it an excellent exercise. It made her think about what she wanted to know about and students were excited that she took the time to do it. It was a very positive experience and changed the environment. Its effects will depend on how a department sets up the process. In her case, they were self-selected and could say "no." But the idea is that everyone will be reviewed over time.

Ultimately it is the chair's responsibility to identify who will do the peer reviewing, Dr. Carney said. She said they have been vigilant about the 7.12 statements; some proposed putting the burden of peer review on the probationary faculty. They have said that is not acceptable and that is the responsibility of the chair to see that it is done. Professor McCormick asked if the reviews seem to occur at a moment of panic. Typically they are in the fall of the decision year, Dr. Carney said; that is bad, Professor McCormick responded. Dr. Carney agreed. Some departments have a schedule but a lot of them have no peer review or they do it very late in the probationary period. Some departments do peer review but do not put the results in the dossier.

What happens to the report, Professor Chervany asked? The larger question is, what happened to peer review? He said he liked the report and commented that his college does not do a lot of peer review. Few do, Dr. Carney said. The key people will be department chairs. It will help that she and Dr. Bacig run a year-long program for new chairs; this report will now be a part of it. There remains an issue with non-new chairs, but she has a good relationship with the many chairs who have gone through the program.

Dr. Carney said she intends to send the report to all faculty members. Some will delete it and some will comment on it, but she said many are thinking about this issue because departments have just redone their 7.12 statements. She said she would also like to get a few chairs to do a pilot project and receive feedback on what worked and what did not. She would also want to ask those who go through peer review if they were helped by the process. She said she did not want to see the report just dropped.

Professor Chervany said he could see asking two or three department chairs in his college to be part of a pilot project. Will Dr. Carney pursue the chairs or should Committee members? Dr. Carney said it would be wonderful if Committee members would be ambassadors for the report and getting departments to participate in a pilot. She said she will also bring the report to the Council of Faculty Associate Deans.

Ms. Phillips said that if part of the goal is to improve teaching at the University, there needs to be something similar for other groups that do a lot of teaching, such as P&A staff. Dr. Carney agreed that would be essential. They just started with the faculty.

Professor Wambach said there has been a lot of progress on this front in the last few years. An expert on student evaluation told the Committee that the earlier Student Evaluation of Teaching was "a piece of crap" that asked students inappropriate questions, so there are much more appropriate questions on the SRT form. Now this peer-review report has been prepared provides ways for faculty to evaluate the expertise of their peers. The only missing piece is administrative elements, such as instructors who don't get grades in. Students don't know about that, colleagues may not know about it, but the chair and department staff do—and it drives them crazy. But the University has done very well on the rest of the process and should congratulate itself.

Faculty participation has been outstanding, Dr. Carney said, and the report would not have happened without the dedication and cooperation of the faculty. She said she very much appreciates the help. She said the report would be sent to all campuses.

Professor Wade said that the annual review form that chairs must fill out and send to the dean and Provost should perhaps include something about annual reviews of teaching. Dr. Carney said that is her next big project: Once the 7.12 statements are done, she would like to overhaul the annual review process, because she believes much in it is not helpful.

Messrs. Mikl and Kalinowski said that the students were also glad to see this report.

Vice Provost Carney said that this will not be a great university unless it has great teaching. As the Provost has pointed out, this is not a research institute, it is a public research university, which includes strong teaching.

Professor Wambach adjourned the meeting at 3:50.

-- Gary Engstrand