

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, October 18, 1995
1:15 - 3:00
Room 626 Campus Club

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Avram Bar-Cohen, Anita Cholewa, Elayne Donahue, Gayle Graham Yates, Jeffrey Larsen, Judith Martin, Glenn Merkel, Ryan Nilsen, Mark Schuller

Regrets: Thomas Johnson

Absent: Paul Cleary, Megan Gunnar, Darwin Hendel, Robert Johnson, Helen Phin, William Van Essendelft

Guests: Vice Provost Louise Mirrer (Arts, Sciences and Engineering); Acting Vice President and Acting Dean Mark Brenner & Provost W. Phillips Shively; Associate Dean Robert Leik (Graduate School)

[In these minutes: Semesters and the Council on Liberal Education; semester conversion standards; the idea of the signature profile/academic core/favored departments]

1. Discussion with Vice Provost Louise Mirrer

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 1:00 and welcomed Vice Provost Louise Mirrer, who will also serve as chair of the Council on Liberal Education (hereinafter CLE).

Dr. Mirrer began by noting that there are two major issues on the CLE agenda: semester conversion (issues with respect to CLE must be resolved no later than the end of winter quarter because college curricula depend on CLE requirements) and the writing requirement. She said they want to do them together so that the new semester configuration would include a writing requirement.

There are a number of course proposals pending to meet CLE requirements; those will be dealt with at the first meeting. There will be a sunset on new proposals, however; CLE will not accept any quarter-based course proposals after winter quarter. They will, however, begin to accept semester course proposals to meet CLE requirements.

Dr. Mirrer said she liked the diversified core and the theme courses; they have been a model for a number of other institutions. It would be a mistake to radically revise the liberal education requirements, she told the Committee; they are too new, and it would be demoralizing to people who used the liberal education framework to develop new courses. All courses approved by CLE must be reviewed every 3-5 years; this is not the time to review and do away with the core or the themes.

*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 reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate or Assembly, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

There will have to be a scaling back of the number of courses and the number of credits per course will have to be rethought. At present each course is four or five credits; it may be appropriate to think in terms of three-credit courses. The number of courses in the core may have to be reduced from ten to perhaps seven and the theme courses from six to perhaps four; the total CLE requirement would be about 28% of the package a student needs to graduate, which is about what it is now.

Asked if she had thought about the number of credits per class, Dr. Mirrer said she believed it makes sense to think about uniformity. Writing intensive courses should probably be more than three credits; there was a proposal to make all CLE courses writing-enhanced, but it is hard to see how that could be done within a three-credit module.

Asked how she saw SCEP and CLE working together, Dr. Mirrer said it would be useful if she could report at the first CLE meeting the position SCEP had taken; that could be a starting point for their discussions. She said she believes in a lot of consultation and it would be a mistake to duplicate efforts; she does not want CLE to come up with plans that do not reflect the decisions of other bodies.

In response to a question about elimination of "double-dipping" (taking core courses that also fulfill a theme requirement), Dr. Mirrer said she is looking at the effect of double-dipping. It may be that a course could fulfill two requirements and that the students would pick which requirement to apply their program. She said there would be no decision without a careful review of the data. She also said she wished to meet with faculty from engineering fields, where the problem of the number of course demands may be among the greatest.

How would a year-long freshman orientation, for credit, fit into the CLE requirements, one Committee member asked? Dr. Mirrer said it would be a mistake to make it year-long; one semester should be sufficient time for students to bond and to get their feet wet in the discipline. They should not be touchy-feely sessions. She said she would insist that they be built into the CLE requirements; if not, students would see them as an impediment. The courses could be team-taught, with faculty from the academic units and staff from student affairs, and could perhaps count as one of the theme requirements. If they are established, she said, they would be offered beginning fall, 1999.

Dr. Mirrer said CLE would not review existing courses for semesters. Those already approved would be sent back to colleges and departments for renovation; the units could then decide to revise them or eliminate them. It was recalled that Professor Bloomfield said, last spring, that it was the hope of CLE that courses submitted would be more than mild transformation of existing courses; will CLE encourage that for the semester courses as well? It is too soon for radical changes in what has been put in place, she said, but units should take the opportunity to evaluate courses to decide if they are what was expected. But they are not expecting departments to start from scratch again; people put a lot of effort into the course proposals, and it would not be fair to expect them to be changed again.

There is also the reality, added one Committee member, that with no funds for faculty time for course renovation, most courses will be stretched out but not changed. Dr. Mirrer said she believed there will be some funds available, at least for writing-enhanced courses, and the Committee should speak on the subject if it wishes. She said the funds would not come from cutting other programs and there is recognition the conversion will be expensive.

Will there be caps on the number of CLE courses a department can offer? Some departments offer many while some offer very few. At one of her first meetings in the provost's office, Dr. Mirrer said, there was discussion about limiting the number of courses a department can offer; it is reasonable to try to arrive at a system of some proportionate limits. It makes no sense to create a CLE course that has no intellectual grounding and that is intended only to generate tuition.

Dr. Mirrer related, in response to a question, that GC courses would meet CLE requirements in the same way as all other CLE-approved courses. If CLE approves a course, it will be approved for all students. Some GC CLE courses were rumoredly not approved for non-GC students, but that distinction was never documented and has been eliminated. If GC chooses or needs to limit enrollment in its courses to GC students, that is up to GC.

There is a thorny problem to be addressed, she agreed, in the case of students who take a course (at another institution) nearly identical to a CLE course at Minnesota, but who are not allowed CLE credit for it. She said she has not been in office long enough to think about the problem, but promised to do so; she said it had to be dealt with sensitively, given the large number of transfer students who come to the University.

Professors Koch and Mirrer, along with Committee members, agreed that there should be continuing communication between SCEP and CLE; thought would be given to ex officio memberships crossing both groups. Professor Koch thanked Dr. Mirrer for joining the meeting.

2. Semester Conversion Standards

The Committee then briefly returned to the issues of semester conversion. Professor Koch distributed several alternative policy provisions relating to the issue of full- and part-time students, tuition, and course credits. A number of points were made in the discussion.

- One department has been assuming there will be 16-credit semesters; the intent is that students take four courses for four credits for four years. That raised the question: should SCEP say what number of credits should be standard, or leave that up to departments?
- If the standard credit module is four credits, that will reduce curricular flexibility.
- Some department chairs have expressed vehement views that the standard module **MUST** be three credits in order to permit their majors to take the course work they need; otherwise they simply will be forced out of business.
- The three-credit module is more consistent with liberal education requirements in that it permits greater breadth of knowledge; that, however, is an argument that would lead right back to the quarter system.
- The Committee has debated part-time and full-time student status; if the University is to retain part-time students, the three-credit module will offer more flexibility for them. Some courses cannot be three credits, but if it is the average or norm, it will offer more flexibility.

- It might be better to think in terms of courses per term rather than credits; faculty are trying to accomplish roughly the same thing per course. The difficulty is that with the change, the number of courses students take will be reduced by one-third; if the standard module is four credits, breadth will be greatly reduced.
- One hears that students will not take more than four courses per semester, no matter how many credits they are; one also hears that students will take five courses.
- The decision about the standard credit module has NOT been made. There are two issues before SCEP: should it recommend a standard, and if so, what should it be? The Committee definitely should take a position; it should make the policy recommendation.
- The Committee should work with the semester conversion committee; the work of this Committee is advisory.

It was agreed that more information was needed about the status of University College/CEE.

3. Discussion about "Favored Departments"/the "Academic Core"/the "Signature Profile"

Professor Koch next welcomed Acting Vice President Brenner and Provost Shively to the meeting to talk about the three phrases that have been tossed about in conversation over the last several weeks and months: favored departments, academic core, and signature profile.

Provost Shively began by noting that these discussions went at least as far back as the Campbell Committee in the mid-1980s; there have been recurring attempts to define what the University is about. This is one of the most comprehensive, multi-tasked institutions around. To talk about the core of the entire institution, including all campuses, is not be more than saying the University educates people and serves the state; anything more specific eliminates something. The sense of the Campbell Committee was that the basic parts of the University (as opposed to the professional and applied fields) had fallen into disrepair and needed help; it recommended the University reallocate funds to CLA, IT, and CBS.

Now the administration is interested in a "profile" or "footprint," which is difficult to do for the institution as a whole; one could probably do it for a campus or a provostal unit. For Arts, Sciences, and Engineering, for example, one could say that at the core this is an urban, land grant research university; all of the things it does--specialized undergraduate education, graduate education, research, the spin-offs of research--are related to research. If the University is not first-rate in research, then it will be mediocre in everything it does. So as a first requirement, AS&E requires maintenance of a high quality research faculty.

This is a also a land grant research university; as such, it serves undergraduates and the community, applying the activities of its research faculty to education and to the state.

From a statement of these two basic requirements for AS&E, one can elicit ideas of how to organize departments and research operations, where money should be allocated, and answer strategic questions based on advancing that profile. To start from the point of evaluating which departments are

going to get what positions degenerates into an argument about who's in the core and who is not.

Dr. Brenner said he wanted to reinforce the idea that one exciting aspect of this University is its breadth; the range of programs on the Twin Cities campus is unique. Equally exciting, at the graduate level, is that the programs are without barriers; faculty can more easily work together here, across programs and with students, than at other institutions.

There has recently been a significant report by the National Research Council (NRC) rating the quality of graduate programs. The University has 165 programs; the NRC looked nationally at 41 fields, of which Minnesota had programs in 38. The University has a number of other programs that would also be highly ranked if the fields had been evaluated. These are basically AS&E programs, Dr. Shively observed, and it is unfortunate that there is no systematic way to evaluate other programs as well.

One thing these rankings allow is a benchmarking of the University's own assessment process, Dr. Brenner observed, and generally the results are consistent.

There is some concern that the results represent the status of four years ago, when the evaluations were actually conducted, said one Committee member, and with a lag in information, the results could actually be six or seven years old. In those instances where there has been slippage, has it been stopped? Have programs continued to decline?

Dr. Brenner said the Graduate School has taken seriously its charge to turn over management of programs to the programs and to provide more data and assessment information that can be shared with all, as well as used to monitor program quality. They are doing that, and will have one-page summary sheets for all programs, including indicators.

He then distributed to Committee members a handout with several tables of information about the NRC rankings; he noted that each program (not department) is ranked on the quality of the faculty in the program (on a scale of 0-5). One table outlined the score of each program and its rank. Drs. Brenner and Shively then made several points about the data and meaning of the numbers.

They looked at the number of scores above 3.5 for all the institutions; Berkeley ranked first with 36 programs scored at or above 3.5; Minnesota was 20th, with 18 such scores. They are doing the same thing for the 1982 NRC data; although it is not complete, his sense is that they will show the University has slipped. Dr. Shively noted that serious graduate students should only consider going to programs that scored 3.7 or 3.8 or better.

One does not want to overplay the meaning of these data, Dr. Brenner told the Committee, but outstanding programs are one aspect of an institution's signature, and he repeated that there are a number of other programs that were not evaluated that must also be considered. Valuable as these data are, observed one Committee member, they reflect the traditional disciplines and ways of furthering knowledge; in ten years, the important areas may be in between disciplines.

Another problem is that none of the professional schools or agriculture are included, Dr. Shively pointed out; these data only cover one-third of the campus. No other studies are done as systematically as this one, so one cannot be as certain about the rankings in other fields. Moreover, one should note that

TWO important questions are asked in this study: the quality of the faculty, and the quality of the program; most faculty know of places that have tremendous scholars but low program quality for graduate instruction while others do a tremendous job of adding value for graduate students but may not have as outstanding scholars.

One need not dwell on these data, Dr. Brenner said, but they are an important element that should be used in any discussion of a signature. There are different levels of attributes as well; these analyses can be conducted at the institutional level, by areas, or by program.

The signature is also more than just fields. The biggest improvement in the University's signature, Dr. Shively maintained, is in the treatment of undergraduates on the Twin Cities campus; that is an important part of the signature. The quality of the research faculty is a quintessential element, but it does not mean anything taken alone.

The cheapest way to maintain excellence, Dr. Shively observed, is to keep excellent what is already excellent. But if that is the ONLY strategy, it will fail, because there are stochastic shocks to the system and there will be declines. The University must both maintain good departments as well as identify where to put money to promote excellence; it has not been doing as well at the latter.

Dr. Shively noted that in AS&E, there are two clusters of programs that were scored at 3.7 or above (an engineering cluster and a social science cluster). There was discussion about movement within the rankings, and how German moved most dramatically in this respect.

One critical point in this is that a high ranking for a department depends on the senior faculty; in one case, eight senior faculty will be leaving within three years; how will it maintain itself when the entire core leaves? That is true in a number of instances.

Asked how significant the scores are, Dr. Brenner said one has to look at each program, at what is statistically significant, and not draw conclusions too quickly. In some areas, the University is not as improved as it would like to be. In areas where there are 160 or 180 programs, whether one is 20th or 30th is probably not too important. One Committee member observed that that is not a place a lot of students would seek out for serious study, but it is close. The University should not hide from that, Dr. Brenner said. The University is doing well in recruiting for graduate students, but in some areas it is not getting the best ones.

Asked what institutional funding would be required to move a program from the top 25 to the top 10, Dr. Shively said it would vary by field. Moving from number five to number one would be VERY expensive. This is a subject they would like to discuss, Dr. Brenner said; they are working with the planning office and will examine each program area to see how they relate to the University investments that have been made. The results will be provided to the Committee. "What will it take to get there" is an important question.

One Committee member cautioned that much is left out of these results and that sometimes the University does things because of wounded pride. Equally of concern should be how students feel about the University, whether they liked it here, and focus on what they need as well as getting into the top 10. Dr. Shively agreed that this is just one thing that needs work, and that there are a lot of fronts that need

working on all at once.

Both Dr. Brenner and Dr. Shively were at a loss to explain any use of the term "favored departments." The "academic core" is AS&E, in large part, Dr. Shively said; it consists of basic fields and provides professional schools with students. Historically, there have not been favored departments; the arts, sciences, and engineering core received money because it had been underfunded. But investments SHOULD be focused, something the University has not done well in the past. If such investments were to be made, they would probably show up not only in the strong departments--which must be kept strong--but in "making bets" on other departments in order to strengthen them.

Most graduate students are probably here because of the quality of the faculty. What does one say when a significant number of the undergraduates are here because it is close and cheap? The University has been too quiet about the innovations and changes it has made in the undergraduate experience in the last few years, Dr. Brenner maintained. Ten years ago what undergraduates received was somewhat shoddy, Dr. Shively added; one student at the time observed that she was paying Target level tuition and receiving a Target education. The University has come a long way since then, and this is the major accomplishment of the last several years.

Dr. Shively then commented, on the subject of semesters, that SCEP should work with the semester advisory committee; he said he was worried that there appears to be a race to nail things down. Faculty and senate committees are basic to any curricular decisions, but this is a complex issue that needs to be made to work, and will require some time for discussion.

For example, on the issue of the three- or four-credit module, if the three-credit module is standard, and since courses can only be offered over two periods (semesters) rather than three (quarters), if all four-credit courses become three-credit courses, unless the range of courses is restricted or new faculty hired, faculty will have to teach three courses one semester and two the next. The decisions will be partly intellectual and partly logistical.

The Committee then discussed what role University College would play, the nature of students it would serve, the registration system, and so on. There will be a single registration system. Integration of staffing has yet to be worked out. Dr. Shively said that the opportunities for overload teaching will not disappear.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota