

Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP)
May 8, 2019
Minutes of the Meeting

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 represent the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration or the Board of Regents.

[**In these minutes:** Updates; Liberal Education Update; Evaluation of Teaching; Absence Notes from Boynton Health]

PRESENT: Jennifer Goodnough (chair), Toni Abts, Nicola Alexander, Michael Anderson, Julia Brokaw, Elaine Darst, Dan Delaney, Stacy Doepner-Hove, Gayle Golden, Jude Goossens, Bob McMaster, Ken Leopold, Brian Sick, Nevin Young

REGRETS: Scott Lanyon, Robert Poch, Emily Shilts, Sophia Vrba

ABSENT: Yan Liang, Keith Mayes

GUESTS: Ole Gram, assistant vice provost, Faculty and Academic Affairs; David Langley, education program specialist, Center for Educational Innovation; Stephanie Klein, assistant director and educational services manager, Office of Measurement Services; Carl Anderson, director and chief health officer, Boynton Health; Jennifer Krzmarzick, chief medical officer, Boynton Health; Jennifer Reckner, chief of staff, Office of Undergraduate Education

OTHERS: Jessica Kuecker Grotjohn, assistant to the vice provost, Office of Undergraduate Education; Katie Russell, assistant to the vice provost, Office of Undergraduate Education; Leslie Schiff, associate dean for University curriculum, Office of Undergraduate Education; Karen Starry, assistant to the vice provost and dean, Graduate Education; Stacey Tidball, director, Compliance and Continuity, Academic Support Resources

1. Updates

Jennifer Goodnough, chair, called the meeting to order and made the following announcements:

- The Administrative Policy: *Academic Calendars* was approved at the May 2, 2019 meeting of the Faculty Senate with no issues.
- Goodnough will serve on the search committee for the new provost.
- Goodnough was interviewed for an Access U: Beyond the Cities article on policy related to presentation of political ideas by faculty in the classroom. The article was distributed to the committee. Gayle Golden clarified that Access U is a project in one of her classes, and thanked Goodnough for agreeing to be interviewed.

2. Liberal Education Update

Next, Goodnough welcomed Bob McMaster, vice provost and dean, Undergraduate Education, who was present to update the committee on the progress of the Liberal Education Redesign Committee (LERC). McMaster noted that he was leading the conversation because Professor

Sally Kohlstedt, chair of the LERC, was out of the country. He added that SCEP members Golden and Ken Leopold are also LERC members, and Katie Russell, assistant to the vice provost, Office of Undergraduate Education, provides staff support for the LERC.

McMaster revealed that the LERC was nearly ready to make recommendations, and that he and Kohlstedt would present to the Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) the following week. A draft report on the process has been written and circulated to the committee, and members are now providing feedback to Kohlstedt. He remarked that he would like to release the recommendations to the faculty over the summer in order to give people time to think about it before a conversation in the fall, noting that the committee is making last minute decisions and has 3-4 possible models for the University community to consider. Overall, said McMaster, the models have similar structures to the current model (with cores and themes), but there are some significant differences beyond that. He then enumerated the major differences being proposed:

2. Eliminate “double dipping” (the ability of a course to fulfill both a core and a theme).
3. Convert two of the current requirements, the mathematical thinking core and the ethics theme, into “fundamentals.” Fundamentals would be similar in structure to the current writing intensive designator, and could be layered on top of a core or theme.
4. Allow students to skip one of the requirements, either a core, a theme, or let the student choose.
5. Rename the curriculum from Liberal Education to General Education.

Nevin Young observed that eliminating double dipping seemed likely to increase students’ time to degree completion. McMaster acknowledged this concern, and said that currently, if students double dip everything, they can complete liberal education requirements in 23 credits. The max credit number is 27. The proposed new requirements would increase the number of credits to 30. He noted that the additional three credits would not make a huge difference in most majors, but that it is of concern for the College of Science and Engineering (CSE). However, he said, a high percentage of CSE students come in with a many credits (30-40) from advanced placement (AP) credits, College in the Schools (CIS), etc. Julia Brokaw pointed out that AP and CIS availability can vary significantly between high schools, and that access to those opportunities involves a fair amount of privilege. McMaster acknowledged that first generation college students, students of color, and Pell-eligible students are indeed less likely to come in with a lot of credits. He said that the University has made remarkable progress on 4 year graduation rates, and expressed concern about the addition of three credits. Golden acknowledged that these concerns are valid, and assured members that the LERC takes them seriously. She said that they looked into how much students rely on double dipping in Mechanical Engineering, one of the most tightly-packed majors in terms of requirements. Based on this investigation, they concluded that it seemed reasonable and that the proposal should be released for discussion.

Leopold asked members how they felt about letting students decide which requirement to skip, as opposed to the curriculum dictating what they could do. Goodnough said that in cases where courses are not offered frequently and there are scheduling conflicts, flexibility would be really helpful. After some discussion, members concluded that in general it is good to require students to take all of the cores. Goodnough suggested asking the Disability Resource Center whether allowing students to drop a core would benefit students with certain diagnosed disabilities. Leslie

Schiff, associate dean for University curriculum, Office of Undergraduate Education, said that she does occasionally receive petitions from students to waive lab courses that are potentially dangerous because of their disability.

Young asked whether the Grand Challenges Curriculum would be integrated with the new requirements, under the proposal. McMaster said no; he expressed disappointment but noted that it would be too difficult to integrate Grand Challenges courses on a scale that would be necessary.

McMaster said that Kohlstedt had consulted with a number of stakeholders, and that the plan is to hold a conversation with the full senate in the fall. He noted that he thinks the proposed structure can be aligned with the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum, and that budget implications are being considered, as well. Goodnough recommended that McMaster and Kohlstedt consult with the Senate Committee on Faculty Affairs (SCFP) on the budget issue.

McMaster said that currently, the earliest possible implementation would be fall 2021. As he is reluctant to delay implementation, he reiterated his desire to release the recommendations to the faculty.

Michael Anderson commented that some other schools tried to reform their general education requirements and the proposal was voted down. He asked whether there was anything the University could learn from those situations. McMaster said he thought it was unlikely that there would be significant push back, as the structure is not radically different from the current one. Goodnough said that eliminating double dipping will probably be the biggest hurdle, as many faculty rely on that to fill classes. She stressed that it is important to move past what is best for the faculty, and look at what is in the students' best interest.

Leopold asked whether just the curriculum would be presented to the senate, or whether some information on processes and oversight would be included as well. McMaster said he did not know, but observed that infusing part of the process might help it pass.

Toni Abts asked whether there would be substantial changes to courses that currently fulfill both a core and a theme, or would it just be a question of coding the course. McMaster said it may be necessary to revise the course descriptions for those courses, but that it should not require major revisions. Leopold said that he likes to think that the Council on Liberal Education only approves courses for both requirements if they do both well; he said it is fine if there is extra content, but under the new system instructors would have to choose which requirement the course would fulfill.

Goodnough thanked McMaster for his time and he departed.

3. Evaluation of Teaching

Goodnough then introduced Ole Gram, associate vice provost, Faculty and Academic Affairs; David Langley, education program specialist, Center for Educational Innovation; and Stephanie Klein, assistant director and educational services manager, Office of Measurement Services.

Gram explained that they were present to update the committee on several initiatives related to the evaluation of teaching. In the past year, he said, they have discussed with the committee two new SRT items related to online and mixed delivery as well as efforts to increase response rates for the Student Rating of Teaching (SRT) survey when it is administered online. This latter item is of relevance to today's discussion regarding efforts to mitigate the potential effects of bias in SRT responses. Gram noted that the response rate for the online SRT is lower, and low response rates mean that few voices can carry an inordinate amount of weight and potentially amplify the voice of just a few students. The pilot project hopes to assess whether in-class administration leads to higher response rates, said Gram; this initiative was part of an overall effort to address concerns about the effect that bias may have in SRT results.

Gram added that continual efforts have been underway to identify when there are issues around the SRT instrument itself and address those issues. For example, the SRT used to ask students to assess the instructor's subject matter knowledge. That question was eliminated about 10 years ago because students are not equipped to assess disciplinary knowledge, but they are equipped to provide feedback about their experience in class and their perception about what they learned. There also used to be an open ended question, asking students to add any additional comments they may have had; that question was replaced with specific questions prompting students to reflect on what worked well and how the instructor could improve. This limits the potential for students to make random comments about appearance, etc. The SRT also used to collect student demographic information, but no longer does.

Gram continued that people may bring their own biases to the evaluations if, for example, a class or a mode of instruction does not match preconceived notions about college classroom instruction. He referred to a [memo](#) the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost had shared with department heads and the committee about best practices for individuals tasked with evaluating instructors (department heads promotion and tenure committees, for example). This document is intended to help evaluators interpret the SRT results in a way that will mitigate biased responses..

Stephanie Klein, assistant director and educational services manager, Office of Measurement Services stated that it is not possible to review others in a completely unbiased way. Therefore, she said, the bias that is reflected in the SRTs would show up in peer reviews, as well. The best way to deal with such bias is to come up with a structure to mitigate its effects. Gram commented that in the fall, David Langley, education program specialist, Center for Educational Innovation, will lead workshops on this topic as well as on effective practices for the peer review of teaching.

Goodnough asked what the response has been to the memo. Gram said that people have commented on its usefulness, and that he has seen specific instances where it has been used. He added that some department heads are receptive to revising 7.12 statements and merit guidelines to align with the recommendations of this document.

Stacy Doepner-Hove observed that the Women's Faculty Cabinet (WFC) had come to SCEP at its previous meeting with a proposal to address concerns about bias in the SRT. Their proposal

was for the provost to form a task force to investigate the issue. Doepner-Hove asked whether this conversation was in response to that proposal. Goodnough said that this item had been on the agenda for this meeting before the WFC came with their proposal. Gram affirmed that the timing was a mere coincidence, and reminded members that he had informed the committee in April 2018 that a project to address bias was underway, and had visited the committee with an update in February 2019. Gram indicated that these efforts were long underway and that there was no opposition to the WFC submitting a proposal to the provost.

Goodnough encouraged Gram to share the memo more widely, commenting that not all department heads shared it with their faculty, and the more people that see it, the more people will be thinking about it. Gram agreed.

Goodnough then asked the student members of the committee, who served on the teaching awards committee, whether evidence of bias in the SRT came up in those discussions. Brokaw replied that the SRT was not a major factor in the teaching awards decisions. Jude Goossens agreed. However, Brokaw noted that she personally feels that the SRT makes it difficult to reflect when students truly have concerns about their instructors. Langley said that the wording of the items on the SRT is heavily scrutinized in order to ensure it is the best it can be. He encouraged students to be honest in responding to the items, and if there was a huge problem, to say so.

Goodnough thanked Gram, Klein, and Langley for the updates, and they left.

4. Absence Notes from Boynton Health

Finally, Goodnough turned the floor over to Jennifer Reckner, chief of staff, Office of Undergraduate Education; Carl Anderson, director and chief health officer, Boynton Health; Jennifer Krzmarzick, chief medical officer, Boynton Health. Reckner explained that requests for absence notes for one-time absences due to illnesses that do not require treatment continues to put a strain on Boynton's resources. Anderson and Krzmarzick said that they strong ideas on how such requests intersect with the values they have as health care providers. Anderson emphasized that it is not a good use of time for health providers, and that it reduces the time they can be available for students who really need to be seen. He acknowledged that there has not been broad communication about instructors not requiring absence notes for such illnesses. He added that Boynton receives around 4,000 such requests each semester, enough for one full time health care professional. The notes have no meaning, he said, because the health care professional has no more ability to truly verify a student's illness than the instructor. Most institutions have done away with such notes, he added. Golden asked whether it is always instructors requesting the notes. Anderson said that sometimes students just think they need it. Krzmarzick said that provider relationship is that we believe our patients, but sometimes it is clear that the person is not sick, and therefore providing a note requires the provider to verify a lie. It is an uncomfortable place ethically, she said. Anderson acknowledged the likelihood that a proportion of requests are for students who are not really sick, but reiterated that health care providers are no better than verifying some things than instructors.

Goodnough said she was sensitive to the access issue, if students cannot be seen when they really need to be. However, she said, if students miss a lab or exam, the workload for the faculty member is an issue, as well. She added that if the option to require a note is eliminated, some faculty members will deny students the ability to make up the work they missed for sickness. Anderson stated that students who fake illnesses may need to face the consequences.

Michael Anderson agreed that part of the issue is lack of awareness around the change in philosophy and policy, and suggested putting a syllabus statement about notes not being required into the standard template. That way, he said, if an instructor wants to change the default rule, they have to put work into. He also suggested faculty discussions around the issue; if people hear their colleagues say they are not asking for notes anymore, maybe that would put more pressure on those who still ask for them. Finally, he noted that the issue is also tied to mental health, and said designing courses with some flexibility built in could de-incentivize faking sick, as well as alleviate mental health concerns.

Goodnough asked for volunteers to work on the issue over the summer. Michael Anderson and Golden volunteered. Reckner thanked the volunteers and the committee, and said they would return with an update in September or October 2019.

Goodnough noted that several members would be leaving the committee after six years of service. She thanked Michael Anderson, Golden, Leopold, Nicola Alexander, Keith Mayes, and Elaine Darst for their years of service. She then adjourned the meeting.

Amber Bathke
University Senate Office