

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Thursday, May 1, 1997
12:30 - 1:30
Room 140 Nolte Center

Present: Laura Koch (chair), Elayne Donahue, Corey Donovan, Darwin Hendel, Gordon Hirsch, Thomas Johnson, Robert Leik, Tina Rovick, William Van Essendelft

Absent: None, because it was a special meeting called on one day's notice

Guests: Jesse Berglund (Student Senate Vice Chair)

Others: Staff, office of Representative Alice Johnson

[In these minutes: report and resolution on student evaluations of teaching; resolution on study space]

1. Student Evaluations of Teaching

Professor Koch convened the meeting at 12:40 and asked Ms. Rovick to begin outlining the report of the subcommittee on teaching evaluations.

Ms. Rovick explained that the report reflected, in part, Dr. Hendel's research on how other institutions are using student evaluations and the directions in which they seem to be moving. The report considers how to design questions that students need in order to make informed decisions about their classes. Instead of using the standard five questions (which would remain part of the evaluation process), there is a draft set of new questions. They are a "work in progress," she said, and were drawn from the evaluation forms used by other institutions.

In response to a question, Ms. Rovick affirmed that the subcommittee concluded there needed to be a separate set of questions, in order to get at what students need. The draft questions address how the class is structured, how a student would do with a certain learning style.

There would be a new form, a "public release" form, similar to what is used in the Carlson School. Use would not be mandatory; faculty would sign a form allowing release of the information.

Asked to whom the results would be released, Ms. Rovick said they would be available only to students with an email account. Dr. Hendel strongly recommends an electronic format that is secure, similar to what is offered at Northwestern University. The results would only be available to current students. Once incoming students had registered and gone through orientation, and received an email account, they would have access to the information; prospective or former students, however, would not. (Of course, a current student could show the information to others.)

*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.

Dr. Hendel joined the meeting at this point and said he would provide an overview of the report. The subcommittee met 3-4 times over the past few months, and discussed the issues in additional conversations, to address the role of data from student evaluations of teaching to help students make course selections. The subcommittee did a lot of work in a short period, trying to respond to concerns of students and faculty as well as examine practices at other institutions. They also considered research to help answer the question of whether there is a contribution to course decision-making by students because of the availability of teaching evaluation data, and to understand the needs of students. The subcommittee also spent a lot of time examining data from the Office of Measurement Services from the current teaching evaluations.

The long report reflects the subcommittee's discussion of the issues at hand as well as related issues (such as level of participation by level of course and student). The subcommittee reached several conclusions. First, there is an important and legitimate need for students to have access to some kind of student opinion data, to help them, in certain circumstances, select courses, but that the five questions used at the direction of Senate policy are unlikely to be the most helpful. The subcommittee drafted questions that might be used, but they are preliminary and need further work.

Second, considering the information needs for students, the needs vary by campus. The subcommittee did not look specifically at each campus, but concluded that the information need may be greater on larger campuses.

There is a need for an alternative form for surveying students; it would include the five questions required by Senate policy, the results of which are to be used in personnel decisions, and 8 - 10 additional questions designed specifically to be meaningful to students in course selection. The subcommittee drafted questions; there needs to be additional work to determine if they are the most useful ones.

Moving forward in this area also requires considering how the results are made available to students. In looking at the practices in place at other institutions, it is clear that those who are Minnesota's peers or to whom Minnesota aspires to be like make the results available to students electronically. Some make the data available to anyone, regardless of their status. The subcommittee concluded that access should be limited to students at the University.

The subcommittee spent time discussing the various options that might be considered, including instructors and courses to be included as well as the content of questions. With respect to the former, the subcommittee concluded--for compelling reasons--to encourage and support faculty who wish to use the new form. If the practice provides useful information, the subcommittee expects the use of the form would expand throughout the University.

The subcommittee report represents a collage of opinions and perspectives, and not all would necessarily support all the details. The overall direction, however, was supported by the subcommittee.

Professor Koch inquired about the perspective of the smaller campuses. Professor Johnson said there are large differences in information needs for students on the different campuses, which the report acknowledges. There is unlikely to be a problem with the draft questions, he said, but it may not be worth doing this kind of information-gathering. For one reason, there are relatively few choices in instructors;

there is usually only one person teaching in a content area. Second, it is easier for students to get information from fellow students, advisors, faculty, etc. Some students feel that they would not need this information. Mr. Berglund said the information would be helpful for students on smaller campuses when choosing courses outside their major. Mr. Donovan said the students from other campuses were interested in the process.

Dr. Hendel said the subcommittee is proposing to provide information that is already in the course guide. At the coordinate campuses, the course guide does not exist, so the situation is different.

Dr. Hendel was asked if the subcommittee expected that the data from these surveys would be used in faculty salary, promotion, and tenure decisions. He said the data would NOT be used, although they have not talked in detail about who has access to the data. It was assumed they would be accessible to students and no one else (except for the faculty member who agreed to participate). Others may have different opinions on whether the data should be provided to department chairs. There is great data in danger of mixing different kinds of data gathered for different kinds of purposes, he said. Whatever resolution is brought to the Senate, it was said, should be very clear on this point if grave faculty concern is to be avoided. Dr. Hendel agreed.

Mr. Donovan said students are always interested in seeing student views incorporated in decision-making, but this form is not the vehicle by which they wish to accomplish that. This is intended to be a set of questions for students to use; they would develop different questions if personnel decisions were involved.

Dr. Hendel affirmed that the five questions required by the Senate policy would continue to be asked and would continue to be used in personnel matters. There would be no change with respect to those five questions, and the data from them remain private. There would be a combined form, allowing use of the new questions, but the results of the five questions would remain private.

Professor Koch observed that a faculty member would not be BARRED from using the data from the new questions in personnel decisions, if the individual faculty member wished them to be included.

One of the interesting aspects of the process was to look outside the University, Dr. Hendel said. There is no one model of how this is done; there is a range, from no process for sharing information with students to making everything available for all faculty, all courses, to everyone. Dr. Hendel said he looked at some of those data; his reaction was that he had no business looking at the information. A system that is totally open brings in the possibility of misuse and abuse. There are a few institutions that limit the availability of the data to students.

There are also great variations among institutions with respect to what is done about student evaluation of teaching. Minnesota, with the five standard questions and Senate policy, is considerably further down the road than other institutions. At many, there is no uniformity in questions used for personnel decisions.

Professor Koch inquired how the voluntary form would be used; would it be signed course by course, be permanently on file, would there be an option of releasing the results of the five questions as well? The subcommittee did not address releasing the results of the five questions, and reached no

resolution on the first, Dr. Hendel said. Using the form for improvement of instruction for every course might collect more information than would be useful; the same might be true for this form: using the student questions for the same course, quarter after quarter, might not be productive. A faculty member may decide, if he or she teaches the same course, to use the student questions for one and instructional improvement questions another time.

As he has talked with individuals across the University, Dr. Hendel commented, it is clear that there are systems in place of which he was unaware. The Humphrey Institute makes some information available to students, as does the Medical School. There may also be such systems at the departmental level.

Ms. Rovick reported that the students favored not including graduate assistants in this proposal, but that would not preclude them from using the questions for their own personal development.

Professor Koch expressed concern that a review of the effort after a few years be directed to improving it, not eliminating. The Committee discussed how to structure such a review, and it was suggested that SCEP consider later the mechanism for review, but that it be made clear that improvement would be the goal of a review and that SCEP be responsible for the review.

Asked if they had concerns, one subcommittee member said only that an evaluation be for improvement, not elimination; a process like this takes awhile to get off the ground, before faculty and students see it as useful, and it should not be permitted to die before that point is reached.

It was thought the date the information was gathered should be noted. There are a number of design issues that need to be addressed, Dr. Hendel said, in terms of what a student sees when the results are made available. Other information besides the date would probably be needed, but the subcommittee did not think about that level of detail. Minimum class size is another factor that should be observed.

Asked if the students who took the issue to the legislature supported this proposal, the members of the subcommittee said they did not know. There could be opposition; some might want all the information released. It is a good start, said one of the student members. It may be that a review will suggest using different questions in a couple of years. Others expressed a similar concern.

The experience with the course guide may be illustrative of how this could proceed, Dr. Hendel said. There was a concern because not enough courses were included; not enough instructors were participating. As the guide continued to exist, and students asked why courses were not included, and as faculty and department chairs saw its usefulness, it grew to the point where those not included felt they were disadvantaged. His perspective, he said, is that this approach is similar to planting a few good seeds; if they are good, and the effort provides useful information to students, and students and faculty work with the administration to increase participation, then the system will grow. In any data system, one reaches a point where more participation does not increase usefulness; there are many courses where there is no choice, in terms of general education requirements, or where courses are so small or offered so infrequently, that the data would not help students in course selection. It will be necessary to monitor implementation; given that the information will be available electronically, it will be easier to monitor student use of the system. What it will not be possible to learn is whether students make better course selection as a result of having access to the information. The research strategy to answer that question is

not clear, although that is ultimately the question: is the system making a difference in the lives of students?

It was agreed that the Senate resolution should not ask for approval of a pig in a poke, but rather that a more specific proposal be developed for subsequent approval next year. The resolution should seek approval of the concept. It may not be appropriate for the Senate to have to approve the precise wording of the questions; except for the five required by Senate policy, it has never approved questions used on the other forms. The idea is to try out a set of questions, and to modify them as may be appropriate.

As for the questions that have been proposed, those also need additional work before any form is prepared; that effort should continue before any final proposal is made to the Senate or any pilot project is begun.

Dr. Hendel said he was surprised to learn, following review of the research that the subcommittee conducted, that no one has addressed the basic question: what are the kinds of questions asked of previously-enrolled students that would indeed help students make better course selections? That may explain the uneven practice at other institutions, and whether the systems have continued over time. It may be that some systems were dropped because the data provided were not useful. What is being proposed may be unique in terms of the approach of other institutions, in that it suggests identifying the right questions.

It was suggested that using a scaled response, rather than simply the yes/no format, would be more helpful.

Dr. Hendel distributed a draft resolution that SCEP might forward to the Senate. Following additional discussion, the Committee approved in general a resolution to be prepared by Professor Koch. The resolution [as finally approved by the Senate Consultative Committee later in the day] was as follows:

RESOLUTION

The Senate supports the optional use of student evaluations of teaching data for those questions, on a form to be developed, as a tool in student course selection decision-making.

The Senate directs the Committee on Educational Policy to develop a plan (1) to implement the May 1, 1997 report of its subcommittee on teaching evaluation (including refinement of the list of proposed questions for the optional evaluation form), (2) to monitor its implementation, and (3) to plan for evaluation of the usefulness of the data for aiding students in course selection.

The Senate requests that the necessary funding be provided by the University administration to support creation of the required information system.

The Senate also directs the Committee on Educational Policy to bring back to the Senate, no later than the winter quarter, 1998, meeting, a proposal for action which responds

to the three points outlined in paragraph two of this resolution.

Professor Koch thanked the subcommittee for its work

2. Study Space

Professor Koch then turned to Mr. Berglund for introduction of a resolution on student study space.

Mr. Berglund explained that the resolution notes that there is no central advocate for study space and that no one has responsibility for ensuring it is created when buildings are built or renovated, or preventing it from being taken for other purposes. In 1987-89, there was a student campaign for new study space, which led to the creation of new spaces.

There is not now a shortage of study space, he said, but there could be in the future; the resolution calls for keeping it available.

He asked if the Committee would endorse the resolution. Professor Koch asked if there were a motion to endorse the resolution; the Committee voted unanimously to do so.

Professor Koch then adjourned the meeting at 1:30.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota