

Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP)
April 15, 2020
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: Liberal Education Requirement Descriptions; Unpaid/Informal Teaching Assistant (TA) Work; Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) Excused Absences for Standardized Tests; Syllabus Statement Addressing Zoom Recordings; S/N Threshold for Graduate and Professional Students]

PRESENT: Jennifer Goodnough (chair), Toni Abts, Kriti Agarwal, Thomas Chase, Dan Delaney, Sara Hurley, Scott Lanyon, John LaVelle, Danya Leebaw, Robert Poch, Nathan Mukai, Katherine Scheil, Brian Sick, Jacob Smiley, Nevin Young

REGRETS: June Carbone, Stacy Doepner-Hove, Bob McMaster

ABSENT: Julia Brokaw, Otto Johnson

GUESTS: Professor Kathryn Pearson, chair, Council of Liberal Education; Stacey Tidball, director, Compliance and Continuity, Academic Support Resources

OTHERS: Etty DeVeaux, chief of staff, Graduate Education; Bri Keeney, assistant to the president, Office of the President; Jessica Kuecker Grotjohn, assistant to the vice provost and dean, Office of Undergraduate Education; Jennifer Reckner, chief of staff, Office of Undergraduate Education; Leslie Schiff, associate dean, University curriculum; Office of Undergraduate Education; Karen Starry, assistant to the vice provost and dean, Graduate Education

1. Liberal Education Requirement Descriptions

Chair Jennifer Goodnough called the meeting to order and explained that the Faculty Consultative Committee (FCC) liked the brevity of the Liberal Education Redesign Committee (LERC)'s proposed new descriptions of the requirements for a course to be approved for a liberal education theme or core (Appendix A from the [LERC's report](#)). The FCC also felt that the LERC's proposed descriptions were more inclusive, and could open up the possibility that instructors who did not feel that their courses met all the current requirements could feel empowered to seek approval. The FCC asked SCEP to discuss whether there would be value in incorporating these descriptions into the current ones (which are in bullet point form) or replacing the current ones with them, if doing so would not make it more difficult for courses to be approved. Goodnough noted that Professor Kathryn Pearson, chair, Council on Liberal Education (CLE), was present for this discussion.

Pearson said that she would like the members of the CLE to weigh in, noting that about a third of the members of the CLE had also served on the LERC; one third were new; and one third were previous CLE members. She added that there was an effort to have at least two disciplinary experts reviewing each course, along with 2-3 faculty members from other disciplines. The bullet points are helpful guidelines, she clarified, but a course need not meet every bullet point in order to be approved.

Goodnough clarified that this is only a very preliminary discussion, in order to determine whether there should be further discussion of this issue.

Nevin Young expressed concern that shorter descriptions would make it harder for the CLE to give guidance to instructors who submit courses that are not approved right away. Pearson agreed that this was a concern, and reiterated that the bullet points are not used as technicalities not to approve a course. Goodnough commented that she understood there was some perception that that is not accurate. Leslie Schiff, associate dean, University curriculum; Office of Undergraduate Education affirmed that they have battled that perception for years, and said she thought having subject matter experts reviewing courses related to their expertise would help. However, she clarified that in the past, the whole committee reviewed any proposal that the smaller group recommended denying; sometimes the subject matter experts changed the result.

Robert Poch remarked that it seemed reasonable to look at the descriptions to make sure that they are still relevant and up to date, noting that the categories can evoke anxiety due to a perception of constraint. He added that a history course may fit better the description for the Social Sciences designation than Historical Perspectives designation, for example. He also pointed out that fields are not static but are always changing.

Young asked whether the idea of including subject matter experts in the small review groups was documented anywhere. Pearson responded it is not currently, but could be. Schiff cautioned against putting matters of practice into policy, and stated that previous CLE chairs had made the groups random in order to evaluate proposals from a more general standpoint, closer to that of a student.

Goodnough summarized that there did not seem to be widespread support amongst SCEP members for reexamining the descriptions at this time. Members agreed, and suggested that Professor Pearson could work with CLE to see if there was value in coming back to the descriptions after they had a chance to consider them alongside the current descriptions, in the course of their work. Pearson agreed to do so, and to come back to SCEP if CLE had interest in reopening the conversation. Goodnough said she would take that feedback to the FCC.

2. Unpaid/Informal Teaching Assistant (TA) Work

Next, Goodnough turned the floor over to Kriti Agarwal, who raised an issue about graduate students doing the work of TAs without being hired or paid to do so. She explained that for some programs, TA work is a degree requirement. There are several scenarios under which graduate students are doing TA work, she continued:

1. Compensation awarded for TA work based on the hourly rate and the graduate assistant pay floor
2. Compensation awarded in the form of a small lump sum at the end of the semester
3. No compensation awarded because the student has a 50% funded research assistant (RA) position
4. No compensation awarded and no effort certified because student has a federal fellowship that prohibits additional assistantships
5. No compensation awarded and no conflicting funding
6. No compensation, but degree course enrollment

Agarwal stated that ideally, all TA work should fall under scenarios 1 and 6 points above. She asked for SCEP's feedback on whether degree requirements should exist outside of what is listed on the transcript, and whether teaching experience is a valid degree requirement.

Toni Abts asked whether the scenarios above were found across the University, and Agarwal answered yes. Goodnough asked how prevalent the middle four scenarios are, and Agarwal cautioned that it was not easy to gather this type of information, but that only one program does degree course enrollment for unpaid TA positions. All others with unpaid TAs fall under scenarios 3-5.

John LaVelle expressed concern about students paying for the opportunity of teaching, by enrolling in tuition-bearing courses for credit. Stacey Tidball, director, Compliance and Continuity, Academic Support Resources, clarified that students could be within the tuition band, and therefore the course may not generate additional tuition. Agarwal asked if it was possible to design non-tuition-bearing courses.

Goodnough asked Agarwal to clarify whether students enrolled in a course are getting teaching instruction, or if the credit is just for the experience. Agarwal said that it varies, but mostly there is no teaching instruction.

Abts asked whether the middle four scenarios are even technically allowed. Scott Lanyon responded that the Council of Graduate Students (COGS) brought this to the attention of The Graduate School a while back, and that they have been working to change it. The short answer, he continued, is that non-compensated TAs are technically not TAs. TA positions have formal expectations and limits on what students in this position can and should be expected to do, and therefore they go through the Office for Human Resources, get appointment letters, etc. These unofficial TAs do not. Goodnough asked what SCEP can do to help move the needle on reducing the middle scenarios, and Lanyon suggested that a letter to the OHR could help.

Lanyon said that the most concerning scenario is number 3, when students have a 50% RA position and are in a program that requires teaching as part of the degree. This is a problem because if they teach for a semester, their research expectations are reduced to 25% and they are still paid 50% as an RA on a grant, which is not allowed. Lanyon stressed that he had communicated that to the graduate associate deans that this is not allowed and that they should watch out for it. He is now working to figure out whether it is still happening.

Sometimes, he continued, students in this situation get a small lump sum at the end of the semester as compensation, but their hours and expectations are often not clearly communicated. He expressed a need to give this type of position a different name, and make limits and expectations clear. The same is true in other scenarios where students are doing TA-like work but not being hired or paid as TAs, he said. In addition, if it is part of a course, the course must teach pedagogy.

Finally, Lanyon noted that there is another category, wherein students volunteer to serve in TA-like capacity, either because they want more teaching experience but cannot officially work as a TA because of other or conflicting funding. Lanyon felt that this was not a good idea, as it is outside of normal structures of liability in the classroom setting, and there is no way to guarantee that the student's faculty advisor was not pressuring the student to volunteer.

Lanyon summarized that there are two things that need to happen to solve this problem. First, he emphasized that it is important to be clear about what, officially, constitutes a TA. Second, there should be clear guidelines as to what tasks or duties are permissible for students who are involved in instruction in some way but not through an official TA position.

Young asked whether graduates are more competitive when they are job searching after graduation if they have a TA position. Lanyon wondered if requiring teaching experience for degree completion is still appropriate, when many graduate students are not interested in becoming faculty. He suggested that every program should be thinking about that question. If a student really wants the teaching experience, it is good to provide the opportunity if possible, but it should be an official TA position. It is inappropriate, continued Lanyon, for students to have responsibility for grading, etc., if not being compensated as TAs. Doing a guest lecture once is fine, but grading and seeing private student data is not okay. Lanyon added that it would be helpful for SCEP to weigh in and say that only formally appointed TAs should have TA responsibilities. Students can be involved in teaching in other ways, but limits should be specified and they should have a different title. Members agreed, and Goodnough said she would work with Lanyon on how SCEP could best support his work to resolve this issue. She thanked Agarwal for bringing this to the committee's attention.

3. Post-Secondary Enrollment Option (PSEO) Excused Absences for Standardized Tests

Next, Goodnough welcomed Jonah Martinez, president of the PSEO Student Association, who was present to seek SCEP input on a proposal to amend the [Administrative Policy: Makeup Work for Legitimate Absences](#) to include taking the PSATs, ACTs, or SATs for free at their high school. Goodnough noted that Martinez had already spoken with Jessica Kuecker Grotjohn, assistant to the vice provost and dean, Office of Undergraduate Education.

Martinez thanked members for their time, and said that absences for these standardized tests should be excused for PSEO students for the following reasons:

- Unlike other activities at their high schools that do not count as excused absences, these standardized tests are not optional for students planning to attend college.

- PSEO students register later than other students, making it harder to plan their schedules around these standardized tests.
- Taking standardized tests on different dates put a financial burden on students (for example, the SAT and ACT with writing cost \$64 and \$42, respectively).

Agarwal asked whether absences for the GRE, MCAT, etc., are excused. Kuecker-Grotjohn responded that those tests are more flexible and there is no option to take them for free or at a reduced rate, so they are not excused absences.

Tidball commented that this seemed like a reasonable addition to the policy, given that it is targeted to a specific problem. Goodnough proposed that the committee vote on this issue at its next meeting, and members agreed.

4. Syllabus Statement Addressing Zoom Recordings

Finally, Goodnough turned the floor over to Tidball, who was present to discuss some policy matters. Tidball told members that Academic Support Resources (ASR) is considering adding a new syllabus statement informing students that Zoom recordings of classes are part of the educational record. Schiff pointed out that these recordings are also the faculty's intellectual property, which is a related concern.

Goodnough recommended that this would be a good way to start conversations about security in Zoom, as well. She noted that it overlaps with an issue that was brought to the Academic Freedom and Tenure Committee (AF&T), regarding faculty being the victims of doxxing from outside groups due to perceived liberal bias in their course content. Sara Hurley remarked that there are many security features in Zoom that prevent people from downloading and sharing Zoom recordings, and faculty should be educated on these security features. However, she said, there are still ways people can record lectures, etc., on their own. The syllabus statement is necessary, concluded Hurley, with the caveat that guaranteeing full security is impossible.

5. S/N Threshold for Graduate and Professional Students

Finally, Tidball brought the issue of S/N grading and what constitutes an "S" to the committee's attention. She elaborated that for undergraduates, an "S" is the equivalent of a "C-" or above. However, graduate and professional schools have the discretion to set a higher threshold. Furthermore, she said, there is not a lot of clarity around how students are informed if the threshold for a particular class is higher, so students may not be aware if they need to get higher than a C- to pass. Karen Starry, assistant to the vice provost and dean, Graduate Education, commented that generally it is the program that decides, but sometimes individual instructors decide as well, which complicates things further.

Discussion resulted in the conclusion that there is not much to be done about spring semester at this point, and that the issue should be addressed in communications and/or perhaps a FAQ in policy as much as possible to make people aware of it. Goodnough suggested trying to capture the magnitude of the issue for spring, so that information can be used as incentive for programs and instructors to make sure students know the expectations for summer and beyond. Agarwal

stressed that the threshold should be noted in the syllabus for each graduate or professional course.

In the interest of time, Goodnough adjourned the meeting.

Amber Bathke
University Senate Office