The University Senate

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UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP)
November 12, 2025
Minutes of the Meeting

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[**In these minutes:** Twin Cities 29-30 Academic Calendar; Graduate Student Appeals of Academic Dismissals; Current Status of Financial Aid]

PRESENT: Jessica Larson (chair), Nina Arleth, Erin Baldinger, Shawn Curley, Erin Fider, Jennifer Gunn, Scott Lanyon, Emily Pelton, Alex Risdall, Claire Segijn, Raj Singh, Erin Slattengren, Nadezhda Sotirova, William Walstrom

REGRETS: Seth Weir

ABSENT: Betsy Murray, Jennifer Row

OTHERS ATTENDING: Toni Abts, director, Graduate Education Policy Office, Carin Anderson-Thoms, director, Operations and Strategic Initiatives, Etty Deveaux, interim chief of staff, EVPP, Meredith Fergus, financial aid and tuition analyst, Office of

Undergraduate Education, Jessica Kuecker Grotjohn, assistant director, Undergraduate Education, Sarah Kussow, director, Office of Classroom Management, Nate Peterson, executive director, Office of Student Finance, Laurie Cooper Stoll, director, University Senate Office

1. Welcome

Prof. Jessica Larson, chair, called the meeting to order.

2. Twin Cities 29-30 Academic Calendar

Carin Anderson-Thoms, director, Operations and Strategic Initiatives, and Sarah Kussow, director, Office of Classroom Management, then introduced a discussion on the proposed 2029-2030 academic calendar. Anderson-Thoms began with an overview of the academic calendar process. She explained that the calendar follows the administrative policy on academic calendars and is published at least four years in advance by Academic Support Resources (ASR). A key requirement for the calendar is a minimum of 70 days of instruction within each semester. Additionally, the policy mandates at least one study day per fall and spring semester. ASR consistently advocates and recommends the calendar option that provides the greatest number of study days for students, based on student preference for more study time.

Anderson-Thoms then reviewed how holidays were incorporated into the calendar: holidays occurring during the term, such as Thanksgiving, use the actual day, while holidays falling on weekends follow civil service rules. She also addressed common questions about adding a fall break or starting the fall term earlier, stating that she and Kussow were unable to change those actual dates as they did not have the authority to do so. She also mentioned that the academic calendar administrative policy was currently up for comprehensive review and requested feedback for clarity and improvement.

Claire Segijn asked for clarification about the rationale for the trade-off between study days and exam days, noting the fall options were between one and two study days, and the spring options were between two and three. Kussow explained that adding a study

day did not change the required number of final exam days but pushed the final exam period out by one day toward the end. Emily Pelton asked if there was objective, survey evidence supporting the anecdotal claim that students wanted more study days and if the varying number of study days between fall (one or two) and spring (two or three) impacted student grades in courses offered both semesters. Anderson-Thoms acknowledged that she did not have that information but would take note of the request for data and analytics.

Erin Baldinger asked why finals were scheduled on Saturdays. Kussow responded that it was a way to shorten the length of the exam period on the calendar. Baldinger argued that scheduling exams on Saturdays created an inequitable experience for students due to religious concerns and strongly advocated for removing Saturday exams from the policy during its review. Anderson-Thoms thanked Baldinger and confirmed she still had notes on that issue from the previous year's discussion.

The conversation returned to the six-day final exam period, which Kussow clarified was not a policy requirement. She explained that attempts to truncate the schedule by even one day had previously resulted in hundreds of conflicts between classes, leading to problems for students. Larson suggested that the landscape of finals had changed post-COVID, with more projects and remote options, and proposed that the committee might need to conduct polling or work through the senate to re-envision the finals structure. Kussow agreed this was a great point and noted that their office had observed a change in the number of in-person exams requested.

Segijn asked why the spring semester offered more study day options than the fall. Anderson-Thoms attributed the fall's tighter scheduling to the requirement of not starting until after Labor Day and the need to conclude before the Christmas holiday, whereas the spring semester had less of that scheduling stress. Kussow recalled that it was common to have three study days in the spring and one or two in the fall. Pelton reiterated her desire for data to justify the difference in study days between the fall and spring, noting her impression was that three in the spring was the norm. Larson

confirmed that the current academic year had two study days in the fall and three in the spring, while the next academic year had only one in the fall and three in the spring.

The committee then moved to vote on the fall 2029 and spring 2030 calendars. The committee unanimously voted 9-0 to approve Option A for the fall 2029 calendar (which provided the most study days). The committee voted 8-1 to approve Option A for the spring 2030 calendar.

3. Graduate Student Appeals of Academic Dismissals

Toni Abts, director, Graduate Education Policy Office, then introduced the process for Graduate Student Appeals of Academic Dismissals. Scott Lanyon provided background, explaining that during negotiations with the new graduate student union, the union wanted involvement in grievances related to academic dismissals of graduate assistants. The university maintains that academic dismissal is an academic decision, not an employment issue. To bridge the gap, the university signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) agreeing to publish clear procedures for students to appeal academic dismissals from their programs.

Abts reported on the progress, noting that the MOU required the university to publish procedures to receive, evaluate, and resolve these appeals within 16 months of the contract ratification (due by May 21, 2026). To meet this goal, the Graduate School:

1. Convened a panel to review comparable processes at peer institutions.
2. Collected existing appeals processes from various schools and colleges within the University of Minnesota.
3. Developed a template process that outlined central requirements for colleges to receive and resolve appeals, a challenge due to the need for applicability across all graduate colleges and professional schools.
4. Had the template reviewed by the Graduate Policy Advisory Council, college coordinators, and the Office of General Counsel to ensure compliance and applicability.

The developed template requires collegiate processes to outline their scope, designate an appeal contact, specify the required elements, and establish a timeline for decisions. A strong recommendation from professional schools and the Office of General Counsel is to have the appeals process happen prior to academic dismissal whenever possible to reduce confusion and streamline the process. The template also outlines the standard decision types and the limited grounds for reversal. The collegiate dean's final written decision would not be further appealable within the university.

Regarding implementation, schools and colleges that offer graduate degrees are required to develop and centrally publish their internal appeals process, following the template's guidance by the May 21, 2026 deadline. Abts clarified that for colleges with existing processes, they simply needed to ensure they met the minimum requirements and that the information was easily accessible. All new or revised collegiate processes were expected to be effective no later than the start of Fall 2026.

Abts clarified that the procedures did not require a formal governance review process and that the final published process would not be grievable by the student union. Lanyon added that collegiate deans and associate deans have been notified of this requirement for months. Shawn Curley asked who was responsible for implementation; Abts responded that ultimate responsibility fell to the college dean, but communication was primarily with the associate deans of research and professional education. The committee requested that Abts return closer to the implementation date to provide an update on how the process was moving forward at the college level.

4. Current Status of Financial Aid

Nate Peterson, executive director, Office of Student Finance, and Meredith Fergus, financial aid and tuition analyst, Office of Undergraduate Education, then provided an update on the current status of financial aid to the committee. Peterson began the presentation by giving an overview of the sources of financial aid, which were categorized into gift aid (not repaid) and loans and work study (repaid or earned). The system saw a significant increase in total gift aid from $362.5 million in 2015-2016 to $569.9 million in 2024-2025. A notable jump in state and local government grants is attributed to the implementation of the North Star Promise program and the federal

FAFSA simplification changes in 2024-2025. This simplification changed the calculation methodology from the Expected Family Contribution (EFC) to the Student Aid Index (SAI), which increased award eligibility for many students.

Peterson highlighted three specific University of Minnesota financial aid programs:

1. U Promise: For eligible Minnesota undergraduate students with household incomes up to $120,000, covering four years for first-year students and two years for transfer students.
2. U Promise Plus: For families with household incomes up to $50,000, covering 100% of tuition using a combination of federal, state, and university grants/scholarships.
3. Native American Promise: For qualified individuals with an Adjusted Gross Income (AGI) up to $125,000, initially created to cover 100% of tuition. Because the state's American Indian Scholars Program covers most students, the University repurposed its Promise funds to provide housing scholarships to the eligible students, respecting the original financial commitment.

Fergus then reviewed key state financial aid programs:

1. The Minnesota State Grant, one of the most generous in the nation, serves students with household incomes up to approximately $110,000 and awarded $71 million to over 12,600 University of Minnesota students in 2024-2025.

2. The North Star Promise program, established by the Minnesota Legislature, provides 100% tuition and fee coverage for students from families with incomes under $80,000. It is a last-dollar grant, meaning all other gift aid is applied first. Fergus attributed a recent enrollment bump to the excitement surrounding this program.

3. The American Indian Scholars Program yielded $4 million for university students starting in Fall 2024.

4. The Emergency Assistance for Post-Secondary Students (EAPS) program provides state-funded emergency grants to students in financial crises, which were not counted as financial aid.

Fergus then explained the Student Aid Index (SAI), which replaced the EFC as a metric to measure families based on income and wealth. Families with the lowest income and wealth receive an SAI of zero.

The presentation concluded with student loan debt trends from 2014 to 2024. The percentage of University of Minnesota graduates with $0 debt increased from 34.5% to 48.8%. The average student loan debt among borrowers increased slightly, from $27,900 to $29,600. The median student loan debt remained relatively stable, from about $26,000 to $23,000, which Fergus cautioned was influenced by a decrease in the total number of students borrowing. She also warned that an uptick in debt numbers was expected in the future due to changes in borrowing behavior during the COVID-19 pandemic. Raj Singh clarified that when adjusted for inflation and as a fraction of graduating salary, the current debt was likely lower than the raw numbers suggested.

Peterson then provided a brief update on the One Big Beautiful Bill Act, which was signed into law on July 4, 2025, and is set to go into effect on July 1, 2026. The most immediate impact on financial aid is the proration of loans based on enrollment status. Unl lol like the previous system, where half-time enrollment allowed for the full loan allocation, the new law introduces a sliding scale for students enrolled less than full-time. This change would require significant internal work to adjust loans as students add or drop classes, creating potential extreme fluctuations in a student's loan eligibility. This proration would affect undergraduate, professional, and graduate programs.

5. Adjourn

Hearing no further business, Larson adjourned the meeting.

Laurie Cooper Stoll
University Senate Office