The University Senate
FACULTY · STUDENT · P&A · CIVIL SERVICE
UNIVERSITY OF MINNESOTA

Senate Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP)
May 8, 2024
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 reflect the views of, nor are they binding on, the senate, the administration, or the Board of Regents.

[**In these minutes**: Course Accessibility and DRC Update; Student Mental Health Update; Faculty Professional Conduct Review & Implementation Group Recommendations; Update on the Future of Writing at the University]

PRESENT: Katherine Scheil (chair), Tom Chase,Matthew Croft, Shawn Curley, Erin Fider, Scott Lanyon, Jess Larson, John LaVelle,, Betsy Murray; Emily Pelton, Nadezhda Sotirova, William Walstrom

REGRETS: June Carbone, Murray Jensen, Robert McMaster

ABSENT: Nina Arleth, Minho Jeon

GUESTS: Enjie Hall, director, Twin Cities Disability Resource Center; Maggie Towle, senior associate vice president, Office for Student Affairs; Rob Dunbar, associate professor, Center for Learning Innovation, Rochester Campus; Ned Patterson, professor, College of Veterinary Medicine; Lin Xiu, professor, Labovitz School of Business and Economics, Duluth Campus; Pamela Flash, director, Writing Across the Curriculum

OTHERS: Toni Abts, director, Graduate Education
Policy Office; Etty DeVeaux, chief operating officer and executive director, Graduate Education Policy Office; Jessica Kuecker Grotjohn, assistant director, Office of Undergraduate Education; Hannah McLevish, administrative services coordinator, Graduate Education; Leslie Schiff, associate dean for the University curriculum, Office of Undergraduate Education; Char Voight, director, faculty initiatives, Graduate Education

1. Course Accessibility and DRC Update

Scheil opened the meeting by welcoming Enjie Hall, director of the Disability Resource Center at the Twin Cities campus and ADA Coordinator systemwide, who discussed new federal regulations for digital accessibility under Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Key points include:

- **Compliance Deadline:** Institutions must make web content and mobile apps accessible by April 24, 2026.
- **Scope of Accessibility:** This includes all web content, learning management systems, mobile apps, documents (e.g., PDFs, spreadsheets), audio-visual content (e.g., videos, podcasts), third-party tools, and social media posts made after the regulations took effect.
- **Accessibility vs. Accommodation:** Accessibility is proactive and ensures immediate access without additional accommodations. If accessibility isn't achievable, alternative formats like Braille or large print must be provided.
- **Standards and Regulations:** The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) 2.1 AA standard are incorporated into the regulations, impacting various laws including Section 504 and Section 1557 of the Affordable Care Act.
- **Exceptions:** Archived content, content from third parties not controlled by the institution, and individualized, password-protected documents are exempt from certain requirements. Historical social media posts don't need retroactive updates but new posts must be accessible.
- **Responsibilities:** Institutions are responsible for ensuring that content provided by vendors or third-party tools used in educational settings is accessible.

Hall paused for questions, and the following discussion ensued:

- Curley expressed concerns about the practicality of making all materials fully accessible and accommodating the federal regulations given current workloads and limitations. He questioned the feasibility and workload implications for universities. Hall explained that accessibility involves proactively ensuring materials are accessible from the start, not just accommodating on request. For instance, converting PDFs to web formats can improve accessibility. She also addressed how responsibility for determining accessibility can be shared between instructors and Disability Resource Centers, especially for complex content.
- Emily Pelton and Tom Chase raised specific concerns about online homework systems, text-based content, and handling complex visual materials like chemistry diagrams. Hall emphasized that while some content may be inherently difficult to make fully accessible (e.g., complex math expressions), accommodations should be provided as needed. She also highlighted the importance of proactive measures and ongoing support to ensure compliance and address accessibility issues.
- Overall, the discussion focused on balancing proactive accessibility measures with practical constraints and the need for collaboration between faculty and support centers to meet new standards effectively.

Hall also announced a significant change in the DRC: they are switching to a new case management system that will affect how accommodation letters are received and how exams are scheduled. The new system will streamline processes by having letters come from their office and provide a faculty portal for managing these letters and exam scheduling.

Scheil thanked Hall for the update, and asked her to return in the fall for further discussion.

2. Student Mental Health Update

Next, Scheil welcomed Maggie Towle, senior associate vice president, Office for Student Affairs; and Rob Dunbar, associate professor, Center for Learning Innovation, Rochester Campus, who provided an update on efforts around student mental health.

Dunbar began by explaining the President's Initiative for Student Mental Health (PRISMH), a systemwide effort that has been active for three years. He highlighted key achievements, including:

- **Grants and Funding:** PRISMH has secured over $260,000 in grants to fund 18 projects across four of the five U of M campuses. Projects include studying the impact of structural racism on adolescent brains and developing art-based interventions for students with depression.
- **Training and Professional Development:** PRISMH's faculty working group has created training modules on disability accommodations and inclusive course design, with 87% of instructors completing these modules.
- **Curriculum Development:** PRISMH, in collaboration with the Center for Educational Innovation, developed a resource on practices to support student mental health and wellbeing in the classroom.
- **Climate Initiatives:** PRISMH has developed surveys to assess the effectiveness of these practices and the awareness of supportive strategies among students.

Towle followed up with updates on new initiatives, including:

- **Mental Health Advocate Program:** Expanded system-wide with nearly 1,400 employees trained through 20-minute modules, showing high engagement and knowledge retention.
- **Micro Trainings:** A series of short, accessible videos aimed at faculty and staff to enhance their skills in supporting student mental health.
- **Centralized Resources:** The MyU portal now includes a mental health and wellbeing tab, centralizing resources for staff, faculty, and students.
- **Interactive Website:** A new website providing detailed, interactive resources for supporting student mental health, set for a full launch in the fall.

Ongoing efforts to improve student mental health support across colleges include:

- **Embedded Counselors and Wellness Navigators**: PRISHM advocates for both embedded counselors and wellness navigators in all colleges. Embedded counselors would provide mental health counseling, while wellness navigators would act like case managers, referring students to various support services.
- **As the initiative transitions from a presidential initiative to a continuing program, the transition team recommends** an a**ssociate vice president position** be established systemwide coordination focused on mental health and wellbeing, advised by a broad steering group. The transition team also recommends continued support for campus-specific work groups to drive local initiatives and ensure representation in the systemwide steering group. The goal is to create a sustainable structure to address student mental health through prevention, services, and curriculum, as well as research.

Towle and Dunbar invited questions and comments, and members offered the following:

- Pelton expressed support for the idea of embedding wellness navigators in colleges, emphasizing that colleges often understand their students' specific challenges best and that having these navigators could greatly benefit students by providing tailored support.
- Croft raised concerns about how students can be supported when facing academic challenges or stress. He highlighted that while counseling services are valuable, addressing the root causes of stress, such as academic pressure, is crucial. He inquired about resources or methods that can help students manage academic stress, especially in situations where they cannot meet deadlines or need flexibility in their coursework. He pointed out that current accommodations provided by DRC are not retroactive and may not cover immediate needs. Dunbar said that student coaches on the Rochester campus assist students with navigating academic and personal issues. Towle added that training for faculty is important to equip them with knowledge and sensitivity regarding student mental health. She noted that this is a long-term initiative and requires time to implement effectively. Both Dunbar and Towle agreed that improving how faculty handle academic stress and provide flexibility in coursework is crucial, and ongoing efforts are needed to address these issues
- Croft discussed the need for practical relief mechanisms for students facing academic difficulties. He suggested implementing concrete recommendations or requirements for instructors to offer flexibility and support during challenging times, as these measures can directly impact student stress levels.

Overall, the discussion emphasized the importance of integrating mental health support into academic structures and providing practical solutions to address student stress and challenges effectively.

3. Faculty Professional Conduct Review & Implementation Group Recommendations
Scheil introduced Professors Ned Patterson and Lin Xiu, co-chairs, Faculty Professional Conduct Review & Implementation Group, who provided an overview of the group's recommendations.

Definition of Unprofessional Conduct:
The group proposes a continuum of unprofessional conduct ranging from severe to less severe behaviors, with a focus on using a "reasonable person" standard to assess misconduct. The goal is to clarify definitions and address gaps in current policies, particularly for behaviors that are less egregious but can still impact the academic environment.

- **Egregious Behaviors:** Includes serious issues like retaliation, discrimination, threats, and sexual misconduct. Existing policies already cover these well.
- **Non-Egregious Behaviors**: Includes less severe behaviors like bullying or repeated unreasonable demands. These are addressed through proactive measures and coaching, aiming to prevent escalation.
- **Positive Culture**: Emphasizes setting clear expectations and good communication to foster a positive academic environment and prevent issues before they become serious.

Healthy Climate and Reintegration:

- **"Red Folder" Guide:** Provides academic leaders with guidelines on handling misconduct and promoting a healthy work environment and includes expectations for addressing misconduct reports and offers strategies and resources, such as coaching and responsive actions.

- **Leadership Training:** Incorporate training sessions into leadership programs to help foster a positive work environment.
- **Coordinated Communication:** Enhance respectful working environments through communication and forums for dialogue between faculty and students.
- **Grassroots Culture Building:** Encourage peer support and address macroaggressions to build a supportive culture beyond just leadership training.

Considerations include the need for inclusiveness and understanding of diverse perspectives; the impact of tenure status and faculty tracks on professional conduct; and addressing inequalities in service responsibilities and peer support.

Policy, Processes, and Procedures:

- **Policy Updates:** Update the *Code of Conduct* and *Faculty Tenure* policies, covering all faculty types including tenure, contract, and P&A faculty. This includes protections and recognition of academic freedom, with consequences for misconduct reported to a central database.
- **Training:** Recommended for all faculty upon policy approval and for new hires.
- **Consultation Process:** The policy recommendation will undergo further consultation and detailing in the next year, with input from the President and the Policy Committee.

The following discussion transpired:
John LaVelle asked about the policy's relationship with the Senate Judicial Committee (SJC) and Office for Conflict Resolution (OCR), and raised concerns about implementing policies if those responsible are involved in misconduct. He also suggested a centralized mechanism to ensure policies are enforced consistently. Patterson explained that the policy would align with existing tenure policies and processes used by the SJC for tenure-track faculty. For non-tenure faculty, a similar process is suggested, though it may differ slightly. Xiu emphasized the need for consistency and alignment between new and existing policies .Patterson and Xui added that there is a recommendation for a centralized system to handle complaints and misconduct findings, ensuring a consistent approach and reducing the burden on individuals to navigate the system alone.

Scheil highlighted areas needing clarification, such as "passionate expression of emotions" and "avoidance or ignoring of conflicts." She stressed the need for more precise definitions to avoid confusion and potential misuse of the policy. Patterson acknowledged these concerns and noted that final wording and definitions would be reviewed in the upcoming meetings. He encouraged feedback before finalizing the policy.

The discussion concluded with an invitation for additional feedback and an assurance that the policy would continue to be adjusted based on input received.

4. Update on the Future of Writing at the University

Scheil introduced Pamela Flash, who is retiring after 32 years as the director of the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) program. Flash provided a presentation on the future of writing at the University, which highlighted the following:

History and Achievements:

- The Writing Intensive Requirement began in 1999, aiming to integrate writing as a tool for learning across disciplines.
- Flash's role included supporting various forms of writing and instruction through the WAC program.

Current Trends and Future Directions:

- There has been a rise in interest in writing workshops, particularly those addressing AI and online writing.
- The emphasis on diversity, equity, and inclusion in writing assignments and assessments is growing.

Challenges in Writing Instruction:

- **Outdated Methods:** There was resistance to traditional, mechanical approaches to writing instruction, such as grammatical diagramming, which seemed irrelevant to technical courses like mechanical engineering.
- **Outsourcing Issues:** Faculty showed a preference for outsourcing writing instruction to TAs, but lacked the necessary funds.
- **Dissatisfaction with Student Writing:** Faculty were dissatisfied with the quality of student writing and lacked confidence in addressing writing issues.
- **Narrow Definitions:** There was a limited understanding of what constituted writing in different fields, such as apparel design or mechanical engineering, where writing might involve documenting processes or solving problems.
- **Data Stories:** The increasing importance of using data to tell stories was recognized as a significant future focus for writing across the curriculum.
- **Addressing Roadblocks:** Flash identified structural, conceptual, and attitudinal barriers to effective writing instruction. These included rigid definitions of writing, reluctance to integrate writing into existing courses, and a lack of clarity about how writing should be taught in various disciplines.

The Writing Enriched Curriculum (WEC) Program:

- **Objective:** The WEC program was designed to help departments integrate relevant writing instruction into their curricula through a flexible, faculty-driven model.
- **Process:** Departments develop an undergraduate writing plan that outlines attributes of writing in their field; expected writing abilities for graduates; how writing is incorporated and assessed in the curriculum; and support needed to implement effective writing instruction.
- **Assessment:** The program involves regular assessment, including triennial evaluations of capstone writing to measure student performance against faculty expectations.

Flash said that the program is adapting to new challenges such as online writing instruction, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, and the impact of generative AI tools on writing. In addition, through the core curriculum revision process, there are ongoing efforts to harmonize writing-intensive courses with other general education requirements and improve their integration into the overall curriculum.

Flash concluded by emphasizing the importance of ongoing faculty collaboration, intentional integration of writing, and adaptability to new educational trends and tools.

Scheil thanked outgoing committee members for their service on SCEP, especially Professor Tom Chase, the former chair of the committee.

Amber Bathke
University Senate Office