

Minutes\*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy**  
**Wednesday, May 6, 2009**  
**2:00 – 4:00**  
**238A Morrill Hall**

Present: Cathrine Wambach (chair), Joseph Bartolotta, Norman Chervany, Megan Evans, April Knutson, James Leger, Kristen Nelson, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Paul Siliciano, Donna Spannaus-Martin, Erin Sperling, Elaine Tarone, Michael Wade

Absent: LeAnn Alstadt, Gail Dubrow, Robert McMaster, Molly Tolzmann,

Guests: Vice Provost Arlene Carney, Cynthia Murdoch, Karen Zentner Bacig (all Office of the Vice Provost for Faculty and Academic Affairs)

Other: Suzanne Bardouche (Office of the Vice Provost and Dean of Undergraduate Education)

[In these minutes: (1) student-learning outcomes pilot project (Twin Cities); (2) use of written comments on student-rating-of-teaching forms; (3) report on graduate education]

**1. Student-Learning Outcomes Pilot (Twin Cities Campus)**

Professor Wambach convened the meeting at 2:00 and welcomed Vice Provost Carney and Ms. Murdoch to discuss the pilot project for implementing the student-learning outcomes (SLOs) approved by the Senate.

Dr. Carney said they are at the point of implementing the SLOs so have come to provide an update and to seek the Committee's advice. Her office has hired Ms. Murdoch, formerly in Institutional Research, to coordinate the assessment of student learning. The SLOs are part of University policy; her office is working with Vice Provost McMaster's office to implement them. The SLOs are part of the larger goal of improving undergraduate education (along with the new liberal-education requirements and the writing-enriched curriculum).

Ms. Murdoch reported that after the Senate approved the SLOs, Dr. Carney's office started working with 14 departments to do pilot projects; she came to the office shortly thereafter and continues to work with the 14. They have divided the work in several phases, beginning with mapping single courses to the SLOs: which courses address which SLOs. Then departments think about the major and how it meets the SLOs. Faculty members are usually able to map courses to the SLOs fairly easily and the pilot departments have done a good job—although no two did things quite the same way. The next step is to create an assessment plan to think about how to evaluate student learning in courses. In terms of the major, Dr. Carney commented, a department might find that it is not covering one SLO at all, or that it is has a heavy emphasis on one SLO.

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Do they focus on the major courses or all the courses a student takes? That is an important question, especially in the sciences, Dr. Carney said, where students take a lot of other courses. The pilot studies do not include those other courses but it is a key question; often other courses are part of a major and they will need to work with other departments to evaluate a major. The issue to be addressed is how a STUDENT would meet the SLOs.

They do not expect any one major to cover all the SLOs, do they, Ms. Phillips inquired? They do not, Dr. Carney said. Students will take liberal-education courses, and for any single student that means a number of courses across a number of areas.

Professor Wade asked what research suggests that this is a valid approach. Can one measure the SLOs during the short period the student is at the University? There is a growing body of evidence that provides mild support for the proposition that these outcomes can be measured, Dr. Carney said. A number of small institutions do so successfully; the University's challenge is to do so in a large institution. It is not easy but they are trying to approach the process methodically and systematically. What do the data look like when the effort is rolled out, Professor Wade asked? If one looks at a student record, there are two categories of evidence. From the faculty perspective, they design a set of courses to teach things they want students to learn. They identify paradigms and approaches that are critical to their field and seek to validate whether they are teaching what they intend. What are the key big-picture skills they expect students to learn? They assess the students and use the feedback to change the way they teach. The student perspective is harder to get at. Now they check off the list when they have completed the liberal-education and major requirements; in the long term, the goal is to ask students to reflect on their activities. Dr. Carney said they are trying to find out what is possible in a large institution with a faculty that has critical research responsibilities. The University will not require a portfolio, which some of the smaller institutions do, but they could ask students to reflect on their learning and the faculty can assess the curriculum. The SLOs seem to resonate with students when they are asked about them, Dr. Carney reported.

There are different ways to infuse the SLOs into the curriculum, Dr. Carney said, and the approach will probably be different for different departments, which is in keeping with the way the University operates. Accreditors are making assessment a key point in evaluating institutions and universities will have to address the issue as they go through the accreditation process. Dr. Carney said there have been discussions with peer institutions and they are optimistic they can assess student-learning outcomes.

Professor Wade said that assessing the SLOs seems to be attacking a cohort problem with a cross-sectional analysis. The University has students for so short a period of time that there is no way to assess skills for effectiveness. He said he did not know how to do such a thing. Faculty can change their exams, and so on, but that will be of limited effect. It is not only that, Dr. Carney said, but also things such as study abroad, UROP, and internships. The idea is the whole package, both in and out of class; at this time they are only reporting on the pilot projects.

Professor Leger commented that for the engineering part of IT, the SLOs are close to what ABET requires; how do those departments relate to the SLOs? Is it straightforward? It is, Ms. Murdoch said. They have mapped ABET requirements to SLOs and it works well. Engineering departments have done this for years, know what they are talking about, and find it easy. They are

already there, conceptually, Dr. Carney said, and she said she hoped the Chemical Engineering model (one of the 14 pilot departments) can be helpful to other IT departments.

This makes sense, Professor Tarone said, and is an example of backward design: one has a clear idea of what one wants at the end and then works backward to achieve it. As a public university, it can say what the outcomes will be.

Ms. Murdoch related that there is ongoing work outside the pilot projects. The Council for Enhanced Student Learning steering committee has discussed what is to happen next year and has identified three areas, each of which has a work group: (1) faculty resources, to help faculty implement the SLOs in their courses (chaired by David Langley, Center for Teaching and Learning); (2) data related to the SLOs, what might be collected centrally and be useful, and what departments might collect that they could use for accreditation (chaired by Ron Huesman, Institutional Research); and (3) accreditation and accountability and what the University (Twin Cities) will say about the SLOs in 2015 when it is next accredited (chaired by Joe Schulz, Provost's office).

Ms. Murdoch next distributed copies of a webpage from ECAS where a faculty member indicates and explains the learning outcomes a course meets. The University asks that every undergraduate course address at least one SLO; in ECAS, the course work related to the learning outcome is described and possible assessments are listed. Are the answers reviewed or are they what the person offering the course thinks, Professor Siliciano asked? There is no central approver, Ms. Murdoch responded, although they will look at them in order to see trends and provide information to the faculty, Dr. Carney added. One goal of the SLO project is to make the expected outcomes more known to students, so the ECAS information, for example, could be put in the course guide.

The addition of the SLO to ECAS highlights a continuing problem with ECAS entries, that the people who do the ECAS entries are not the faculty who propose or teach the courses, Ms. Phillips said, so a lot of mistakes can occur in translation between the faculty's intent and the ECAS entry. In addition, there is a lot of double-entry and cutting and pasting. One solution is to allow the faculty access to enter their course information on ECAS as the first entry. Is there a way to have "ECAS level 1" for the faculty, then "ECAS 2" for the department and "ECAS 3" for college approval? Dr. Carney said this was an idea they would explore. She said they already are planning several special summer activities to help faculty get better at the SLO process, and they could look at this then.

Professor Wambach thanked Dr. Carney and Ms. Murdoch for the report.

## **2. Use of Written Comments on Student-Rating-of-Teaching Forms**

Dr. Carney remained for this portion of the meeting and related that she had read with interest about the policy change on the use of written comments on student-rating-of-teaching forms. It was a minor change; before, colleges or campuses decided if they would be used in personnel decisions while now it is the faculty governance system for the unit that decides. She said she has a heightened sensitivity about this issue because she has been reviewing promotion-and-tenure files. She brought her concern to the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure and now brings it here.

If the decision about including the written comments in the dossier is local, and when the files come forward for faculty members with a borderline score in teaching, in one college the file may

contain only the score and in another the file may include the written comments. In one case the reviewers might be swayed by the written comments but in the other there are no written comments to have an effect. Her concern is equity across colleges. Should there be fundamental differences, beyond those expected in the 7.11 and 9.2 statements? This is a real issue, Dr. Carney emphasized. The Provost is very concerned about teaching and looks carefully at the teaching record in the file. She said she would be troubled if one person were granted tenure and another were not because of a difference in the composition of the file in the inclusion of written comments. This is a more fundamental question than whether "the college" or "the campus" makes a decision or the faculty governance body makes the decision.

What would she have the Committee do, Professor Chervany asked? He said he understood the argument, which is cogent; what is her recommendation? What she would like is a uniform policy on the use of written comments, Dr. Carney said. All or nothing is the only way to achieve equity. She said she understands that this topic provokes strong feelings, and recalled that this Committee and the Committee on Faculty Affairs took opposite views when the question was brought to the Faculty Senate a few years ago. The compromise was that the decision would be left to each college. She noted that part of the problem was addressed with the change recommended by the Committee on Academic Freedom and Tenure (to allow faculty members to request the deletion of scurrilous comments from the file).

There will be appropriate negative student comments in some small percentage of cases, Professor Chervany commented. His view, he said, is that if it gets to the point that the comments make the difference in the judgment on the teaching dimension, and that the decision to grant life-long tenure hinges on those comments, the answer should be "no" to granting tenure. Dr. Carney said an example might be a faculty member who receives good scores in some courses but not in others, even in the final probationary year; student comments could address fundamental issues (e.g., coming late to class, cancelling class, etc.). Everyone occasionally encounters a class that is just a mismatch, but on fundamental issues comments can make a difference: the scores may not suggest the individual should not be tenured but the comments may argue against it. In her four years on the job, there have been cases where she has read every single written comment from students and will do a discourse analysis to determine the number of positives and negatives. In some departments, a small number of negative comments will lead to a "no" vote on a candidate. Some colleges vary the use of comments by department, which also makes her uncomfortable. These issues do not arise in the easy cases, she pointed out.

Professor Wambach said people can be biased by the comments, even though they are the least reliable evidence in a file. And sometimes faculty may not see the written comment for two months while someone in a department types them up.

Most students do not write comments in the belief that they affect tenure, Ms. Evans commented, but that they can help make the class work better. Everyone understands, however, that the numbers do count in personnel files. Given that the students' intent can vary significantly, Professor Tarone said, the least expensive alternative would be to send all the comments to the faculty member and not track them at all. When someone is up for tenure, invite students to write on behalf of the faculty member. Professor Nelson said she did not favor using the comments in personnel decisions. Professor Siliciano said he agreed with Professor Tarone but worried that it would not be possible to get many student responses if asked to send a message later. He said he agreed with

Professor Chervany that all the comments should be included because those making the decision need all the information they can get.

Is teaching-award information included with the comments, Mr. Bartolotta asked? It depends on how comprehensive a file is, Dr. Carney said, something on which a group of faculty is working to develop best practices. Some units lay out the data well while some are much more difficult to read. All include the score, some include the written comments, and some include letters (although she has never seen a solicited letter that was negative).

Professor Ng asked if Dr. Carney has the prerogative to ask for comments in a borderline case. In CLA the comments are not in the primary file but they are available in a second file, so she has access to them. If the comments are not used in the personnel decision by the unit or college, she also does not have access to them. Is there an issue of making the 7.12 statements more consistent, Professor Ng then inquired? Dr. Carney said she believes they are getting more consistent, and almost all of them mention written student comments.

Ms. Phillips said that if comments were solicited from students during the promotion-and-tenure decision, perhaps they should not ask the faculty member to provide them but instead go to students in the classes taught by the faculty member for the last two years. Departments do things differently, Dr. Carney said; some sweep that broadly while others may focus on students who participated in UROP or took a directly-study course from the individual. Ms. Phillips said her concern is that comments at the end of the semester reflect the end of the semester, and students could be asked to reflect on the entire class. That would be a lot of work for a department, Dr. Carney responded, to which Ms. Phillips said that the decision about a life-time appointment warrants a lot of work. Professor Tarone said the comments from the last two years' of classes could be sent centrally. Vice Provost Carney said she was reluctant to rain on the parade but pointed out that while Dr. Bacig has done a wonderful job of handling the student-rating-of-teaching issues, including the online versions, her office does not have the capacity to handle all those comments.

Professor Wambach noted that peer review is supposed to be an important part of the evaluation of teaching; how can it be combined with student evaluations? Dr. Carney said she has another faculty committee that has been working on peer evaluation for the last 18 months to develop best practices. It is a very good group that is going beyond just classroom evaluations. The practices vary wildly across departments. She said she would like to see faculty members receive formative peer evaluation early in the term, evaluations that do not go in the file, and then receive summative evaluations at the end. There should be a way to give feedback that does not count in the personnel decision.

Professor Nelson said it was her view that they should get rid of the comments and improve other measures because the comments can be contextual and skewed for disciplinary reasons (e.g., some disciplines are more verbal than others). Skewed data should not determine the outcome when a candidate is on the tipping point. Comments are invaluable for faculty but should not be used to evaluate them. On the flip side, Professor Leger said, is what SCEP has argued in the past and what he supported: if the University is serious about improving undergraduate education, it should not throw away data. Students already do not believe the University uses the results of the ratings and a decision not to use them in personnel decisions would simply reinforce that perception. Then everyone should use them, Professor Nelson said.

Professor Chervany said he supported uniformity and keeping the comments in the file. He said he would also put the onus on colleges and departments to synthesize the elements of evaluation of teaching to provide a higher-quality record. If a case is truly on the margin, a better file would provide richer data. Some comments can be flaky but if there are a lot of comments in the file, one can begin to see major themes.

When does she need a decision, Professor Wambach asked Dr. Carney. Preferably now, Dr. Carney said, before any file preparation begins for next year. It was noted that the Faculty Consultative Committee could act on behalf of the Senate, if need be. Dr. Carney repeated her point that this matters. A department may say that written comments were strongly negative; when she does a discourse analysis, she finds that not to be true. It may be that one offering of one class went badly.

Professor Wambach asked for a straw poll. The Committee voted first on whether it favored uniformity in the use of written comments; the vote was 11 in favor, 2 not. The Committee next voted on whether, if there were uniformity, all the written comments should be included in the file; the vote was 8 in favor, 5 opposed.

Professor Wambach thanked Dr. Carney for her comments.

### **3. Report on Graduate Education**

Professor Wambach next noted that she had decided to exercise her prerogative as chair to ask that all of the administrative ex officio members of the Committee absent themselves for the discussion of the graduate-education task force report.

Professor Wambach began by observing that a lot of faculty disapprove the way the proposal to change graduate education and the Graduate School were rolled out, as an announcement. The Provost and President subsequently asked the task force chaired by Dean Crouch to consider more broadly whether or not the University should retain the Graduate School. The larger question is what functions should be kept central and which should go to the colleges. As part of the consultation process, this Committee has been asked to comment on the report from Dean Crouch's task force.

Professor Tarone noted that the task force was divided on whether there should continue to be a free-standing graduate school. Some argued graduate education will be more recognizable with a graduate school; others believe the name is less important than effective operations. Her question, she said, is how moving the functions in to the Provost's office would make them more operationally effective. There is no evidence presented that that would be the case; how do supporters of a plan to close the Graduate School and move some functions to the Provost's office believe the change would increase effectiveness?

Professor Wambach said the task force was split down the middle on the question of a leaner/meaner Graduate School versus a unit that is part of the Provost's office. The person in the position would have the same title as now. One concern of some members of the task force was that the Graduate School is not able to be nimble and change in structure would permit greater nimbleness; if it is streamlined but the structure remains intact, there would be little change. The Graduate School would of course argue to the contrary.

There seemed to a consensus on some points, Professor Tarone observed, but how will the Provost's office make things better? Some felt it was an important "brand" for the University to have a graduate school and dean; others say it has become bureaucratic over time and more authority should be put into the colleges, Professor Wambach said.

Professor Chervany said that as he read the task force report, in rough terms the argument was whether there should be a free-standing graduate school or the functions should be made part of a unit in the Provost's office. The recommendations also include a 20% reduction in staff. In either structure, it appears there would be an increase in efficiency. If so, one way to resolve the dispute is to let a group make a case for the brand identity and dig in to see if the efficiencies would be the same. If they are, one can make the case for the brand identity and a free-standing graduate school. If the brand identity comes with less efficiency, then it is harder to make the case for a free-standing graduate school. But it is a very good report that identifies things the Graduate School should give up. In the case of the professional master's degrees, it has worked well for the Carlson School to have them in the college.

If the grants and fellowships go to the Vice President for Research, what is left, Professor Siliciano asked? The task force debated block grants and fellowships and who could best administer them and be accountable for them, Professor Wambach reported. Some believe the allocations have not changed or been evaluated for a long time and have become fossilized, that there is no feedback loop, and that there are high transaction costs to determining who receives first-year fellowships. Others argued that the current system ensures that high quality programs are supported. The task force recommended that a second group consider this issue in more depth.

Mr. Bartolotta noted, on the point about brand identity, that the report contains a table with information about peer institutions but that there is no discussion of student satisfaction; why not think about that? Professor Wambach agreed and said they do not want to create delays for students. In the case of online applications, the Graduate School added questions that departments do not see as relevant. The question is who should control what is on the application form. One of her major concerns is the I20 forms, Professor Tarone said; the University has many international students and those forms must be handled quickly and well—that function should continue centrally.

Professor Nelson asked if there was anything new from the Senate discussion of the report. There was not, Professor Wambach said; the focus was on the process, not the report. Professor Chervany said he thought the Senate liked the report but wanted to admonish the leadership. Professor Tarone said the Senate pointed out it had had very little role in the discussion but was asked to rubber-stamp the recommendation. The President will ultimately decide, Professor Wambach said, but has indicated he is open to discussion.

Professor Siliciano noted that undergraduate education is run through the Provost's office and seems to run pretty well; does anyone see a benefit to a parallel structure for graduate education? Professor Wambach said there are several questions about the idea of a parallel structure. One is that Vice Provost McMaster works with the Senate governance structure and comes to these Committee meetings while the Graduate School has operated as a college with its own governance system, and there is a concern about how that system would transfer to the Provost's office. Another is that the Graduate School has coordinated admissions, student services, and degree clearance, which needs to

be done centrally. Vice Provost McMaster has large offices behind him to handle these matters for undergraduates. Another is about coordination and where the functions would go. The Directors of Graduate Study who spoke to FCC also emphasized that graduate education is very different from undergraduate education and the parallel structure would not be appropriate.

Professor Chervany said the analysis is backward. An argument for change must lead to improve effectiveness and more efficiency. Neither will be accomplished until the processes are improved; simply moving them does not change anything. There is a need to work on the critical processes to see where gains can be made, and that work may suggest how graduate education should be administered. The quasi-emotional argument engendered by the February 9 memo needs to be set aside and effort spent on looking at the block-grant process and others to see where improvements might be made. After that one can see how the functions should be organized.

Ms. Evans said she liked the distinction between professional masters programs and more traditional graduate education. What about funding for them? Professor Wambach said that big professional masters programs have staffs in place to manage them, but there are smaller programs, perhaps small colleges, that do not have staff, so the task force thought that colleges should have the option to have central support.

Discussion turned to cost-pool charges. Some believe that the cost pools are what instigated the entire discussion, Professor Wambach commented. Colleges pay cost-pool charges to the Graduate School but some do not believe they get anything in return, so believe that if the Graduate School were eliminated, they would recover those cost-pool funds. Dean Crouch pointed out, however, that the funds for colleges to pay cost-pool charges came originally from the central administration when the new budget model was established—and the colleges would not have that money without the creation of the cost pools. The concern of the deans is that some colleges receive proportionally more back than others. If programs are no longer in the Graduate School, the colleges might get to keep some of the cost-pool funds, but not all of them.

There was a feeling that the best decisions about graduate students are made locally, Professor Wambach said, and some faculty members believed that the graduate-program reviews were a waste of time and did not provide information useful for improving the programs.

Ms. Phillips said she was all in favor of local control, but if there is no Senate Committee on Graduate Policy, there could be differences in the treatment of graduate students. All of the policies could come to this Committee, Professor Wambach responded, and policies on graduate education moved into the University's policy library. If the Graduate School continues, she recommends that the policies be pulled out of the constitution into a separate set of documents so they can be updated when necessary without changing the constitution.

In response to a question from Mr. Bartolotta, Professor Wambach said there was strong support for having a central unit to provide a home for interdisciplinary programs, and that responsibility for them would be a major part of the vice provost's job.

One problem that came up, Professor Wambach reported, is that it can take a year for a college to receive approval from the Graduate School for a new 8XXX course—so some departments put

them at the 5XXX level to avoid the process. It can take up to a year just to change the title of a course. One question is why courses need approval from the Graduate School. How will that be better if the function is in the Provost's office, Professor Tarone inquired again. Will it be less bureaucratic and more efficient? The claim is that there is need for Graduate School review to ensure quality, Professor Wambach said; her question is why faculty would approve a low-quality program—and why would a college allow the faculty to do so? Because it brings in tuition revenue, Professor Tarone said, and they want to admit as many students as possible. Now they have to deal with the Graduate School and faculty from other colleges, a process she firmly believes in, Professor Tarone concluded.

What is driving this, Professor Wade asked? The Provost has indicated it is to save money. Professor Wambach said the President is convinced that money can be saved by streamlining the Graduate School. Has anyone done an audit, Professor Wade asked? Apart from the glaring point that the Graduate School is top-heavy on staff? There are also questions about transaction costs, Professor Wambach said, given that the colleges run successful programs without the bureaucracy of the Graduate School. There is frustration with what has been seen as the unresponsive structure of the Graduate School and the lack of nimbleness. Professor Chervany repeated his point that someone should look at the processes. He agreed that the Graduate School should be nimble and that processes should be efficient and effective, but those things can be accomplished without organizational change. When the analyses are completed, they may suggest an organizational structure.

There was no agreement on the organizational structure in the task force, Professor Wambach repeated, but there was a lot of agreement on a number of major elements of the report, including making the processes more efficient and adopting more accountability measures for graduate education.

Professor Wambach adjourned the meeting at 3:55.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota