

Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, October 8, 2008
2:00 – 4:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Cathrine Wambach (chair), Norman Chervany, Gail Dubrow, April Knutson, Richard McCormick, Robert McMaster, Kristen Nelson, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Emily Ronning, Erin Sperling, Molly Tolzmann, Michael Wade, Joel Weinsheimer

Absent: LeAnn Alstadt, James Leger, Paul Siliciano, Donna Spannaus-Martin, David Zeller

Guests: Susan VanVoorhis, Tina Falkner, Terri Tuzinski (Academic Support Resources)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) blank grades; (2) review of educational policies (course numbering, remedial courses, and other transcript notations; credit requirements for an undergraduate degree

1. Blank Grades

Professor Wambach convened the meeting at 2:00 and welcomed Ms. VanVoorhis and Dr. Falkner to present a new issue for discussion, blank grades.

If an instructor does not turn in a grade for a student the grade remains blank on the student's transcript. Ms. VanVoorhis explained that technically all undergraduates should have grades for every course, but there are cases where a grade has not been submitted and remains blank after a long period of time. Dr. Falkner reported that someone from the VA had contacted their office because it provides funding for students, who go to class and expect a grade. One of the students had a grade outstanding—it was not an "I," it was nothing. Dr. Falkner and Ms. VanVoorhis explained how blank grades come about: when filling out the initial grade report, an instructor must enter a grade for every student. Blank grades continue to be found on students' transcripts for at least 2 reasons: (1) the final grade roster is not submitted before the final grade roster expires, or (2) the instructor uses the supplemental grading application, which does not require that every name on the form have a grade.

Dr. Falkner reported that in total, since Fall 1999, there have been 20,153 blank grades, of which 5,061 have been for undergraduates (out of perhaps 200,000 or more). The student has usually done the work for the course, Dr. Falkner said, but they must count it as an "F" for the purposes of financial aid, NCAA eligibility certification, and are not counted by colleges in monitoring for progress to a degree. In some cases an instructor will leave the grade blank rather than submit an "F" (which the student may have earned because he or she stopped attending class or never attended in the first place); this practice makes it difficult for the University to monitor student progress and address retention issues.

* 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 represents the views of, nor are they binding on, the Senate, the Administration, or the Board of Regents.

Dr. Falkner distributed copies of a proposal for dealing with blank grades. They suggest changing the Grading and Transcript policy to allow for blank grades for undergraduates to lapse to an "F" six weeks after the end of the session in which the class was offered. Their office will work with graduate and professional programs, and international and study-abroad programs, to manage blank grades and ensure students in the latter instances are not adversely affected.

Professor Chervany said a blank is the combined responsibility of the faculty member and the student but that he would hate to see a policy that penalizes a student because the faculty member forgot to do something, something that is not the student's fault. A student may not look at his or her transcript for awhile and it would not be right for a blank to turn into an F. What there should be is a policy that puts pressure on instructors to turn in grades.

Ms. VanVoorhis said her office has no way to make instructors submit grades. Professor Chervany said that someone must go to departments and insist that this behavior stop. But he would not favor solving a faculty-induced problem by putting the onus on the backs of students. That is not right, he repeated.

Dean Green said that if there were 50 students in a class, one of them would notice that there are blanks. He wondered if the greater problem might be with independent or directed study. Ms. VanVoorhis said that is not a problem; all those grades are given through the supplemental form. What about having the same rule for the supplemental form as for the initial form, Dean Green asked? No blanks allowed. Ms. VanVoorhis said her office has only one technology person and they cannot add that rule to the system. That form is not usually for students who need grades, it is for instructors to correct grades. The supplemental form needs to be flexible, she said; some students finish a course early and need a grade, which can be filed with the supplemental form.

Professor Wambach observed that some of these blanks go back a number of years. If an instructor does not submit a grade or grades, the department chair should know. There is, however, no report on blank grades each semester, but if a department chair is to follow up, he or she needs that information. Professor Wade agreed that the department chair is responsible and perhaps instructors should be required to provide copies of grades to the chair.

Professor Nelson pointed out that blanks are a very small percentage of the grades awarded and the Committee should not use a sledgehammer to deal with the problem. It would be better to address it with technology if possible, and if it is a resources problem, make the change next year. If it can't be dealt with by technology, then faculty must be informed so they know they are required to give a grade. This is a small percentage, she repeated, so any change should not need to have an effect everyone.

Professor McCormick asked if the F would be a "soft" F that could be changed quickly. It would, Ms. VanVoorhis said. If the student is alerted, he or she could make sure something happens. It would be better to alert faculty, but someone has to be alerted. Professor Chervany noted again that the F affects student aid and NCAA eligibility. Dean Green said that to get attention on blank grades by giving a student an F is not logical. Ms. VanVoorhis asked for suggestions on what her office should do.

The decision should be based on principle, Professor Chervany said. And it should not put the burden on students, it should be on instructors. The University may not have the resources to make a technology change so it will have to do a workaround. The principle, however, should be to locate the responsibility where the problem is.

Professor Weinsheimer commented that it appears students have not complained, even with 5000 blanks. If the blanks are being counted as Fs now, apparently students are not being punished for an F on their transcripts.

Whose job is it to submit the grades, Professor Wade inquired? The instructor's, Ms. VanVoorhis said. Can there be a policy that the University will not accept blank grades, he asked? A red light comes on if someone doesn't submit a grade? If an instructor submits grades via the final grade roster, there is an error message that appears if any of the grades are left blank, Dr. Falkner said. So an instructor must put in all the grades, Professor Wade concluded. Ms. VanVoorhis reminded the Committee again that an instructor can skip using the final grade report and file all grades on the supplemental form—which does not require a grade for every student.

Professor McCormick suggested that rather than track individual faculty members, there should be a report next semester on blanks and warnings sent to the departments with courses that have blanks. Professor Weinsheimer asked if there would be any advantage to taking the report to the dean's level. If not all the data can be compiled, perhaps particular designators that are a problem could be brought to the dean. Vice Provost McMaster said he was concerned about the workload for Ms. VanVoorhis's staff. They do not have the resources to implement new system elements, but he agreed it would be a good idea to send the information to the deans. The associate deans for undergraduate education could ride herd on the departments.

Professor Wambach asked if it would be feasible to send a report with the number of outstanding blank grades to each dean and ask them to clear up the problem. Ms. VanVoorhis said it would be and that she wanted to send the report approximately six weeks after the end of the term so it could be addressed with faculty before they leave for the summer.

Dean Green asked about the implications of changing the system so a blank turned to an I. Ms. VanVoorhis said the result is the same; an I is also treated as an F for purposes of financial aid and eligibility. Either that or the Committee would have to change the definition of an I, since currently an I is not to be given without a contract and is only to be given if the student has completed a substantial amount of work for the course. (No one on the Committee thought that desirable.)

Professor Weinsheimer said he agreed with Professor Chervany: students should not bear any responsibility for failure of an instructor to turn in a grade. The blank should not be an I or an F. If he loses a student paper, he has to give the student the benefit of the doubt. He said he would prefer that the system put in all As rather than an F or an I, although he didn't care for that option, either.

Professor Chervany urged that reports be forwarded to deans, along with the principles this Committee enunciates that should guide their thinking. This Committee is the watchdog for educational principles at the University. Perhaps the system can change in the future. One can understand there are not resources to make the change now, but the institutional response should come down to principles.

Dean Green surmised that a significant proportion of the students who had the blanks, especially as one goes farther back in time, don't know and don't care about them. The instructor is at fault but if the student doesn't care, there is no reason to harass the dean about inactive students. He suggested leaving the current blanks dormant; if students come back to complain, they must be dealt with—and if they transfer, perhaps they don't want the blanks dealt with. He suggested that perhaps there could be a computer query about which of the students with blanks are still active students, and that it was probably not necessary to worry about those who are not active.

Can students graduate with a blank on their transcript, Ms. Phillips asked? They can if they didn't need the course, Dr. Falkner said. And when a student graduates, Ms. VanVoorhis pointed out, a transcript is frozen.

Ms. VanVoorhis said that they can review transcripts for Fall 2008, and could go back to previous terms. The consensus of the Committee was that she need not do a retroactive review.

Ms. Tolzmann said she did not see the problem if a blank converted to an F. If she did not want the F, and did the work for the course, she'd be motivated to get it changed. If it changed her GPA, she added, she would notice.

Professor Wambach summarized the Committee's position as opposing the change of a blank to an F and as favoring notification to the deans with a request for follow-up, but only for Fall 2008 and after six weeks have elapsed.

If the solution is to send the information to the deans, Professor McCormick said, there should be a Committee resolution along the lines suggested by Professor Chervany indicating that it is important that the deans clear up the problem. Professor Chervany suggested it say that it is the sense of the Committee that instructors are responsible for submitting grades, and to the extent there are blanks, the deans must talk with department chairs and individual instructors to solve the problem. He wagered that the number of blanks would drop dramatically if faculty were more thorough and timely and did what was expected of them.

Ms. Ronning asked how difficult it would be to send an email to the student at the same time notification goes to the dean. She could decide if she were concerned. She agreed that the burden should not be on the student—but they are also responsible for checking their transcript. They are responsible, after taking a class, for logging on to see if they passed.

Vice Provost McMaster noted that at the University of Iowa, instructors who do not turn in their grades do not receive their next paycheck. He was not recommending that policy for the University. Professor McCormick said that it is up to the administration to decide what sticks are to be used.

Professor Wambach thanked Ms. VanVoorhis and Dr. Falkner for their report.

2. Continued Review of Educational Policies

The Committee returned to the review of the revised educational policies.

The General Counsel has recommended that the policy requirements be separated from the guidelines and best practices in the "Classroom Expectations." Professor Wambach said she would follow up on parsing the document into the two pieces.

Next came the policy on "Course Numbering." Professor Wambach reported that at one of the forums, it was reported that the Academic Health Center uses 0xxx numbers for field work courses for which no credit is given but which it wants acknowledged on the transcript. The problem is that for financial aid purposes, 0xxx courses are considered remedial and they do not count for degrees. Ms. VanVoorhis reported that there are other uses of the 0xxx level in other units as well.

What harm is done if 0xxx numbers are used for various purposes, Dean Green asked? Around the nation, Ms. VanVoorhis explained, 0xxx means remedial. That does not matter if the Medical School is using the numbers for its own purposes, Dean Green responded. Are the activities offered as a course, Ms. VanVoorhis asked? That is up to the Medical School, Dean Green said. Ms. VanVoorhis pointed out there are insurance issues raised; Dean Green agreed it is a legitimate issue if student records are being manipulated in order to provide insurance coverage. Boynton Health Service would be concerned.

Professor Chervany commented that if students must take remedial work and get it on their transcript, that is a clean use of the 0xxx numbers. All other activities that a unit wants to capture on the record should use a different designator. Ms. VanVoorhis said that important experiences can be noted on the transcript without using a course designator. The distinction is between the academic record and an activities record. If something is required for a degree, why not make it a milestone, which is recorded on the transcript? The Graduate School registers milestones on the transcript, she pointed out.

Dean Green noted that the Graduate School does use 0xxx numbers to mark status in the Graduate School; 0999 carries no credit but marks a student as active and shows he or she is enrolled. Each program is expected to monitor how long a student is active; the number was put into use when students were required to register every semester but not to pay tuition. Is it because they are working on a thesis, Ms. VanVoorhis asked? They do not investigate what a student is doing, Dean Green said. How do other institutions mark graduate student status once the 24 thesis credits have been taken and paid for, Professor Wambach asked. There are "registration occurrences," Dean Green said, not courses, with a designator and number. The director of graduate studies can look at it and monitor student progress. Supposedly they are working toward their degree, Ms. VanVoorhis said. In other cases, however, the number might record volunteer work, activities that are truly not a course.

There are not that many remedial courses left at the University, Vice Provost McMaster observed, mostly in math and ESL.

Professor Weinsheimer said that the Graduate School tracking could be at the 9xxx level. To the extent others might be reading transcripts, it would appear that 0xxx registrations are remedial. This should be an easy remedy. Vice Provost McMaster concurred that the Graduate School should use another number. Professor Chervany suggested that if milestones can be recorded on the transcript, they should have a designator and policy should require that other events that are not courses or academic enrollment should use a milestone. Ms. VanVoorhis and Dr. Falkner said that

passing a preliminary oral, service, passing a language proficiency test, etc., are all examples of accomplishments that can be entered on the transcript for students.

Dean Green said the Graduate School can make a change if it has a little notice. He agreed that in no case should the 0xxx number be used as a sub rosa way to obtain insurance coverage. He asked Ms. VanVoorhis to let him know when a new number should be adopted.

The Committee agreed that the description of 0xxx courses in the Course Numbering policy should be revised to make it clear they are remedial. Dean Green said that units currently using 0xxx for other purposes should be advised of the change.

The Committee turned next to "Credit Requirements for an Undergraduate (Baccalaureate) Degree: Twin Cities, Morris, Rochester" and took up the first item in the policy:

1. Degrees are awarded by the University, not by colleges or departments or campuses. Degree requirements and standards are set by the University, but the determination of requirements and standards related to programs and majors are delegated to departments, colleges, and campuses, but must be consistent with policy.

Dean Green recalled that at the last meeting the Committee talked about the campus-specific requirements for a degree (that is, "to be eligible for a University of Minnesota undergraduate degree, a student must present at least 30 semester credits awarded by the University of Minnesota campus from which he or she is seeking to graduate, at least 15 credits of the last 30 credits earned prior to the awarding of a University degree, must be awarded by the University of Minnesota campus from which a student is seeking to graduate, [and] students must complete at least half of upper-division major work (3XXX courses or higher) on the campus from which they are seeking to graduate"). There seems to be an issue of pride in getting some number of credits from a campus before a degree is granted, he said. It was noted that pride was less an issue than that departments have been unwilling to recommend granting a degree to a student who has taken very few courses from it.

Diplomas all say "University of Minnesota," Dr. Falkner said. Her office is constantly asked why it does not indicate the campus. The transcript does indicate the campus.

The Committee agreed to amend the first sentence to read "Degrees are awarded by the Regents of the University of Minnesota on recommendation of the faculty, not by colleges or departments or campuses."

It was agreed that S/N grades should be explained, with a reference to the grading policy, because there is no definition in this policy.

Vice Provost McMaster inquired if there is a problem with #5 in the policy:

5. [Twin Cities only] D grades not permitted in major courses. Required courses for the major in which a student receives a D grade (with or without plus or minus) do not count toward the major (including transfer courses). All other courses (including courses in the major field that are not required to complete the major) will count toward a degree if the student earns a D or better.

Professor Wambach said it is a problem for the colleges. There are variations among departments in what they consider to be "major" courses and the extent to which "pre-major" courses are part of the major. The Committee has been asked by the units to give guidance on what it thinks the major is: are they only upper-division courses or also required pre-major courses? Or should there be a rule that the colleges must make their own decisions? At present some could decide one way and others another way, Professor Wambach confirmed in response to a question from Professor Chervany. It is variations at the department level that is the problem, Dr. McMaster said. Professor Wambach agreed and reported that the advising network has asked that this be clarified so there is consistency. The best option might be to allow the colleges to set their own rules, Dr. McMaster said.

Professor Nelson said her department went through this when the College of Natural Resources merged with CFANS. They decided they would not allow D grades in pre-major required courses. They did so for curricular reasons: they saw a lower success rate with students who came into a major with very low grades in pre-major courses. Professor Wambach inquired rhetorically why, if her department required a course to enter the major, they would accept a D.

Can that vary with the prerequisite, Ms. Ronning asked? One can see that a student must know statistics or calculus if those are important to the major. It could be that in other majors the desire is for exposure to a field. Professor McCormick said he has argued for a global policy but that Professor Siliciano provided a good counter-example with regard to one non-CBS course required by CBS. CBS does not want to bar students who received D grades in that particular course taken outside CBS. That, Professor McCormick concluded, argues for policies set at the college level. Ms. Phillips pointed out that students can receive a D in a course and later earn a B in a more advanced course.

Dr. Falkner noted that the Committee had charged her and Ms. VanVoorhis to work with a group of collegiate advising representatives to see if they could develop a proposed policy that would create consistency.

Professor Chervany said that the University has established a policy that any unit should not give credit in the major for a D. It set a standard and should stand on it. He said he did not believe ease of interpretation for advisers is a reason to change. The policy should provide for local autonomy for each school to decide what will constitute part of the major—this is a quality-assurance mechanism. Colleges need to write policies clearly so advisers can advise students about major and pre-major courses. Professor McCormick noted that colleges do the advising, and if a student is thinking about transferring, he or she should be referred to an adviser in the new college. Professor Chervany said the technology exists to allow students access to the information they need about majors and pre-requisites by clicking on a link. Dr. McMaster agreed but asked about creating difficulties for students who transfer between colleges. Advising is purely collegiate and could break down. It could be that a student could start in one college that allows a D in non-major pre-requisite courses but then wishes to transfer to another college that does not allow them, and the student would not be able to get credit. If the program believes a course is essential to its curriculum, the student would have to re-take the course, Professor Chervany said. Dr. McMaster commented that the more he thinks about this, the more he wonders if there would be a problem with different college rules.

Professor Wade suggested that precision in language is required to define courses not in the major and not pre-requisite to the major. Dr. Falkner noted again that some majors do count pre-requisite courses because they find that students who do badly in them do not succeed in the major. At

present the policy does not define "major course," Professor Wambach observed. There is nothing that bars departments from requiring a C- or better in pre-major courses.

Ms. Ronning said that if a major requires calculus, and it will affect everything else the student does in the major, it would not be responsible for a department to allow a D if it would affect the performance of the student in the major. Professor Chervany agreed. He said that if colleges were doing what they should be, they would identify the courses that a student must do well on in order to succeed in a major. And, Ms. Phillips added, in some cases earning only a C- could be a problem (e.g., in calculus) and in some cases a department may need to set a higher bar in pre-major courses if students can be expected to complete a degree. This argues for college and department autonomy in setting standards for pre-major courses, Professor Wambach said. Vice Provost McMaster said he would be nervous about policy language allowing units to set a standard of "C- or better" in courses because some might want to require an A in a course. The problem, Professor McCormick said, is whether a department is using the pre-requisite course as a predictor of success or a way to winnow out students in order to keep the numbers down. It was suggested that if a department wished to set a standard higher than a C-, it would need to be approved outside the college (e.g., in Vice Provost McMaster's office).

Dr. Falkner said she and Ms. VanVoorhis would provide a report to the Committee before February.

Professor Wambach adjourned the meeting at 3:50.

-- Gary Engstrand

University of Minnesota