Minutes*

Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, March 26, 2003
1:00 – 3:00
238A Morrill Hall

Present: Martin Sampson (chair), Wilbert Ahern, (George Green for) Victor Bloomfield, Dale Branton, Vernon Cardwell, Shawn Curley, Gretchen Haas, Frank Kulacki, Marsha Odom, Kim Pinske, Karen Seashore, Mary Ellen Shaw, Mary Sue Simmons, Craig Swan

Absent: Scott Ferguson, Carol Miller, Douglas Wangensteen

Guests: Susan VanVoorhis, Tina Rovick (Enrolled Student Services); Len Boike (Athletic Director, Crookston), Jon Holland, Jason Tangquist, coaches, Crookston); Associate Dean Peter Hudleston (Council of Undergraduate Deans)

[In these minutes: (1) data on degrees with honors and with distinction; (2) request from Crookston for exception to policy barring student events during study day and finals week; (3) calendars; (4) length of the break between semesters; (5) policy on feedback to students; (6) continuous registration]

1. Degrees with Honors and with Distinction

Professor Sampson convened the meeting at 1:05 and turned to Ms. VanVoorhis for a report on the number and percentage of degrees with distinction and degrees with honor that were awarded by college and campus. The Senate policy on Degrees with Distinction and Degrees with Honors requires an annual report to the Committee. The policy provides that "it is the expectation of the Senate that in general, a college will not award degrees with honors and degrees with distinction, in total, to more than approximately 10-15% of any graduating class."

Ms. VanVoorhis distributed a table containing the data for the years 2000-01 and 2001-02. Vice Provost Swan reminded the Committee that degrees with distinction are awarded solely on the basis of GPA (3.75 for distinction, 3.9 for high distinction) whereas the degrees with honor require not only achievement of a stipulated GPA (3.5 for cum laude, 3.665 for magna cum laude, and 3.75 for summa cum laude) but also participation in a "fully-developed" honors program in a college or campus, which includes writing a thesis. Students may graduate both with honors and with distinction. Colleges decide if they are going to offer an honors program or degrees with distinction.

It appears that only two units are outliers in terms of the number of degrees with honors or distinction, Professor Seashore commented. What happens if a college is out of compliance? Do they receive a letter from the Provost? Dr. Swan said the parameters for the programs are set in Senate policy and how to respond to colleges that do not follow them would be a Committee decision. There was a clear decision, for example, that the GPA requirement should apply across the University and

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not vary by unit. Professor Sampson suggested that he could send a letter as Chair of the Committee to the colleges pointing out the variance from the Senate expectation.

The only way to get at the variance is in the grading policy, Dr. Shaw said; the units may have inflated grades. Professor Cardwell agreed that the issue is "grade inflation" if a unit is above the 10-15% guideline. He said that Professor Sampson should call attention to the language of the policy and that faculty in the units need to be more discriminating. The decision is ultimately up to the units, however, Professor Sampson observed; the Committee is not in the business of revoking the designation that accompanies the degrees. Professor Kulacki maintained that two data points (two years of data) do not establish a trend; the letter should simply call the data to the attention of the dean and note that the numbers were higher than expected under the Senate policy. A third year of similar data would begin to suggest a trend.

Associate Dean Green asked if anyone thought it was anomalous that the GPA requirements for the degrees with Latin honors were lower than those for degrees with distinction. Professor Cardwell pointed out that students must engage in many other activities to obtain the degree with honors and that a much smaller number are awarded such degrees. This Committee, it was noted, had INCREASED the GPA requirement for degrees with distinction, over the requirements for the degrees with honors, because the former was based exclusively on GPA rather than additional work.

Professor Odom said that the policy should acknowledge different admission standards for different colleges and campuses so that one would expect different performance among the units. That is the Harvard argument, Professor Seashore said: Everyone is above average so everyone should receive an A.

Professor Cardwell said there is no real problem if one looks at the totals. For the Twin Cities campus, 11.8% of students received a degree with honors or distinction (or both) in 2000-01 and 11.2% did so in 2001-02. Those numbers are in line with the policy. And it may be appropriate to look at admissions standards for a unit to learn if there is justification for variance from the policy expectation.

These data should be released to all of the newspapers, Professor Seashore said, to demonstrate that the University does not suffer from grade inflation. There is a policy, colleges are within the policy requirements, and not everyone is getting an A. Dr. Shaw said that the Committee may see a gradual rise in the number of degrees with distinction because the qualifications of incoming students are increasing. That raises the floor, not the ceiling, Professor Seashore said, and should not affect the top 10%. Dr. Swan observed, however, that the University has seen a big increase in applications throughout the academic distribution so there may be more students in the top part of the range as well. In that event, Dr. Green said, an increase in the number of degrees with distinction should not be considered inflation. Professor Cardwell wondered if the increased credit load might dampen that increase; Dr. Swan said the 13-credit rule could cut both ways: It could also make students more serious about their academic work. Professor Ahern said that Morris students take more credits and have higher GPAs; one could also look at the size of classes, he said, to see if there is an effect on GPA.

Professor Sampson thanked Ms. VanVoorhis for her report. These data present a face of the University that is not widely known, he commented.

2. Appeal from Crookston

The Committee next took up an appeal from the Crookston campus for two athletic teams that had competitive opportunities during the study day/finals week period. By Senate policy, any University-sponsored activities are prohibited during study day and finals week unless this Committee grants an exception. Professor Sampson welcomed Athletic Director Lon Boike from the Crookston campus, who was connected to the meeting by telephone.

Mr. Boike had provided materials to the Committee earlier and asked for an exception for the golf and equestrian teams.

Before acting on the requests, the Committee looked at the policy on athletic competition during study day and finals week that had been adopted for the Twin Cities campus. That policy provides that if an event is in normal progression to a championship, the (Assembly) Committee did not have to act specifically to approve the exception as long as appropriate arrangements were made for study and exams. This policy, however, does not apply to the other campuses. Professor Ahern suggested that the Committee might wish to make the same delegation of authority to the other campuses in order that they also adopt a "logical progression" policy.

The Committee agreed to take up the question of the two teams separately. The Crookston golf team was in the position described by the Twin Cities policy: it qualified for an event as the logical progression toward a championship. The Committee was informed of the academic performance of the members of the golf team and the arrangements that had been made for study and exams. The Committee voted unanimously to approve the golf team travel.

The Committee next took up the equestrian team request. In this case, the sport is not officially recognized by the NCAA; it is, however, considered the equivalent of an Olympic "demonstration sport," labeled an "emerging sport." The NCAA allows a school to use such sports to meet the sports-sponsorship criteria for NCAA membership. The equestrian team has been a club sport in the past but is now considered intercollegiate and is partially funded by the athletic department. They also have an equine science program, Mr. Boike noted. In response to a question from Professor Cardwell, Mr. Boike also reported that rules about eligibility, length of season, practices, and so on are governed by the NCAA and the athletic department. Study plans have also been made in the event the team is allowed to travel over the study day/finals week period.

Professor Sampson noted that the Committee was not bound by the fact that the team is or is not an NCAA sport; the Senate policy provides the Committee authority to make an exception for ANY student group sponsored by the University. He suggested it would not be fair to exclude this group because it did not meet NCAA sponsorship requirements when such criteria might not be imposed on a non-athletic group. Professor Kulacki argued, however, that to approve the request would set a dangerous precedent for club and emerging sports. Professor Sampson said the record should show that the Committee was concerned about, and inquired about, study time for students who participate.

Mr. Holland, coach of the team, reported that there are about 300 colleges that field equestrian teams, with the participation of about 5000 students. The Twin Cities campus is trying to assemble a

team for 2003-04, he noted. They have about 50 students on the roster and six students transferring to UMC because of the program.

It was moved and voted 10-1 to approve the exception for the equestrian team.

Professor Odom said she would bring to a future meeting a suggestion that the Morris and Crookston campuses be granted the authority to adopt a policy similar to that in place for the Twin Cities that would allow teams to participate in events during study day and finals week if the event is in normal progression to a championship sanctioned by the appropriate national sport governing body and if appropriate arrangements for study and exams have been made. This Committee would need to approve the policies, Professor Ahern noted.

3. Calendars

The Committee turned next to the 2006-07 calendars. Dr. Rovic recalled that the Committee set as a goal approving calendars for four academic years. Approval of these calendars will keep the schedule of approved calendars set for four years. For the Twin Cities campus, as the Committee recommended and the Senate approved earlier in the year, fall semester has 70 days and spring semester has 74 days.

Dr. Rovic noted that Duluth and the Twin Cities try to follow the same calendar; the other two campuses start earlier. Professor Odom noticed that the Crookston spring break is different from the Twin Cities and Duluth, which can cause problems, and said she would inquire about the difference.

The Committee unanimously approved the proposed calendars for action by the Senate.

4. Length of the Break Between Semesters

Dr. Rovic informed the Committee that the Office of the Registrar has received comments to the effect that the break between fall and spring semesters is too long and disruptive to students. A future agenda can be discussion of whether to start spring semester before the Martin Luther King holiday. She noted that summer session on the Twin Cities campus is not supposed to start before the public schools are out; if the spring semester were to start earlier, there would be a longer break around the May term.

What does "disruptive" mean, Professor Sampson inquired. Dr. Swan reported that some have argued students are gone so long during the break that their attachments to the University begin to atrophy. If there is less time away, they would have a stronger bond with the campus. Starting earlier would allow an extra spring break, Professor Seashore suggested.

Dean Green said that the Committee has been through many calendar discussions and he would not be inclined to re-open them.

This is a legitimate question, Professor Cardwell said. Students say the break is too long but they can't get a job so they would just as soon get on with their education. There would be a number of positives associated with finishing the spring semester earlier in May.

This change would be effective for the 2007-08 calendar, if it were made, Professor Sampson noted, and said the issue could be brought up at a future meeting.

5. Feedback Policy

Professor Sampson distributed copies of a draft policy concerning feedback to students about their performance in classes, noting that it responded to the issue raised when a student asked about receiving a test back. Should there be a policy, he asked? Instructors are responsible for providing responses and comments to let students know about their academic work.

Professor Odom said she had looked at the Classroom Expectations Guidelines; they include other things an instructor is expected to do but provision of feedback is not included per se. It could be added, Dr. Swan said.

Professor Seashore said she did not like to develop policy in response to incidents that happen rarely. Unless one sees a lot of grievances about a lot of faculty not providing feedback, she said she did not believe the Committee should act. Ms. Haas said that because one does not hear about it does not mean it is not a problem and a policy could be helpful with end-of-semester problems. Professor Seashore said there were no data suggesting this is a problem, although she did not object to Committee action but preferred to do so only if there is a need. Professor Ahern agreed with Professor Seashore.

Professor Branton said there can be a problem that does not rise to the level of complaints; there could be a number of students who do not complain. A Committee statement could encourage people to provide more information to students. Dr. Swan recalled that in his eight years in the CLA dean's office there was only one complaint from a student about this that came to his attention. If the Committee wishes to do something, it should be in a general way. He said that he writes on student papers but few pick up their finals at the end of spring semester; if he were to write extensively on each one he would have trouble meeting the deadline for reporting grades. Committee action should not be too prescriptive.

The question is if a student asks about a grade, did he or she get an explanation, Professor Seashore said. Professor Odom said that as a department head she hears from students about receiving no marks on papers. She agreed that a Committee statement should not be too specific but there could be stronger language than is currently contained in the Classroom Expectations Guidelines.

Professor Sampson said that he and Ms. Haas would look into student opinion and bring the issue back to a later meeting.

6. Continuous Registration

Professor Sampson welcomed Associate Dean Peter Hudleston to the meeting to discuss a change in the Twin Cities academic policy governing continuous registration and leaves of absence.

Dean Hudleston reported that the Council of Undergraduate Deans (CUD) requests the Committee to recommend to the Senate a change in the policy. At present an undergraduate student who has not been granted a leave of absence and who does not register for two consecutive semesters

(excluding summer) is placed on "inactive" status. If placed on "inactive" status, a student must contact his or her college office for approval to become an active student again (such permission is not required when a student has a leave of absence). CUD believes this policy is not consistent with efforts to improve retention and graduation rates and therefore recommends that the period be shortened from two semesters to one: If a student does not register for a semester and does not obtain a leave of absence, he or she must have college approval to re-enroll. If a student stops out for a semester, he or she can delay graduation--and such stopping out often leads to dropping out. If the University discourages students from casually taking a semester off it should do so. The current policy does not encourage students to take semesters off but it does say that it is acceptable to stay out for a semester without endangering student status. The idea is to tell students the University expects them to stay in school continuously.

People stop out for many reasons, Dean Hudleston said, but a large fraction say they intend to finish their degree--although few do. So CUD proposes to shorten the period of stopping out. There was no such policy when the University was on quarters, he clarified in response to a question.

Right now if a student does not show up for a semester, current policy implies that the University does not care, Dr. Swan said. The student will receive a letter a couple of weeks later. If the policy is changed, the expectation will be that students are full-time: they graduate and leave the University or they ask for a formal leave of absence. It will be important to communicate with students in advance, to tell them that if they are going to stop out they need to talk with someone before they do so. That shows the University cares and wants to talk about it before a student stops out. Having a leave of absence would make the decision more planful.

Could a student come in after the start of a semester and request a leave of absence, Dr. Shaw asked? They could, Dr. Swan said.

It is not clear what the consequences are if a student is absent without a leave, Professor Cardwell said. Is there any penalty? Do they lose their slot in a program? If they do not apply for a leave of absence, Dean Hudleston said, they could be held to new program requirements whereas they would have to meet old requirements if they had the leave. There is no fee to get back into the University. In principle, if a college is full, it could say thee is no space and not allow a student without a leave back in, Dr. Swan added. The intent is to make students more planful,

Professor Seashore said she favored anything that would make students more planful but did not see a link between that goal and this proposal. This is not the way students think--they just leave and high percentage do not come back in a short period. This proposal will not affect that behavior.

Ms. VanVoorhis said that resources would be freed up in the colleges that currently monitor the students who have received a warning and for those students who are about to become inactivated. In addition, financial aid resources would become available sooner by changing this policy.

In the past, students stop in and out and the University never knows who will come back, Ms. VanVoorhis said. The point is to make students understand the University expects continuous registration. All have assumed they could use old program requirements, which may not be true. This will require them to talk to someone in the college about new program requirements. This is a very small piece of how to manage these students, Professor Seashore suggested.

Professor Curley said he agreed with Professor Seashore. The rationale is to signal to students the importance of continuous registration, but 90% of students who drop out do not return and this simply makes it more difficult for the 10% who do. This proposal is more proactive in that it says to students they should talk to someone before they leave, Ms. VanVoorhis said.

Dr. Shaw said she liked the idea of sending a message to students early in the semester about coming in to obtain a leave of absence. If they are in town, they can do so to protect their standing.

The Committee voted 11-1 in favor of the change.

Professor Sampson adjourned the meeting at 3:05.

-- Gary Engstrand