

Minutes*

**Senate Committee on Educational Policy
Wednesday, September 5, 2007
1:30 – 3:30
238A Morrill Hall**

Present: Cathrine Wambach (chair), LeAnn Alstadt, William Bart, (George Green for) Gail Dubrow, April Knutson, James Leger, Richard McCormick, Claudia Neuhauser, Peh Ng, Jane Phillips, Paul Siliciano, Craig Swan, Molly Tolzmann, Douglas Wangenstein

Absent: Donna Spannaus-Martin, Joel Weinsheimer

Guests: Richard Howard (Director, Institutional Research), Ronald Huesman, John Kellogg, Ronald Matross (Institutional Research)

Other: none

[In these minutes: (1) report of the chair; (2) Voluntary System of Accountability; (3) update on retention and graduation rates]

1. Introductions and Comments from the Chair

Professor Wambach convened the meeting at 1:35 and began with a round of introductions. She then commented that there are three big projects before the Committee that carry over from last year: the revised teaching evaluation questions, the report from the Council on Liberal Education recommending new liberal education requirements for the Twin Cities campus, and the Student Learning Outcomes adopted by the Senate, the last of which are being piloted by a number of departments in terms of integrating them into the curriculum and assessing them. There are, in addition, a significant number of additional issues pending.

2. Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA)

Professor Wambach said she thought it would be good to start the year with an update on and data about retention and graduation rates. The University's strategic-positioning goal (for the Twin Cities campus) is to be among the top three public research universities; to reach that goal, retention and graduation rates must improve. She invited Dr. Howard and his colleagues to inform the Committee about what has been happening. She also asked Dr. Howard to discuss an initiative on learner outcomes across institutions, an effort that has developed as institutional presidents came together in response to the Spellings commission

Dr. Howard said he would deal with the learner outcomes initiative first. Last spring Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings decided the best way to get control of higher education was to establish a set of standards that regional accrediting agencies would apply to institutions, including

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requiring them to reveal data on costs. At the same time, the Higher Education Act came to the U.S. Senate; Senator Lamar Alexander asked Secretary Spellings to delay implementing her plans during the debate about the Higher Education Act. The higher-education associations in Washington got quite active on these issues. The question is how institutions can be accountable without the federal government setting accrediting-agency standards. The private colleges took action first; more recently, the National Association of State Universities and Land Grant Colleges (NASULGC) and the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASCU) joined to look at the way public institutions could document accountability. The two groups appointed committees on several topics (student learning, student engagement, etc.) One outcome of the effort is the Voluntary System of Accountability (VSA).

Dr. Howard distributed copies of a handout for a hypothetical university illustrating a template that the presidents and provosts are considering for the Voluntary System of Accountability. The (standardized) form would provide information on student demographics, success, retention, and progress rates, costs of attendance and financial aid, (undergraduate) admissions data (including ACT/SAT score ranges), degrees/areas of study (in very broad categories), student-faculty ratio and class sizes, student housing, campus safety (required by federal law), and student experiences, perceptions, and satisfaction. In almost every case, there is an associated link that provides additional information from the institution's website.

One of the useful additions is data on transfers and graduation at other institutions. Information would be available about the percentage of students (by cohort) who had graduated from the institution 4 and 6 years later, graduated from another institution 4 or 6 years later, still at the institution or still enrolled at another institution. These data will not capture 100% of students, Dr. Howard said, but it will cover most, and the University exchanges data with virtually all of the institutions to which students might transfer. Each campus would have staff fill in the information and the form would be posted on its website. The institutional data could be provided now; the plan is that institutions would be asked to provide student engagement data within the next couple of years and student learning outcome data in four or five years.

Committee members offered several views and questions.

- Is there any plan to track sophomore-junior as well as freshman-sophomore retention? Not at present, but that could change, Dr. Howard said.
- The information will be provided in pdf format? (It will.) That will mean the data cannot be manipulated. Dr. Howard said that is what the presidents preferred. Dr. Swan said the audience is primarily parents and students, who are not going to do research on the data; researchers who are interested will probably be able to obtain databases.
- The originally-intended audience was students and parents, Dr. Howard said, but that has been expanded somewhat to include those in political office.
- Could this effort be a lever to make changes? It can be used to make comparisons, Dr. Howard said, but it has yet to be determined how the data would be used except to make them available to parents and students. Unlike the U.S. News & World Report rankings, which use algorithms, these forms present facts.

	42	82
4-year graduation rate %	15	41
5-year graduation rate %	37	58
6-year graduation rate %	45	61

-- The number of freshmen applications for this fall is projected to be over 26,000 for 5,300 spots.

-- The percentage of freshmen from the top 10% and top 25% of their high-school class will continue to increase.

-- There has been a significant increase in the graduation rates, in part because the initial rate was so low. This increase is not by chance, rather reflects the hard work of a lot of individuals across the campus, but the numbers are still not where the University wants them to be.

Drs. Matross and Swan reviewed with the Committee longitudinal first-to-second-year retention rates for all campuses (since 1984). The lines on the graph go up and down from year to year but the general trend lines are up for three of the four campuses; Morris fluctuates between 80 and 90% (for 2005, UMMC is about 87%, UMM is about 83%, UMD is about 79%, and UMC is about 71%). The UMC rate has been improving markedly in recent years as it becomes a more mature 4-year campus.

Another set of graphs illustrated what increases would have to be achieved to meet the announced goals; the lines from the current year slope up and to the right. For the Twin Cities, the 4-year graduation goal for 2008 is 60% (now about 41%). The corresponding numbers for the other campuses are 40% (25%) UMC; 40% (27%), UMD; and 60% (48%) UMM. The goals for all campuses are aggressive but are what are needed for them to rank highly in comparison with their peers.

Committee members next examined a complicated graph of first-year retention rates for the Twin Cities campus that factored in average high-school rank, percentage living in residence halls, and programmatic changes (e.g., Residential College, living-learning communities, convocation, freshman seminars, 13-credit rule), all since 1990. The line generated from the data points goes steadily up over the 15 years represented on the graph. Ms. Phillips commented that it appeared the retention rate was increasing even without the steps the University has taken, similar to telling your dog to "sit" after it has already sat. Dr. Swan agreed that might be the case but observed that no one knows the counterfactual. Each of the programmatic additions or changes contributes to a stronger student experience, and while it would not be possible to get data on the effect of convocation, there are data on freshman seminars (students who take them do better and graduate in a more timely fashion). The Committee is seeing history in these data, Dr. Swan said, and averred that if the campus had not paid attention, the changes would not have occurred.

Dean Green observed that one significant factor is the quality of the incoming freshman class; as that increases, so does the graduation rate. Dr. Swan agreed but pointed that the University of Minnesota under-performed compared to its peers taking into account the quality of the students who entered. The University was making excuses, he said, which did not serve the students, the University, or the state.

Graduation rates are attributed to the campus where the student started, Dr. Swan said in response to a question from Professor Siliciano about the result when a student transfers from one campus to another within the University. IPEDS data from the federal government counts only students who graduate from the campus where they started. Work associated with the VSA will attempt to include all students who transfer and graduate from a different college or university.

Professor Leger urged that in looking at cause-and-effect relationships, one should not overlook the impact of positive feedback. The University gets better students because it is doing better, which leads to getting better students, and the situation perpetuates itself. There is also the question of student culture itself, Dean Green said; unlike the past, now it is embarrassing to take a long time to graduate. The messages from the University are having an effect. And they start at orientation, Dr. Swan added.

Professor Wambach suggested looking at graduation rates for students in the second quartile as well as for top students. Professor Bart followed up by asking again if data sets would be available to researchers. There could be a lot of data analyzed by academic researchers, he said. Dr. Howard said that could be discussed; they would need to be sure that the confidentiality of data was protected. Dean Green pointed out that the University would probably learn more if there were more people studying the data.

The Committee next considered a bar graph illustrating the proportion of freshman students who are still registered and have completed 30 credits after 1 year of attendance, 60 credits after 2 years, and 90 credits after three years, by entering cohort (beginning with fall, 1999). The proportion of students with 30 credits after one year of residence increases with each cohort: in 1999, the proportion was about 55% while for the fall, 2005, cohort about 70% of entering freshman had completed 30 credits after one year. The numbers increase similarly for 60 and 90 credits. The challenge, Dr. Swan said, is to be sure that the line keeps going up; there is no reason the percentages should not be 85-90%.

The Committee considered satisfaction data for Twin Cities students (seniors: overall satisfaction and satisfaction with instruction in their major; students in general: overall satisfaction and satisfaction with overall quality of instruction). For students in general, overall satisfaction with the quality of instruction has trended steadily upwards since 1999; with the exception of one period when it dipped (when the Twin Cities campus was in the midst of major construction in many locations and both Coffman and Walter Library were closed for major renovation), overall satisfaction of students in general has also trended upward. For seniors, the satisfaction levels tend to be higher than the student body in general and have also generally trended upward since seniors were first surveyed in 2002. Dr. Swan cautioned that the campus will need to be careful about not becoming complacent because the lines, especially for seniors, may be flattening out.

Dr. Matross next discussed a graph that showed the deviation from the average by subgroup for retention rate for the cohort of 2002 entering freshmen and five-year graduation rates for the 2001 entering cohort. The graphs looked at groups such as students who took 16+ credits their first semester and students who took fewer than 14, students in the top 10% of their class and students below the 50th percentile, students who lived on campus their freshman year and students who did not, and students who are Minnesota residents versus those who are not. For example, the overall retention

rate for the 2002 cohort was 85.8%. Students who took 16 credits, were in the top 10% of their high school class, and lived on campus in a living-learning community were retained at higher rates. Women and students from higher-income families graduated at higher rates.

For policy levers, Dr. Matross concluded, it is useful to look at the subgroups of students and consider whether policy actions on the part of the University can move students to groups with higher rates of success while at the same time understanding how selection bias may be influencing particular results.

The University has stacked the deck in favor of full-time students, Dean Green said, but it also has part-time students who are part-time because they are constrained by outside obligations but who also can be very bright students. The University should not say it will not allow students to request a lower number of credits in the first term because there are legitimate exceptions. Dr. Swan agreed that in special cases the University should act this way, but he noted that over 90% of freshmen are 18-19 years old and the most important thing they should do is put their studies first. Now fewer than 1% of freshmen take fewer than 13 credits; previously between 12% and 15% had. Students whose personal situations truly prevent them from being full time can get exemptions. The 13-credit rule was controversial at the time, and there was concern that it would drive out disadvantaged students, but students have had little trouble adapting to the rule and the fears turned out not to be well-grounded. This fact provides a reason to consider other proposals.

The Committee considered finally a table presented by Dr. Huesman showing the effect of variables on graduation rate. Students who took remedial courses and failed them graduated at lower rates, supporting previously-reported data on the importance of high school preparation. Higher numbers of Ds and Ws were also associated with a lower likelihood of graduation. Finally, Native American students are less likely to graduate than other student groups.

Professor Wambach said that the presenters had provided the Committee with good data. What is the next initiative, she asked? Apart from hoping that the numbers continue to spiral upwards? Dr. Swan said there are a number underway: the Graduation Planner (which provides new tools for advisors and students to work on timely graduation); increased effort to get students who are close to graduation to do so (a point brought home by the study last year of what happened to student-athletes); and identifying cases where a student needs an advocate on the institutional side in order to graduate. The NSSE data will show the University a lot of things, Dr. Swan said, and there will be comparisons across campuses and across majors and colleges.

Dr. Knutson asked what initiatives might be undertaken to increase the retention rate for students of color, and especially for American Indians. Dr. Swan suggested that the Committee might wish to have a conversation with Vice President Barceló, who has considered a number of programs the University might initiate.

Professor Bart offered two suggestions. One, there is clear evidence that stellar students are highly likely to graduate on time, but the University's connect to the high schools and their talented-and-gifted programs is weak. There are not enough faculty involved with gifted high-school students; Johns Hopkins and Northwestern, by comparison, do a lot to connect with those students. Two, not all courses at the University have the same impact. Some courses have cognitive effects that transfer to

other courses (e.g., if one does well in math, one is likely to do well in engineering). Other courses have little transfer effect. There should be a systematic way to inquire about this.

Thinking about courses that have a big impact moves the discussion toward learning outcomes, Professor Wambach observed. They will be on the agenda, she promised, and adjourned the meeting at 3:30.

-- Gary Engstrand

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