

Academic Affairs Committee, 4 February 2008

In attendance: Jorge Nobo, Bill Roach, Pat Munzer, Karen Camarda, Patricia Renn-Scanlan, Frank Chorba, Tom Prasch; as guests, Dan Peterson, Willie Dunlap, David Sollars, Russ Smith

The minutes of the meeting of 3 December were approved.

The first agenda item was devoted to personal remarks by Jorge Nobo connected to the operation of the committee since its installation and responses by guests, in response to action by the General Faculty to amend the Faculty Senate constitution to make it consistent with the way the committee had already been operating. As Nobo recalled, the posted version of the Faculty Senate constitution was missing the paragraph in the approved constitution defining the membership of the committee, and that paragraph was therefore never implemented. Operating without knowledge of that missing paragraph, the executive committee of the Faculty Senate developed its own structure for the committee. That original makeup included three members from the College of Arts and Sciences, one from each other school except the School of Law, and one representative from the library; in that original formation, two representatives were included from SAS, but one of those was a temporary member representing associate degree programs.

The committee met with that structure in the fall of 2005, but issues raised by the committee and then-VPAA Ron Wasserstein led them to initiate a change in the structure, so that the committee's membership was the same as that of the Faculty Affairs committee, except for the exclusion of the School of Law. Action by the committee required a vote of 6 of the 9 members, to ensure that the College of Arts and Sciences could not control the committee; the VPAA had a standing invitation to attend as a guest, and usually did so. Those changes were approved by the Faculty Senate in March 2006; because it was not recognized that this was a change in the Faculty Senate constitution (because the missing paragraph was still missing), the change was not forwarded to the general faculty for approval, or to the Board of Regents. That committee structure has seemed to work fine.

Dan Peterson, responding to Nobo's narration, argued that he was concerned that the committee's representational structure should reflect not just proportions of the general faculty, but each academic unit. At the Faculty Senate level, this balance was carried forward by the presence of at-large members. For the Academic Affairs committee, the argument for representation of each unit concerned the need to avoid a "tyranny of the majority," leading to a formula of representation for each program or academic unit or program on the committee. It was voted this way for a reason, Peterson argued, and that reason should be considered regardless of the effectiveness of the current structure. Peterson also found it problematic that the committee structure had been changed without proper procedures, which would have entailed following the procedures for an amendment to the Faculty Senate constitution. Peterson concluded that issues of representation were linked to perceptions of fairness.

Pat Munzer wondered how it would have been possible to know that an amendment to the Faculty Senate constitution was required, given the printed and on-line versions of the constitution (all lacking the key paragraph).

Russ Smith suggested that the changes to the committee structure had never been fully debated, and declared that he was personally offended by the procedures.

Nobo responded that he was personally mortified to have discovered the mistake. He added that the committee had tried to respect concerns about representation with the supermajority provisions, which ensured that the College of Arts and Sciences could not override the collective voice of other units.

The committee then turned to the VPAA's proposals for a uniform course numbering system. Robin Bowen introduced the proposal by noting that it reflected typical numbering patterns at other institutions and left the possibility open for Washburn to develop doctoral-level programs in the future.

Munzer commented that she couldn't speak for her school's graduate program, and expressed concern about the committee taking action without allowing time to consult all affected units. Nobo offered the reassurance that the proposal would be amply discussed.

Bowen summarized the proposal, noting that it proposed a basic numbering system for courses, some optional additions, and provisions relating to graduate and undergraduate students taking courses.

Tom Prasch noted that the basic numbering system seemed relatively unproblematic, but that the option for using 2d and 3d numbers to reflect specific sorts of courses would be more troublesome. In the history department, for example, those numbers were already employed as other sorts of indicators.

David Sollars raised concerns over the use of a fourth digit, another of the options, having found that difficult to implement and less than useful in practice at another institution.

Willie Dunlap noted that the proposal would require changing the numbers for the entire master's program in his unit, and suggested that it would be important for the committee to consult with people who operate the Banner system and the Registrar's office.

Bill Roach noted that the proposal failed to define exactly what constituted a 300-level course, and whether such courses should require prerequisites.

After some discussion among committee members about how widely present policies (where they originated, how widely they were meant to apply, how widely they did not), Nobo conveyed an email from David Pownell, unable to be at the meeting, that his unit had no problems with the proposed changes.

Bowen at this point raised a procedural question, asking if the proposal needed to go back to schools and departments before being implemented. Nobo noted that the procedures were not entirely clear in the new system. Before returning to the procedural problem, a range of other issues were raised. Munzer pointed out that numbers could not be re-used. Nobo added that the Banner system and Registrar's office could carry both changed and previous numbers for awhile. Peterson noted problems for graduate degree programs with the 500-600 numbers, and alluded again to the issue of fairness in the lack of a defined protocol.

Returning to the procedural issue of establishing protocols, Roach noted that the previous mechanism—in which the VPAA and the chair of the University Council agreed on procedures—was essentially analogous to processes in the present committee. Peterson suggested that the more information that goes back to units the better, and proposed that there should be deliberate redundancy in reporting. Nobo recalled that committee minutes used to be forwarded to all deans, and suggested reverting to that practice; Prasch said sure, he could do that. Dunlap hypothesized that this was the first proposal since the institution of the Faculty Senate that affected both this and the graduate committee. Munzer suggested that there should be reporting to all units, departments, and graduate schools, and then perhaps let the matter be taken up by a committee combining the academic affairs and graduate committee. Bowen averred that she would prefer to work with both entities rather than a hybrid new one. Roach, with Munzer concurring, noted that it was only the undergraduate components of the proposal that came under the purview of the committee; he added that, to cover all bases, this proposal would necessarily be a “tree killer,” requiring reaction from all departments. Munzer suggested that committee members could take the proposal back to their constituents. Nobo proposed forwarding it to the graduate committee as well as divisions and departments. Bowen suggested a process that began with feedback from constituent groups, then moved to this and the graduate committee, then to the Faculty Senate. Roach proposed bring the Registrar's office and Banner experts into the discussion to ensure the practicality of the propose changes. Bowen queried the group about mechanics of changes that involve impacts beyond the department proposing a change; members of the group concurred that this committee acts as a check on such changes being implemented without all concerned groups being brought into the process.

Other issues with the proposal were then raised. The 500-level courses, Bowen noted, were necessitated by financial aid rules for graduate students. Prasch suggested that the limit on 8 hours of such courses might provide a problem for the Master of Liberal Studies program. Smith, with Munzer concurring, suggested that the program director, not the instructor, be the person designated to allow undergraduates to take graduate programs for credit; after some discussion, other members of the committee seemed to concur with the discussion.

By vote of the committee, it was decided to eliminate the “options” section of the proposal.

Nobo, returning to the issue of procedural protocols, suggested that the VPAA can initiate action in the graduate committee, and that the proposal be forwarded for discussion to deans and the curriculum committee. Roach suggested adding the Registrar to the list. Karen Camarda, with Smith concurring, suggested that an explanatory narrative be added to the proposal; Prasch volunteered to develop one, and to forward it to the committee for comment. Bowen volunteered to revise the proposal in light of discussion and return it to the committee. Nobo instructed committee members to take the proposal back to their constituencies for comment; comments, it was agreed after some discussion, would come back to the committee.

The meeting was adjourned.