

Academic Affairs, 7 April 2008

In attendance: Robin Bowen, Frank Chorba, David Pownell, Karen Camarda, Patricia Renn-Scanlan, Bill Roach, Shirley Dinkel, Jorge Nobo, Tom Prasch; guests, Al Dickes, Dave Petersen

Prasch and Nobo summarized responses to the proposal on uniform course numbering received from SAS, School of Business, and Nursing. All had concerns with the mechanics of changing course numbers. SAS raised issues relating to the proposed tuition model in the suggested change. Business raised the problem of cost related to the need to change publicity for the school.

Al Dickes then discussed the impact of general education on transfer students, a problem he says he has been dealing with for 13 years, since the implementation of the present system in 1995. Dickes asserted that the current structure of general education at Washburn contributed to the perception that the university was transfer-unfriendly, and that general-education credits are particularly transfer-unfriendly. This has become a point of discussion not only within education, but in legislative sessions and even at the U.S. Congress (where it figures in the still-unpassed Higher Education Reauthorization Act), and there are some who would seek to implement legislative solutions to the perceived problem. At the top level, Dickes suggested, there were counselors, faculty, and legislators who claim that WU particularly (but KU and K State to some degree as well) does not permit courses to transfer from community colleges. This is patently untrue, but it remains the perception, and that perception is supported by the fact that transfer credits do not always fulfill the expectations of transferring students. Transfer students are nevertheless a significant piece of Washburn's total enrollment: 800-900 coming in for the fall semester, with around 300 from community colleges (most of those from ten institutions).

With each transfer, Dickes points out, it is necessary to evaluate transcripts to determine both transfer equivalencies and general-education credits. Since the change of the database in 2004, that has meant a significant increase in the workload of Dickes's staff. Now, those evaluations are carried out for each student who applies, whereas before they were done only after students came to Washburn. Some specific problems tend to repeatedly crop up, for example that math courses only count with the passing of a test. Washburn has also received recent delegations from Hutchinson and Garden City with concerns about the issue.

One problem is that Washburn's general-education structure is very specific. Often courses match up fairly simply: U.S. History or college algebra, for example. Other times, there is no fit: Washburn counts World History, but not Western Civilization, for example, and has no equivalent course to Intro to Philosophy. On the other hand, some unexpected courses do count as general education: Philosophy of Love and Sex does, but History of the Civil War does not, for example.

Washburn has, Dickes argued, done a pretty good job of establishing what we're doing in courses approved for general education: defining what students should get out of those courses and how to assess that. We should not lose sight, however, as we think about general education and the assessment procedures increasingly demanded by accrediting agencies, of the fact that community colleges have been doing both general education and assessment for a very long time. Whatever we may think of the education provided at community colleges, they have procedures for approval of courses and syllabi, and they have well-established assessment mechanisms. When they do general education, it will be defined in the same terms that we are defining it. Dickes closed by suggesting that we needed to move beyond the tendency to establish pecking orders of schools, with community colleges near the bottom, and that we should recognize the facts that, here and nationwide, community college enrollment was growing; that they do a good job with general education; and that good students at community colleges tend also to be good students here.

Jorge Nobo suggested that the problem was not so much general education per se as course equivalencies, and that establishing more courses that count toward general education may alleviate that problem. Dickes agreed, noting that this was not a problem when any course in an approved discipline counted toward general education, and that we had articulation agreements with students coming with Associate Degrees that allowed all their general education to count. Dickes also suggested that, as opposed to the parallel KU articulation agreement, which is somewhat deceptive on this issue, Washburn's was clear.

Robin Bowen asked about students who were concurrently enrolled here and finishing an Associate Degree at a community college. Dickes said that would be no problem. He also noted that an appeal mechanism was now in place. Questions about transfers were sent by the administration or registrar to departments, but could then be appealed. Dickes added that his office had catalogs from across the US.

Dickes noted that social science general-education offerings were somewhat thin, and that there were persistent issues: English 300, which no one else had; PE 198, long a problem although it has become more flexible over time; Communication 101, again one without many equivalents.

Nobo noted his irritation about having a system which created no problems, being forced to amend it because of pressure from accrediting agencies, and now being pressured to change again, to allow upper-level general education that had been explicitly rejected by the earlier pressurers. Nobo wondered who was doing this and what they knew that we didn't. Dickes noted that he had asked North Central how they would respond to someone who argued that assessment was a bad idea coming from wrong-headed, career-driven educationists, and that he got no answer. Dickes noted that we have always assessed in some way or another, and had thought through general education repeatedly, but that we were subject to changing currents and models. But he insisted again that, as we move toward changes, we needed to consider carefully what it did to students and to perceptions of Washburn.

After some discussion of changing terms of general education (shifting ideas on grading as assessment and on upper-level courses as general education), Shirley Dinkel noted that at Avila, the working out of general education began with the end product—what we wanted students to learn, in terms of skills and basic knowledge—and worked from that to develop the program. Dickes pointed out that in transfers, they sometimes saw transcripts with blocks of general education that were not equivalent, but looked good as gen ed. Bowen suggested it might be a good way to start, to imagine what we wanted our students to look like on completing a degree. She also noted that some general education ideas seemed interesting but would present nightmares for transfer, using the example of Pres. Farley's suggestion at a faculty dinner of multiple-teacher period-focused interdisciplinary courses.

Nobo noted that, before the present system was installed, it was presumed that taking courses in a discipline would lead to skill acquisition. From somewhere the idea was imposed that courses should target specific skills, but he suspected they were doing just that more efficiently and better before.

There was some discussion of grading as assessment instrument, about what we needed to do to address the transfer-unfriendly image of Washburn (through creating more offerings and accepting general-education courses from other schools even when we offered no equivalent, for example), about the need to maintain the role of departments in final decisions, and about articulation agreements. Prasch noted that no changes were likely to make transfer issues go away entirely.

Nobo raised the question of what transfer problems SAS and Nursing had. Petersen suggested that Allied Health had the most difficulties with the issue in SAS. Dinkel noted that for Nursing the biggest problem was the limited range for electives in the program. It was agreed to invite representatives from other units to a subsequent meeting.