OPENING: The meeting was called to order by D. Wade, Chair.

I. APPROVAL OF THE AGENDA

Approval of the agenda was moved by D. Wade, seconded by E. Mogren; agenda approved.

II. ANNOUNCEMENTS

The minutes from the September 29, 2004 meeting were electronically approved.

III. OLD BUSINESS

A. Undisclosed prerequisites

D. Sinason from the Department of Accountancy reported that about a year ago he had a student who came to him very upset because they had worked very hard to meet the prerequisites to take a course. The student got to the course and the instructor stood up on the first day of class and said, "In addition to the published prerequisites for the class, if you have not taken this additional course you should not be in this class." The student then watched 15 other students get up and leave.

Others have said this was an isolated incident but since then there have been other examples reported of this. In another case, a professor walked over to the student and requested that he leave the class because he had not taken an undisclosed prerequisite.

Another student was told that they needed the prereq to take the class that was
undisclosed. They attempted to register for the prereq but found out that that was not available, they are now commuting to Kishwaukee to pick up the prerequisite to take the class the next semester. The parents are concerned about the student commuting to Malta.

Another student was a graduating senior in a course with an undisclosed prerequisite and spent a large amount of money on tutoring in order to complete the class.

There is no policy in the university which governs prerequisites, only a policy that prerequisites cannot have a higher number. D. Sinason said that every prerequisite should be disclosed to the student. There should be a policy that indicates to professors that every course that is required as a prerequisite must be disclosed to the student in advance.

One student did take the issue forward to the college and department but was told there was nothing that they could do. D. Sinason brought this forward to the U.C.C. but was told that this would be referred to APASC. E. Seaver suggested that there be a letter to the deans and the curricular deans indicating that this situation is occurring and to remind them that it is their responsibility to monitor prerequisites in the classes.

R. Blecksmith asked if the undisclosed prerequisite is just one for the one professor and if somebody else teaches the class there is not that prerequisite, or is this something that is done across the board. Because there is not standardization in the preparation of classes that leads to differences in the kinds of backgrounds that are required to successfully complete the class. D. Sinason replied that if the prerequisite is not indicated in the catalog then the student is registering for the course based on incomplete information. In this case, perhaps what should be in the catalog is a listing of the highest level course that might be required for the class. Otherwise, it is deceptive.

The discussion made a distinction between those classes that function as gatekeepers where a student cannot get into the class unless they have taken that course and those courses that are not required to get in the class but would be helpful in the process of the student succeeding in the class. In this instance we are talking about courses that are necessary to succeed in the class but are not listed in the catalog. D. Sinason reiterated that there is no policy or procedure for requiring an instructor to list all the prerequisites for a course. So if a department chair or the college office talked to the professor and said that they had to do it, they could say there is no policy that requires me to do that.

S. Eaton pointed out that the catalog is a contract with the student and if there is a requirement that is not listed in the catalog and it results in a lawsuit, the University would probably lose the case. We need to address this from a legal standpoint if nothing else. The suggestion, then, is that a policy be formulated that any course that is required to successfully complete the course, in addition to gaining entrance to the course, must be listed in the catalog. If a student is going to make the correct choice in registering for a course they need to have the information from the catalog.

Part of the discussion revolved around the issue of how to motivate the faculty member to take any additional prerequisite courses through the curricular process. Students must have this beneficial information early in the registration
process and not on the first day of class. It would seem that instructors would not want to have students showing up in the class the first day who did not have all of the requirements.

In addition, students who have not met the requirements but are in the class are taking seats that may prevent other students who have met the requirements from registering for the class.

D. Wade suggested that APASC draft a couple of provisions for the APPM indicating that any course that would be essential for a student’s success should be included in the course description that appears in the undergraduate catalog. It would give a policy to enforce, but ultimately the responsibility belongs to the college and departments. APASC could follow up with a clear statement that a student could not be dismissed from a course for not meeting a prerequisite that wasn’t listed in the course description. It could then be followed up with letters to the various boards that these APPM provisions were going to be enforced. E. Seaver indicated that it might be sufficient to include a description in the catalog as to what a prerequisite exactly is. This would clarify that a prerequisite was something that a student would need to have a reasonable expectation to be successful in the course.

D. Wade moved that we table the item until a future meeting during which time E. Seaver and D. Wade would draft language to clarify the description of a prerequisite for the catalog to forward to the appropriate bodies. Seconded by R. Blecksmith. Motion passed.

B. Grading System

D. Larson and S. Kallembach distributed a report from Registration and Records to the Admissions Policies and Academic Standards Committee on the proposed grading scale change presenting background information from other institutions that have made or contemplated a change in their grading structure. D. Larson summarized the report. Institutions have usually modified their grading systems in response to grade inflation or grade compression. There are institutions that are highly selective where students are clustered together with a large number of A=s and B=s. Institutions need to find a way to differentiate these students in order to make internal decisions and have opted to implement incremental grades in order to respond to that situation. It is also relatively common in graduate and professional schools for similar reasons.

One of the questions that arose was, do we have grade inflation at NIU? Registration and Records did not do a definitive study of this for this report although there is information from Institutional Research that can be presented at a later time. However, over the past six years there was an increase of only .05 of a grade point in terms of cumulative GPAs.

Another question was, do we have enough differentiation in our grades for consistency at NIU? If we use our general education courses as an example, we find that there is great diversity in grading at this particular level. The average of all grades given for all 120 General Education courses is a 2.6. However, if we look at the total range of grades given in each of the courses we find a high of 3.9 to a low of .829 for fall 2003 and in between there is a relatively smooth
distribution between those two ranges. Generally there are higher grades in the Arts and Humanities and lower mean grades in the more subjective areas of Math and the Sciences.

Examining the impact on students, Registration and Records found that in some institutions the plus/minus grading has been effective in reducing grade inflation. One of the reasons for this is that an A is considered by most institutions to be a perfect grade. For 96% of the institutions surveyed 4.0 is the highest grade that one can earn. Of those institutions that have an A+ grade, most awarded 4 grade points. Without an opportunity for students to compensate for an A- with a calculated A+ students with one A- cannot achieve a 4.0 and it does have a downward pressure on GPAs. In addition, Registration and Records found that more A->s are generally awarded if they are available. As a result, some research stated that upper end students are more affected by a plus/minus system than average students are.

Registration and Records also found that the minimum grade of C makes the grade of C- potentially problematic. Currently for prerequisites if a student receives a C- in a prerequisite where a minimum grade of C was required, the student cannot use that as a prerequisite. Compounding that situation, a C- cannot be repeated under our current policies. Additionally, a C- might not transfer because most institutions require a minimum grade of C for a transfer course. There is also concern that one C- could make a marginal student eligible for probation or dismissal, if all of their other grades were C=s.

One way to alleviate the minus grade downside would be to have a grading system with plusses only. Registration and Records did find, however, that in the latest complete AACRAO survey of grading practices, that less than 1% of four-year institutions use a A plus only® system. Typically, if an institution has an incremental grading system they have both plusses and minuses.

Registration and Records reviewed how grades are treated by the admissions services for law schools and medical schools. Plus/minus grades are factored in to their review. However, of the over 44,000 transcripts that Registration and Records sent out last year only 118 went to the Law School Data Assembly Service and 38 went to the medical college admissions service.

Northern Illinois University is one of the major transfer institutions in the Midwest. Fifty-five percent of our graduates start out at another institution. In addition, one third of our freshmen transfer to a community college and don’t return. Of the community colleges and other public state universities in Illinois, only one institution has a plus/minus grading system and because of the mobility of students in and out of the university, we have to be aware of what the other grading systems are and attempt to maintain some consistency with other institutions.

As Registration and Records considered potential impact on the faculty, one of the things that was suggested in some of the literature was that the expansion of grade levels means more time needed to determine grades. It is anticipated that this might impact the subjective grading disciplines more than others.

Institutions that move to a plus/minus grading system reported anywhere from a
30% to almost 100% increase in grade changes. Last year Registration and Records processed over 6,000 grade to grade changes. There is concern about how much additional time instructors would need to spend discussing grade changes with students in this environment.

S. Kallembach indicated that she put together a list of questions that should be considered as deliberations about this topic proceed. This type of change is not a trivial matter as it has a great deal of impact upon the university and our students. The key question revolved around the issue of, would this type of change be beneficial to students? Before any action takes place there needs to be additional research about the impact that this change would have on students and faculty.

D. Wade moved that this item be tabled pending further review and discussed in the Spring semester. Seconded by R. Blecksmith. Motion passed.

IV. NEW BUSINESS

A. Admissions/Retention Requests

Three items were referred to APASC from the Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum which included changes in programatic course requirements that may or may not affect admissions or graduation. Guidance was requested from APASC to determine whether these should be forwarded on a continuous basis.

The three items were: 1) Changes in the Department of Family, Consumer and Nutrition Sciences, modifying a number of course prerequisites to a minimum grade of C or better; 2) A request from the College of Education to change the ETR 440 prerequisite from a 2.5 cumulative GPA to a 2.75 cumulative GPA; and 3) A request from the College of Education to change a number of non-academic requirements in the Athletic Training Emphasis.

Discussion of this issue consisted of the following key points:

$ Some departments have retention grade point averages that float. Do these types of changes need to come before APASC even though the use of a grade point average was previously approved? For example, some departments may need to raise the grade point average because there are not enough seats to accommodate all who are eligible. Do all of these need to come before APASC or not?

$ There is a differential between academic standards and resource issues. If it is a resource issue only, it may not need to come forward, but if it is an academic standards that will become permanent that would need to be submitted for approval.

$ The question was raised as to how are students supposed to be able to predict their schedule over time if the grade point average pre-requisite is floating? There is an assumption that students will be informed in advance of the change. It was pointed out that departments do a good job of
informing students as early as possible.

$ There was a question as to what point do these changes fall under the concept of a limited retention program? For example, limited retention programs generally define if a student can repeat, what happens if they can’t repeat, how many times they can repeat, what assistance is available to students, and how this affects under represented groups.

$ The impact on at risk students of a flat GPA requirement versus a special set of courses that allow students to demonstrate skills. At risk students struggle with developmental courses in the first few semesters. All students deserve to make a mistake or two and should not be locked out of a particular major program because of a poor grade in a general education class. It was mentioned that departments have the ability to look at at-risk students to take these factors into account but they can’t create a double standard. This is a problem, for at-risk students especially, when the Gen-Ed has no bearing on the major. The main question is, are we giving students the most fair opportunity to get into the major?

$ One option for limited admissions programs would be to allow a student to repeat any grade so that they could meet GPA requirements for limited admissions. The down side of this is that this might constitute an economic burden for low income students. Additionally it may further enrollment pressures on limited admissions programs as students are repeating more classes.

$ We need a consistent process for determining which proposals to review.

$ Prerequisites for a course that is required for graduation is in effect a retention requirement.

In the case of the change to ETR 440 of 2.5 to 2.75 it was felt that if APASC refers these cases back to the departments, it puts the departments on notice that each of these have to be justified individually.

It was moved by D. Wade to refer the request from Family, Consumer and Nutrition Sciences to comply with the requirements regarding procedures for limited retention programs. Motion passed.

It was moved by D. Wade, seconded by C. Rollman, to approve the change for ETR 440 from a 2.5 to a 2.75. Motion passed.

Regarding athletic training, these issues are primarily non-academic requirements such as CPR, copies of the transcripts and deadlines for the application. The accrediting associations wanted these items included in the catalog. They had been in place since the beginning of the program in the Students = Handbook but it was felt that getting this information into the catalog constituted truth-in-advertising for the students.

It was moved by E. Mogren, seconded by D. Wade to approved the changes to athletic training included in the September 28, 2004 Curriculum Committee minutes of the College of Education. Motion passed.
B. Advising Center Catalog Language

Additional catalog changes for the Advising Center are still under development and will be submitted at a future meeting of APASC.

It was moved by R. Blecksmith, seconded by E. Mogren to adjourn. Meeting adjourned.

Minutes submitted by Don Larson.

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