ACADEMIC PLANNING COUNCIL
Minutes of November 1, 2010
3:30 p.m., Holmes Student Center – 505

Present: Alden, Baumgartner, Carter, Cassidy, Dawson, Falkoff, Gordon, Gorman, Jung, Marcellus, Matuszewich, Novak, Otieno, Prawitz, Simpson, Ye

Guests: Donna Askins, Research Associate, Office of the Provost; David Buller, Chair, Department of Philosophy; Dave Changnon, Acting Associate Vice Provost, Office of the Provost; Carolinda Douglass, Director, Office of Assessment Services; Christopher McCord, Dean, College of Liberal Art and Sciences

The meeting was called to order at 3:30 p.m. It was announced that the next meeting (November 8) will be held in Holmes Students Center room 405. Jim Carter, the graduate student representative to the APC, was introduced.

It was moved and seconded to approve the minutes of October 4, 2010, and the motion passed unanimously.

The 2010 University Writing Project Report was distributed with the agenda for today. This project is done each year and assesses course-embedded writing samples from seniors. There have been suggestions for changes in the process for this project, but we are trying to get some trend data for now. Changes to the process will be made in the future. One suggestion was that other faculty should be involved in the scoring of the writing samples. The mean score for the university was 4.13, and the sample size was 518. All of the categories met the guidelines, except presentation. The presentation (grammar, punctuation, and usage) area is still the lowest score. This is an area that consistently falls short of expectations. Different colleges are targeted for participation each year, and this year the College of Engineering and Engineering Technology did not participate. The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences participates every year. Current term cumulative grade point averages, ACT verbal scores, and University Writing Center (UWC) attendance were also looked at for variances. The UWC attendance was not significant this year. The more students attend the UWC, the lower the scores. This could be because the students know they are having problems and seek assistance. We would like to survey faculty participants to find out how the information is used and how helpful it is. We would also like to tie this project into the newly created baccalaureate goals. We are working with the UWC to help develop guidelines for those working with the University Writing Project. It would be helpful to have historical data next year to see if the presentation area is getting better. It would also be interesting to see a breakdown between transfer and native students. Now we are working on providing examples of above average, average, and below average writing samples.

David Buller, chair, Department of Philosophy and Christopher McCord, dean, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences were introduced.

The dean provided an overview of the Department of Philosophy. The department has done a remarkably good job of identifying a clear coherent mission for itself. The department has an
undergraduate service mission and a graduate research mission. The master’s program has achieved the greatest distinction for itself. There is a continuous focus on training students who want to pursue doctoral degrees, especially for students who do not have an undergraduate philosophy degree. Among departments that have terminal master’s degrees, our master’s program is consistently ranked second in the country.

David Gorman presented the APC subcommittee report. The department is focused on doing several things very well. A concern is whether or how the department can continue to do all of these things.

The department has several strengths. The publications record is good. The department hosts a graduate conference annually.

A discussion point is the size of the faculty which was described in the review as a “skeleton crew.” Hiring and retaining female and minority faculty has been problematic, but there has been some improvement during the review period. The department disagreed with the statement that hiring and retaining female and minority faculty has been problematic. Out of the last nine hires, five have been women or minorities. The last position that was filled was offered to two females, both of whom turned the position down to accept what they perceived to be better opportunities. The department has lost one woman and two minority faculty members to what those faculty members perceived as better opportunities at other universities (Northwestern and Florida State), so it is true that the department has not retained all women and minorities hired. The department has a small faculty, and the ratio of untenured to tenured faculty has shifted during the review period. There are six tenured and five untenured faculty in the department.

Resources are adequate with a couple of exceptions. A smart seminar room is needed. The Department of History also does not have a graduate seminar room. If we had a graduate seminar room it would not be utilized 100 percent of the time by us; therefore, other areas could utilize this room too. Travel funds for faculty and graduate students are inadequate. The boundaries for travel funds have expanded a little, and the college gives supplemental funding for travel. The department tries very hard to provide travel funds for graduate students and also for undergraduate students to participate at conferences. A couple of the faculty have had Presidential Research Professorship or Presidential Teaching Professorship funds that they used for travel, which frees up travel funds for graduate students. There is a need for more travel funds.

Recommendations for the future include implementing a strong faculty mentoring program. The department faculty did have a discussion about instituting a mentoring system, but the younger faculty were not receptive to the idea. Some faculty could use mentoring, but others are doing fine without it. Mentoring is provided informally to those who need it. The Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center has a mentoring program for new faculty. Philosophy is traditionally a single research and single author discipline. In the last decade, co-authorship has been more common in the discipline, but we don’t have much in our small department.

The council moved on to the section of the review on the B.A. in Philosophy. The strengths of the program are that it is cost-effective, enrollment numbers and degrees awarded for women and minorities improved during the review period, and the department made adjustments to accommodate the decrease in faculty size. The adjustments made were impressive and did not affect the integrity or coherence of the program. One focus of the program was the history of philosophy,
and the department decided that it couldn’t provide a strong focus in this area with the current faculty. However, the department can and does focus on the philosophy of science, language, and the mind, in addition to metaphysics, epistemology, and ethics.

Many of the discussion points overlap in various ways. The department has added a B.S. degree, which will be implemented in fall 2011. Some students pursued a B.S. in Biology and wanted to have a second major in philosophy. Within the college, our department has the highest portion of second majors. If a student is in the B.S. degree, the science requirements are fulfilled. In order for a student to receive a B.A. degree, they would have to fulfill the foreign language requirement. If students are interested in sciences, why should they have to take the foreign language requirement? With the new B.S. option, students can tailor the major to their intellectual interests. Having this new degree will probably increase the number of majors to about 70 (currently the number of majors in 60). The department also discussed cutting the number of students in the master’s program to 30. The department does not believe that there will be a growth in the number of undergraduate majors. Students who wanted a second major in philosophy were disadvantaged. These students were in the minor, so they can just move into the B.S. in Philosophy program.

The recommendations for the future are to increase degree completion rates for women and minorities so they are comparable to the benchmark institutions that the program selected and to improve student performance in writing analytical essays. In the benchmark section the program talks about the student faculty ratio being different from other universities. The ratio at NIU is twice as high as the ratio at many other institutions. This shows how good the program is. The department has found that undergraduates are having difficulty with writing analytical essays. The department wants to create a new course at the 300-level. This would be an intensive writing course, and all majors would be required to take this course by the end of their junior year. This requirement was put into place so that transfer students have time to complete the course after enrolling at NIU. The majors will also be required to take a 400-level capstone course (one credit hour). The prerequisite for this course will be the 300-level writing course and a co-requisite of a 400-level course. The requirement in the capstone will be a 3,500 word essay, and we hope to see better writing results after these curriculum changes are put into place. This has been approved by the department’s curriculum committee. The course will be offered every semester to majors only, and this might encourage undergraduate students to continue on into a graduate program. Will these requirements change the completion rate for women and minorities? There is a small group of faculty and students in the department looking at ways to recruit more women; nationally minorities are underrepresented in philosophy programs. The writing course sounds like a great idea, but are there any negative implications of instituting this requirement? There are national models that can be looked at; the challenge is making the model work for both transfer and native students. The new courses will be deliberately tailored to provide the quality of instruction for the need the department has identified. In order for students to improve in writing analytical essays, they need individualized instruction. These courses will not be taught by TAs; they will be taught by a faculty member who has graduate teaching status and will interact with undergraduate students the way he or she interacts with graduate students. The courses will be deliberately right sized to accommodate the numerous writing assignments that will be required.

Since 2002, the department has had a certificate in applied ethics, and the enrollment in the certificate has declined. The College of Business now has a strong certificate in ethics, and some of the demand for this certificate came from students in the College of Business.
The information provided by Institutional Research is broken down in many ways, but the data on women and minorities is not broken out by transfer and native students. These data would be helpful to have.

The council moved on to the M.A. in Philosophy section of the program review. This program has many strengths. The program is the second-ranked M.S. program in the country, and it can recruit the very best students. The placement of students in doctoral programs has been very high. Among graduates not pursuing a further credential, the placement rate in regional teaching positions has been about 75 percent for new graduates. The record of presentations and awards by students has been very strong. The program adjusted its capacity to 30 students during the review period, and the requirements have been adjusted to fit with the changed profile of the faculty. The program is cost effective.

Discussion points are travel funds for master’s students and the lack of women and minority representation in the program compared to the undergraduate program. Why do M.A. students need travel funds? Our students get their papers accepted at conferences, and these are not graduate students’ conferences. Our students are succeeding at professional conferences in philosophy, and we need to provide this support for our students. Why are women and minorities better represented in the undergraduate program? The 2010 data show that minority representation in the master’s program is higher than it is in the undergraduate program, but this is not true for women. Many of our applicants also apply to Ph.D. programs. If they are accepted into a Ph.D. program, they don’t come to NIU. The program is losing some of the good women applicants to Ph.D. programs. The stipend amount of GAs and TAs has increased, but the program can’t fund all of our students.

Recommendations for the future are to bring female and minority enrollments closer to the statewide average and to develop an employer survey for graduates who do not pursue further credentials. Nationally and institutionally women and minorities have been underrepresented in philosophy programs. Recently, the program has been able to obtain extra funds for offering stipends to women. Approximately 75 percent of the graduates pursue a Ph.D., while 25 percent do not pursue a doctoral degree. Developing an employer survey for these graduates would be a good thing. At the M.A. level there are a number of substantial requirements that students have to fulfill. How do you feel about the logic requirement? This is a good requirement, and all students must take PHIL 505 and receive a B or better. In the past the comprehensive examination had a logic requirement, and 505 was used to prepare students to take the comprehensive examination. The comprehensive examination requirement in this area was dropped since we now have this course. A grounding in formal logic is required for all of the areas that are offered. Is the strong focus on logic an attraction or an obstacle? This might be truer at the undergraduate level. This is not a problem at the graduate level. In regard to the undergraduate program, there has been some discussion of whether symbolic logic was a problem for women and minority students. This issue is not popping up at other programs in the state. There are some undergraduate students who struggle with symbolic logic. Given the faculty strengths and the rigor in the program, are there any thoughts about offering an M.S. degree? The M.S. degree wouldn’t connect with other things in the university, and there would be no placement benefit to the students.

The meeting adjourned at 5:00 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,