Northern Illinois University

UNDERGRADUATE COORDINATING COUNCIL
132nd Meeting
Thursday, March 3, 2005
Altgeld Hall 203

MINUTES
(Approved)

Present: S. Conklin (HHS), A. Doederlein (LAS), J. Gau (EET), D. Gough (HHS), B. Hart (VPA), C. Malecki (LAS), M. Mehrer (LAS), D. Rusin (LAS), E. Seaver (Vice Provost), D. Sinason (BUS), M. Van Wienen (LAS), P. Webb (LIB), E. Wilkins (EDU)

Absent: S. Beyer (BUS), N. Boubekri (EET), W. Goldenberg (VPA), C. T. Lin (LAS), L. Townsend (EDUC)

Students: C. Marcus (SA), E. Person (BUS), J. Katz (LAS)

Guest: K. Van Mol (Catalog Editor)

I. Adoption of Agenda

A motion to approve the agenda was made by D. Sinason and seconded by D. Gough. The motion carried.

II. Announcements

A. Electronic Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the February 3, 2005, meeting were electronically approved.

III. Reports/Minutes from Standing Committees

A. Admissions Policies and Academic Standards Committee – C. Malecki

C. Malecki reported that at the last APASC meeting, the committee continued discussion on the change in the proposed grading process for undergraduates and had a general discussion about a number of issues that this would involve.

General consensus from APASC is that minus grades would not benefit our students but would be detrimental; so the general thinking is, if making any change at all, about the possibility of going to a plus system. Grade inflation has continued to be a concern, but, after looking at data provided on the NIU mean grade fluctuation between 1984 and 2003, the committee generally agreed that grade inflation is not a problem at NIU. There was concern expressed about the impact of plus grades on the limited admissions program; such as, inflated GPA’s that would require limited admissions programs to further raise the GPA requirement for entry into the program. Also, there was discussion about the grades in courses where grades are determined subjectively as opposed to objectively and the issue of whether the grading system can be consistently applied considering the different ways in determining grades. The committee talked about what steps to take next related to this issue. One suggestion was to write a memo to go to various student advisory committees to get student feedback on the issue. The committee will follow up with this. Another suggestion was refer this issue back to UCC, but it was...
decided that there is still more information to be considered. She went on to say that, in general, some individuals have been surveying faculty, and there does appear to be some level of faculty support and interest in having some kind of incremental grading system. The committee still doesn't know, however, what the student perspective might be, and they don't have any strong data in terms of how the faculty, in general, feel. As such, even though any change would involve costs, and there is not an overwhelming rationale to make a change, the committee still feels like there are enough unanswered questions and enough interest to continue to discuss the issue. The only action taken on this issue was to approve the development of a document that will now go out to poll various student advisory committees for input on this issue.

D. Rusin asked if there were any disagreements to the first clause in the proposed changes to the grading process. C. Malecki said that one issue discussed was that “A” is the accepted gold standard grade and the possibility that a student from NIU with an A might have a lesser GPA than an A from most other universities in Illinois. With a minus system, you would have an A and A-. The other issue was that faculty want to reward the students that have the B but are clearly in the upper third of that B. Students vary as to their performance in class, the low end of the B versus the high end of the B, but currently there's no way to make that distinction.

M. Van Wienen commented that the committee may not be taking into account the full effect of this alternative as the tendency of the students with the current full grade system is to think that they've got a B, but they're doing better than other people with B's, and, therefore, they could get a B+. He stated that the other side to this is that there are definitely students who need a range -- students that professors know are not at the top of the A range. In effect, there might be just as many students who would have gotten an A in the old system, who would get an A-, if that was available, who will now get a B+. There needs to be thought given fully to when this is in place how it will actually impact grades.

E. Seaver added that this was the feeling of APASC. This matter came from the Faculty Senate/University Council to this body. This body passed it on to APASC with no information other than some faculty members thinking this was a good idea. The committee had long discussions in APASC about this, and the feeling is that, so far, the only input we really have has come from faculty. We don't have any input from students, except from the students who are on the committee who really don't see any quick change. He noted that Registration and Records has been asked to present some data, and they did present several pages of information about issues that need to be addressed to make an intelligent decision about this.

D. Sinason said that a benefit of a plus/minus system allows a grade of B with a range of 81 to 89 to be differentiated as a high or low B rather than as a B. He agrees students should be asked for input but that that should not be a driving force as to whether or not the faculty believe this is a better mechanism for assigning grades and making those grade differentials.

E. Seaver said that a wide variety of options for obtaining student feedback have been brought up, all across the board. He added that a lot of this is because it is really being dealt with without a lot of thought about the implications, not just to students, but many other implications as it relates to issues like finances, effect on students applying to professional schools, etc. These are the same concerns APASC has been struggling with for about a year.

M. Van Wienen asked if other schools have the plus but no minus system and if there are other institutions that have gone with this system. E. Seaver answered that in the State of Illinois the only public institution with anything other than an A, B, C, D, is the University of Illinois, everybody else uses the standard like NIU. B. Hart commented that Indiana University has no A+, but they do have A-, so if a student receives ten A's and one A-, he/she will not receive a 4.0 grade average. He said he also agrees and is not comfortable with giving the same grade to an 80.1 and 89.9.
C. Malecki reported that the committee also discussed proposed language changes for the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual regarding clear disclosure of course prerequisites. Referring to a handout with the proposed language, she pointed out that the only change that was made in the wording was to change “should” to “must.” It was felt this change made the wording stronger. APASC passed a motion to approve this change in wording.

M Van Wienen questioned whether, in the catalog descriptions for prerequisites/corequisites, the wording “Any prerequisite/corequisite course considered essential for student success in a higher numbered course must be listed in the higher numbered course description that appears in the Undergraduate Catalog” should appear in both courses in which the corequisite is possible. He said that if it is a corequisite, then it can be taken at the same time, but the course that it can be a corequisite with is going to be higher numbered. A. Doederlein clarified the definition of corequisite as being two courses that would be taken at the same time or a lower level course that is taken before the higher numbered course. He agreed that the wording should be listed in both courses.

M. Van Wienen said then that his question is, if it is a corequisite that is in effect a prerequisite, that kind of course where a student is taking two courses at the same time that go together, then it should be listed in both courses, regardless of whether they are higher numbered. D. Rusin noted that this could happen as in the case of a science course with a lab, where a student isn’t allowed to take the course without the lab nor the lab without the course, in which case one course is a higher number than the other. D. Sinason noted that that is not always the case, sometimes courses are given the same number with a different letter designation after it, and there’s a registration mechanism there that forces students to register for both. M. Van Wienen again said that it seems self-evident that if there’s a prerequisite course that it would be listed both for the lower course but especially the upper course, that this particular course is a prerequisite of this other one. He went on to question whether the language should be altered to make clear that the corequisite courses lead to both lists.

E. Seaver commented that the focus of the committee was on the first part of that statement that prerequisites and corequisites need to be listed. This was all driven by the fact of faculty feeling that there are prerequisites/corequisites to their course but that they are not going through the curricular process.

D. Sinason further explained that the issue was that students would show up for a course having taken all the prerequisites only to have the instructor announce that there is another course that the students should have in order to be successful. In some instances, the students dropped those courses. In other instances, the students couldn’t drop the course for various reasons, such as maintaining a full load, maintaining a sequence, etc., and were struggling. Students that had these problems felt this was unfair, and so he brought this to APASC’s attention. He asked that his thanks be taken back to APASC for dealing with this very well and in a very timely manner. E. Seaver added that in the instance of corequisite, the committee’s thinking may well have been centered around the idea that it is all right to take two specific courses together; however, there may be some cases where a student should take a lower numbered course first and not take the upper numbered course until later. D. Sinason reiterated that the issue was to make sure that students in the higher level understood the things they needed.

Further discussion centered around course numbering issues, language suggestions, and possible steps to proceed with this issue. E. Seaver emphasized that APASC was strongly behind the intent of their motion to approve the wording and feels they would respond favorably to a request to focus on language modifications. He suggested several ways in which UCC could move forward on this issue.

Additional discussion resulted in the following action.
C. Malecki made a motion to accept the APASC minutes of February 2, 2005, with the exclusion of the Academic Policies and Procedures Manual language for corequisites and prerequisites, and to send the language on corequisites and prerequisites back to the Admissions Policies and Academic Standards Committee for further clarification and modification of language. The motion passed.

C. Malecki stated that “deciding students” and the relative catalog language that needs to be changed with reference to the new Academic Advising Center were new business items discussed. Currently, the catalog refers to the dean or the dean’s designee in terms of issues that refer to student appeals, dismissal reviews and university withdrawals. Since there is no dean or dean’s designee in the new in the Advising Center that would advise deciding students, that language throughout the catalog needs to be changed to reflect back and refer to the vice provost or the vice provost’s designee who will be overseeing the new Academic Advising Center. New replacement language has not yet been brought forward.

C. Malecki also reported that there were a number of reinstatement reports that the committee received and accepted. In addition, the committee approved a School of Nursing request to change their retention requirements from allowing one semester to achieve a 2.5 GPA to allowing two semesters to achieve that GPA.

C. Malecki reported that the matter regarding degrees of distinction, which is not included in the February minutes, had been brought up at the recent March meeting of APASC. The issue came back to APASC because UCC requested APASC to revisit this. APASC re-examined the issue, and, given the data, particularly that from other schools in which the vast majority are using GPA criteria to determine degrees of distinction, they established that we are putting NIU students at a clear disadvantage by using our current weighting and percentile system. The committee discussed that and reiterated support for making the change for the degrees of distinction to be based on GPA’s as opposed to percentiles in that it was more fair to students and in line with almost all other area universities.

E. Seaver noted that action is required on the item listed on today’s agenda under Old Business as Degrees of Distinction. APASC has sent their response back to UCC, along with the information that they had that was a part of their deliberation process originally.

A. Doederlein distributed a handout with data from Institutional Research showing GPA’s per college over the last five year time-period. He noted that the average GPA for each college differs dramatically, and that’s the reason for his concern regarding the change in the language about degrees of distinction. In terms of not recognizing distinction enough, he agrees, and thinks we should recognize distinction everywhere it can be done. However, he notes that, if what is being recognized is grade inflation, then he thinks it’s a mistake. He thinks the segregation among the GPA’s per college would suggest that a blanket GPA policy would not be a good idea. He said that fixed GPA’s per college might be a way of dealing with having a target.

M. Van Wienen commented that we are talking about a piece of the student’s record which has a certain comparative value with other students competing on the job market. He thinks that what counts is that students who are graduating with a degree in education, engineering or business are being compared with peers in business, engineering, and education at other schools. It helps to indicate who at NIU has achieved at a level that is the same as other schools and hope that NIU with its reputation will translate well. He notes that, from reviewing A. Doederlein’s data, there is a wide variation. However, he feels that the basis of comparison that is the most important is not within the institution but the people with similar programs at other institutions in Illinois and elsewhere are the true comparative thing that counts.
A. Doederlein asked if this committee had ever seen comparative data about GPA’s in different colleges at other universities or if other universities have the same deviation in GPA’s from college to college as NIU.

M. Van Wienen commented that he has seen data at three or four other institutions, and he has noted that education departments have much higher GPA’s. Visual and performing arts departments have much higher GPA’s because of the nature of how those courses are set up and how work is evaluated. B. Wilkins stated that, taking that a step further, in the field of education, the field is saturated, so there may be students graduating with a decent GPA in elementary education, but unless they’re willing to move to a part of the country where there is a shortage, they’re probably not going to find employment in Illinois.

D. Sinason noted that his concern isn’t about the percentage of increase by college but rather the total percentage of graduating seniors of each college that is receiving degrees of distinction. If the percentage is 5, 6, 7 or 8 percent, he’s comfortable with that, but if it’s the top 20 percent, then he thinks that’s stretching too much.

P. Webb commented that the issues raised here are the very reasons this was sent back to APASC. C. Malecki said that APASC noted the increases, but there was still overwhelming support because of looking primarily at what other universities are doing. In comparing institutions, the consensus was that we are putting our students at a disadvantage, and changing the system would put us more in line with other universities.

B. Wilkins noted that most institutions are using the entire undergraduate degree program as the cumulative GPA. If the last 60 credits are used, the data gets sliced a different way. She would like to see these numbers crunched based on the total cumulative GPA, although there would be some arguments with regard to transfers. She thinks that if you put, over the past five or six years, the entire undergraduate degree GPA on the table, the numbers would go down. In the last 60 hours, students are in their major, they have succeeded to that point, they are going to do a good job and are most likely getting all A’s and B’s, whether they are in education, engineering, business.

P. Webb commented that he doesn’t know how we could afford that with the number of transfers that we have. That would almost say that transfer students are essentially ineligible for graduating with honors, or we would have to use another institution’s grades as part of our GPA. D. Sinason asked why we couldn’t just base it on all the courses that a student has taken at NIU. P. Webb noted that students that started here as freshmen are then at a real disadvantage because, as a freshman, the math class would have to be taken here at NIU, which might pull down the GPA. Whereas a transfer student comes in with a clean slate, with the math class behind, regardless of what the grade is. B. Wilkins asked what was wrong with using the GPA from community colleges. D. Sinason answered that there is grade discrepancy between community colleges, some are very inflated, and others are not.

P. Webb asked committee members if they felt we were competing amongst ourselves or competing with other institutions, or doing both. He emphasized that the bottom line should be the best interests of our students who are graduating.

M. Van Wienen commented that he wasn’t sure how much more would be accomplished by continuing to discuss the matter; both systems have visible disadvantages.

D. Sinason said that he feels that it’s important that students have a goal to reach that they know is the goal. With the percentage system, students never know where they are going to be, whereas with the GPA criteria system they will know.
E. Seaver summarized that this issue originated with the Advising Deans, came to UCC, and UCC sent it to APASC. APASC revisited and discussed the issue again and gave their approval.

A motion was made by S. Conklin, seconded by B. Wilkins, to accept the decision of the Admissions Policies and Academic Standards Committee’s decision with regard to the change in criteria for determining degrees of distinction. The motion passed: 10 Yes, 2 No.

B. General Education Committee – D. Rusin, E. Wilkins

D. Rusin made a motion to accept the January 20, 2005, minutes of the General Education Committee. The motion passed.

B. Wilkins reported that the PHIL 205 new course submission was electronically approved as a new general education course in the distributive studies area of science and mathematics.

E. Seaver added that the rest of the January 20th meeting was devoted to giving some feedback to Craig Barnard about the results of the online survey.

C. Honors Committee – M. Mehrer

M. Mehrer made a motion to accept the February 2, 2005, minutes of the Honors Committee meeting. The motion passed.

No discussion.

D. Committee on the Improvement of Undergraduate Education – M. Van Wienen

M. Van Weinen made a motion to accept the minutes of February 7, 2005, meeting of the Committee on the Improvement of Undergraduate Education. The motion passed.

M. Van Wienen reported that the committee disseminated some information on the matter of considering modifications for the criteria for the Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Awards to broaden that to possibly include other instructional awards.

M. Van Wienen also stated that, in new business, funding was approved for numerous CIUE grant proposals. Dr. Seaver reported that there were a large number of proposals submitted and that the proposals received were good and very strong. He pointed out that the distribution of funds is not always even across the colleges; some colleges are much better at submitting applications for these opportunities and submit multiple proposals.

E. Seaver reported that the next project for this committee will be working on the Excellence in Undergraduate Teaching Awards.

E. Committee on the Undergraduate Academic Environment – E. Seaver

E. Seaver reported that this committee is still looking for a chair. He said the next meeting would be designated as a “finding our way” meeting, as this committee has struggled over the last year trying to develop some focus. The focal point of the next meeting will be on attaining direction for next year.
He indicated that as a result of this next meeting the committee might be asking UCC for some guidance as well. He asked that UCC members give some thought to this and pass on to him any suggestions they may have along those lines.

D. Sinason commented that the lack of authority to do take action is the factor that frustrates this committee the most. He said almost everything that is brought forth from CUAE to another area seems to get rejected, so there is no sense of accomplishment. He continued by saying that one thing that might be done is to try to decide if there is a way of providing more authority or asking other groups to respond back to them in a more meaningful way rather than just simply rejecting forwarded recommendations.

E. Seaver announced and thanked Paul Webb for volunteering to serve as UCC representative to CUAE for the remainder of the spring semester.

F. Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum – D. Gough

D. Gough made a motion to accept the February 10, 2005, report of the Committee on Undergraduate Curriculum. The motion passed.

D. Gough reported that the committee did not have a formal meeting on February 10, 2005, as there was not a sufficient number of agenda items. She explained that the documents included in the UCC agenda packet are pieces of information that were not included in previous minutes, and action had already been taken on these items.

IV. Other Reports

A. University Assessment Panel – P. Webb

No report.

V. Old Business

A. Enrollments

A. Doederlein distributed data that he explained included the number of declared majors in majors in which degrees may be earned. He said he found the most interesting thing about the data is that once pre-business was removed there was a dramatic drop-off in graduation, as noted on the data sheet. He noted that he feels that, although the graduation rate is on its way up somewhat now, more than any other factor that he saw, that accounts for the displaced majors. He also distributed a sample correspondence dated the 20th of May to a student who had been dropped from UBUS 310. A. Doederlein explained that because of the late May notification, the student would be unable to obtain the required class hours to stay classified as a business major and as such would now be referred to as displaced major. This type of student is the displaced student that UCC had discussed at previous meetings. He went on to say that when pre-business was in existence, there was an orderly way that any student would go into the system of seeking another major at the end of the freshman year, then other measures were applied at the end of the sophomore year, and students weren’t as displaced – majors and students fit together more readily. He feels that we now have the displaced person problem that is illustrated in the numbers that he has provided.
P. Webb asked, if based on the analysis that he has run, when typically a student becomes a displaced student. A. Doederlein answered that the displaced student is typically identified in the middle or at the end of the junior year. P. Webb noted that these students are displaced students because they got bad grades in their major; if they had done the work and gotten good grades, this wouldn't be an issue. D. Sinason added that the student still might be in good standing at the university.

D. Sinason commented that when advising these students, such as in the example of the correspondence that A. Doederlein distributed, the student knew what he/she was doing – it was not when the student got the “D” that it was a surprise; the student knew he/she was in academic trouble before he/she received this letter, which was approximately ten days after grades were posted. He said that the undergraduate advising office moves quickly to notify the student, so the student will have the opportunity take some steps towards rectifying the problem.

P. Webb asked if the committee had ideas on how to address this issue or if any possible remedies had been thought of. He suggested the possibility of aptitude testing for students as they enter NIU to determine their strengths and weaknesses may help diminish the likelihood that students will become displaced. A. Doederlein responded that many students major specifically in business because of parental influence. The student may lack the interest and aptitude, and thus may not do well. D. Sinason noted that aptitude tests don’t necessarily show interest.

E. Seaver stated that one difficulty that we have as an institution is that students go unescorted to other areas, such as Watson Hall, to look for an alternate major because they hear it or are told that there’s an option in that area. He feels that, as an institution, we are not as effective as we can be at helping students make decisions. He added that we know where most of these displaced students come from, and he feels that, as an institution, we don’t do as good a job of working with students at an early stage so as to help them know where all of their options are. From his perspective, these students, in many cases, are just wandering, making decisions on their own and not getting assistance, and we need to do a better job with that as this is becoming more problematic. Earlier intervention and early identification of these students at an early stage to help them learn what their options are is important to helping resolve this problem.

After further discussion, E. Seaver suggested that committee members review further A. Doederlein’s data and that this item be kept on the agenda for the next meeting. He recommended that members think about what other kinds of information, examples, or ways in which colleges try to deal with this issue. At that point, this committee can begin to explore some ways to address the issue. He indicated that additional data can be put together on retention and major change data, and the average number of semesters to graduate at NIU.

B. Degrees of Distinction

(Discussion on this topic took place during APASC report portion of meeting.)

VI. New Business

No new business.

VII. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at 2:55 p.m. The next UCC meeting is scheduled for April 7, 2005, beginning at 1:00 p.m. in Watson Hall 233.
Respectfully submitted,
Mollie Keller