

Senate Educational Policies Committee
Meeting Minutes for May 18, 2020

Members in Attendance: Bonneau, Chris; Cecchini, Nicole; Falcione, Bonnie; Hampton, Marian; Horvath, Zsuzsa; Kucinski, Barb; Landsittel, Douglas; Lotz, Andrew (excused); McCarthy, Joseph; Molinaro, Lori; Rikstad, Pam (excused); Schein, Michelle; Shaver, Kevin; Stoner, John; Vento, Barbara; Wilson, Frank.

Call to Order: the meeting was called to order at approximately 3:00pm by Co-Chair John Stoner.

Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies Joseph McCarthy reported on the policy and “accreditation-relevant” changes the University needed to do to manage the completion of spring classes and how this might impact University operations going forward. This includes the potential implications for closing the University down for a week after Spring Break for state and national regulatory bodies. If an academic year is curtailed as was the case at Pitt, then Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) had to request permission to do so. The federal government’s approval of Pitt’s request protected student financial aid in particular. He went on to discuss how those same policies would potentially limit the University’s flexibility in the fall and expressed his hope that the fall term (in whatever posture it operated) would be fifteen weeks in order to avoid needing to seek the same exceptions.

McCarthy went on to discuss that the other principal shift in the Spring 2020 semester to respond to the COVID-19 crisis was to provide the option for students to shift the “grade basis” for their Spring 2020 courses to be what is the Pitt equivalent of “pass/fail.” He outlined how the Pitt system was different (S/NC or Satisfactory/No Credit is not the same as pass/fail at many institutions) and then outlined how almost ALL undergraduate students received the option to choose an S/NC grading basis in their spring courses if they had not already chosen that option. This allowed UG students to see their letter grade in the course and then choose whether or not they wanted to keep the letter grade or shift that grade to S/NC basis. According to that metric, any student with a grade of C or higher would receive an “S” if they chose that option. McCarthy then mentioned that individual schools were given the latitude to tweak the rules to provide students the most flexibility while remaining within the disciplinary and other restrictions on their grading systems. He then outlined how an NC works in contrast to the typical “fail” designation at many institutions. He expressed regret that SEPC was not consulted because of the time sensitive nature of the decision making and the need for the University to move swiftly. He also mentioned that for Spring 2020 only, the University also relaxed rules that normally preclude students from satisfying major requirements with “S” grades so that students could maintain progress towards degree. McCarthy went on to discuss some of the challenges with the optional S/NC (particularly with outside graduate-level institutions) basis. He characterized the University decision not to permit the same flexibility in the summer session as a “competitive” one; extensive benchmarking indicated that the vast majority of peer institutions were not permitting modified grading systems in their own summer terms.

Finally, McCarthy briefed the committee on the ongoing deliberations to design undergraduate education delivery in the Fall 2020 semester. He offered to take questions.

Shaver asked about the interaction of academic integrity violations and the grading basis option for the Spring 2020 term.

McCarthy responded that in general he entrusted schools to handle the majority of academic integrity violations. He expressed the concern that students whose academic integrity sanction would have resulted in a failing grade would have the option to switch to an “NC” and therefore effectively avoid the consequences of the sanction (particularly in more egregious cases). The general consensus was that an NC option should not be an alternative for someone receiving a punitive sanction for major violations of academic integrity.

Shaver mentioned that the spring presented an unusually-complex and challenging landscape in which academic integrity violations might have happened (or their nature).

Bonneau asked McCarthy if there was a rise in academic integrity violations in the Spring term.

McCarthy noted that there was no increase in violations brought to the Office of the Provost but agreed that anecdotal evidence from school leaders indicated a rise in violations (or at least higher-visibility ones).

Co-chair Stoner asked (on behalf of committee member Rikstad who submitted a question through chat) about whether or not all of those grade changes had been effected (citing her own sense that they hadn't yet been accomplished).

McCarthy indicated that his understanding was that the University Registrar received more requests than they'd expected and had therefore extended deadlines to consider them. They balanced that extension with the need to certify students for graduation.

Rikstad said that as of today (May 18) not all of the changes had been implemented and that hundreds of students had expressed concern that those changes had yet to be made.

McCarthy promised to query the registrar's office and find out.

Co-Chair Stoner asked questions about whether or not ALL students (UG and GR) had access to the grading basis change and clarification on the potential impact of NC grades on financial aid eligibility (based on satisfactory academic progress).

McCarthy addressed the second question first. He agreed that NC grades were like “F” grades in terms of not contributing towards Satisfactory Academic Progress. He argued that an NC was still better for a student in general because it wouldn't harm their GPA. However, students who had taken an S/NC option who earned a C- to D- grade would (with the letter grade option) have that credit count towards Satisfactory Academic Progress but an NC would harm them in that same equation. He expressed that this was why advising was so important in guiding students through the decision about changing their grade basis and why the University had strongly encouraged students to seek advisor input before doing so. He noted that they could take appeals for individual consideration, but wanted to avoid the problem upfront if at all possible.

McCarthy then turned to the second question. He said the University offered the S/NC option to all undergraduates on all campuses uniformly. He qualified his response on the graduate side by saying that there had been a need for a “more nuanced” approach because the Law School had accreditation issues that didn't permit an optional grading basis change. He promised to follow up what had happened with that decision.

Co-Chair Stoner then introduced Vice Provost for Faculty Affairs, Development, and Diversity Laurie Kirsch and Associate Vice Provost and Executive Director of the University Center for

Teaching and Learning Cynthia Golden, who were on the agenda to discuss assessment of teaching. Co-Chair Stoner asked if they might be willing to answer some additional questions in the Q&A about events that had come up in the interim (particularly COVID-19 and the University response).

Kirsch and Golden proceeded to report on the “2019 Recommendations from the Provost’s Advisory Council on Instructional Excellence and Subsequent Activities.” Kirsch noted that their initial scheduled presentation that was to take place on March 16, 2020, but was subsequently delayed by the need to respond to the pandemic and thanked the committee for its patience. Kirsch laid out the council structure (which she chaired) and thanked all who served on that council (including Co-Chair Falcione and committee member Lotz). Kirsch then proceeded to discuss the council’s charge (in Fall 2018) and the priority of “expanding the ways in which we as a university assess teaching.” Following a precis of the historical context of assessment of teaching, Kirsch noted that this has been a recurring and widely-considered and debated issue since 1994 (when assessment of teaching became an obligatory activity). Kirsch then discussed how the Office of Measurement and Evaluation of Teaching (OMET) survey has been an oft-used (but is not a required) vehicle by which teaching is assessed. She also acknowledged the shift to online OMET surveys in 2013. Assessment has also varied at the unit level (in which practice has varied significantly), including differences about the groups with whom assessment is shared. Kirsch acknowledged the attention to these topics across numerous university groups, including students and faculty, in past years. Kirsch then walked the committee through the timeline of the council’s operations, its efforts to gather data, benchmark, and seek input from units perceived to be innovative in this regard to present recommendations to Provost Cudd. The provost accepted the basic recommendations in November 2019 and the council presented the report to the Council of Deans (CoD) in January 2020 (over several meetings). The CoD requested several clarifications primarily related to implementation. At the last meeting, the CoD endorsed the guiding principles and recommendations with several minor amendments; with implementation of units submitting their assessment plans to the office of the Provost no later than Fall of 2021, which Kirsch acknowledged is now believed to be an aspirational goal.

Golden then took over to highlight the guiding principles (there were seven—principles can be seen in attached slides). Similarly, there were seven specific recommendations made by the council (seen in attached slides). As with prior guidance, the critical thing is that assessment will continue to be guided by individual academic units; their proposed plans would then be approved by the Office of the Provost. Golden then turned to how the information was going to be socialized: to this committee, to Faculty Assembly, and then securing a formal memo from the Provost that would document this shift.

Golden and then Kirsch asked for questions.

Co-chair Stoner asked Kirsch if the Office of the Provost would formally approve plans forwarded by the individual units (which hadn’t seemed to have happened in earlier practice).

Kirsch confirmed that building more robust oversight was very much part of the process. Unit plans would be reviewed by OTP which would ensure that those plans were consistent with the guiding principles of the council’s determinations.

Co-chair Stoner asked if the report could be shared. Kirsch confirmed that it could be.

Kirsch went on to say that it became evident over time that the way in which assessment would be done might (and perhaps should) vary across the University, perhaps even within individual schools. She noted that the council wanted to give latitude to faculty and schools to design appropriate tools that would fit individual disciplines while recognizing that there was a lot of expertise concentrated in the University Center for Teaching and Learning that would take a more prominent role in this new system (sharing of best practices, etc.).

Landsittel expressed appreciation for the thoroughness of the process and made a comment about the challenge of getting “high-quality” faculty input particularly in the Health Sciences where there is a very heavy research load. He expressed concern about how to generate a “critical mass” of faculty and asked a question about how faculty and/or units would be able to serve effectively as “peers” for assessment purposes, that not enough of them spend enough time focused enough on teaching to engage in evaluation. He professed the perspective that certain units will need a significant amount of assistance.

Kirsch indicated her appreciation for the comment but suggested that this illustrated why faculty engagement in every school was so important and that assessment of teaching didn’t need to be peer evaluation each time. She stressed that it was really particular to the discipline.

Landsittel then asked how we considered issues of how much faculty support or protected time is for teaching, i.e. units in which teaching is more central or core to some units than in others where teaching is at-times more ad-hoc or filling in for colleagues who are absent for some reason. Did the council consider these kinds of issues?

Kirsch indicated that the council didn’t consider this specific point, but admitted that that style of teaching was fundamentally different across units.

Co-Chair Falcione said there was a recognition that those kinds of operational processes were a reality and said while it wasn’t considered per se, that there was an element of desiring continuous quality improvement and that when instructors are evaluated it should be from an opportunity to improve (what has been done well and what could be improved) so that it is an ongoing process. Such scenarios (described by Landsittel) may not be anticipated or ideal, but applying continual quality improvement for relevant aspects is an opportunity that remains regardless of the scenario.

Golden said you see that reflected in the flexibility that is built into this specific set of recommendations.

Co-Chair Falcione said it was encouraging from the presentations made to the council to hear about the diversity of assessment happening across the University and that it was great to see some of the “incredible” work that was going on. She endorsed UCTL’s efforts and expressed excitement to see how it was implemented across the University.

Co-Chair Stoner asked about the new question on the OMETs about the shift to online instruction in the Spring 2020 term. He asked if there was anything that could be publicly shared about the initial results.

Golden noted that the data was still being aggregated but that the provost had wanted the questions to be included. Golden indicated that she had only taken a cursory view and that would need to do more analysis of the data to understand (particularly through an analysis of the comments) general themes in those responses. She stressed the provisional and

incomplete nature of the results as of the meeting date. Some results reflected perhaps predictable issues (technology, connectivity, asynchronous vs. synchronous delivery). She noted that there would be questions on the summer surveys as well.

Co-Chair Stoner said he was sure that this data was informing conversations about the fall posture.

Co-Chair Stoner thanked Kirsch and Golden for their time and their willingness to continue to brief the committee even in trying times.

Co-Chair Stoner reported that most of Faculty Assembly and Senate Council in previous months had been dominated by COVID-19. He noted that an important thing in a recent Senate Council meeting was an impassioned plea by a graduate student for faculty and schools to be sensitive towards graduate student stress and needs in a time of crisis. Stoner then asked Bonneau if there was anything he had missed.

Bonneau stressed that there would certainly be changes going forward (in terms of schedule, class capacity, etc.). Much had yet to be decided but he stressed that faculty would need to be flexible going forward despite efforts to minimize disruption.

Co-Chair Stoner then briefed the committee on the Office of the Provost working groups that had been convened to consider posture in the Fall and working groups in the Office of Research to facilitate the reopening of the research enterprise. He indicated that there was hopefully going to be more clarity in early June but noted that the University won't even necessarily completely control its own posture based on guidance and restrictions by local or state-level authorities. He noted that those bodies were taking into account the fact that some of the populations concerned were vulnerable populations and needed to be protected. He noted concerns over equity regarding students in different time zones, and visa issuance problems for international students.

Bonneau also mentioned the budgetary implications were significant but still poorly defined; he indicated that SEPC would probably want to be mindful of implications.

Co-Chair Stoner indicated that the UPBC's deliberations had been intentionally delayed to better reflect awareness of COVID-related issues.

Bonneau indicated the likely contingent nature of the budget and the potential to mitigate some of the damage to the budget mid year (this is happening potentially at the University and Commonwealth levels).

Co-Chair Stoner mentioned the 10% budget cut number referenced in the meeting chat and explained that it was a provisional number and not one that had yet been officially determined by the University.

Bonneau described how this was to give unit and responsibility center heads an opportunity to engage in planning exercises prior to having the official decision.

Co-Chair Falcione mentioned the 1 June meeting as an opportunity to follow up on this question but that it might be too early to reflect on some of those recommendations. She proposed a possible follow-up meeting.

Co-Chair Stoner asked the committee to consider an additional June meeting (scheduled now for June 15) to discuss some of the implications of additional announcements. He asked the committee for its willingness to do so. Following general support, he announced that the chairs would schedule that meeting to consider educational options based on the campus posture (at least that had been determined by that date). He indicated the challenge of the inter-related nature of many of the questions for the working groups that impacted decision making across working groups and how best to aggregate that information.

Co-Chair Stoner then turned to the question of the proposal for a syllabus statement on religious observances and asked committee members to present on their revised draft.

Kucinski presented on the revised version of the draft, indicating that changes reflected conversation with the committee. Changes principally shifted on making the language more instructor-focused versus using broad third-person (and thereby impersonal). The new language thus reflected an instructor-level imperative to respect the students' religious beliefs and the observance requirements that arise from them. The subcommittee wanted to allow latitude for instructors to adjust accordingly multiple aspects of the course experience. She noted the subcommittee adjusted the time frame to match this statement to the disability statement to two weeks from the start of the semester. She solicited additional comments or suggestions and that this feedback could be done by email followed by an email vote.

Co-Chair Stoner asked about how best to move the initiative forward, from committee consideration to consideration by Faculty Assembly.

Wilson confirmed that this was the case.

Co-Chair Stoner suggested several editorial changes which Kucinski indicated would be welcome. Stoner then indicated that they would circulate the edited version and indicated electronic voting could be used to gauge committee approval.

Co-Chair Falcione expressed concern about voting in the summer and wanting to make sure that committee members service obligations that didn't normally extend into the summer had an opportunity to weigh in.

The co-chairs thanked the subcommittee for its efforts in bringing this to fruition.

Rikstad commented that the two-week restriction might unduly limit students who don't have broader perspective on religious holidays (particularly late in the term) and wondered if the time limit could be time-relevant: within two to three weeks of the holiday, for example.

The committee proceeded to discuss the language and how earlier conversations had debated this issue as well. There was no good solution, but the committee agreed to make the language somewhat conditional. There seemed to be consensus that hard and fast deadlines would be challenging and that it depended semester to semester based on major religious holidays and how they varied between fall and spring. Members of the subcommittee explained their reasoning but noted that there would always still be last-minute requests for exceptions.

Co-Chair Falcione indicated that the statement could be used to start a conversation with students to try to "pin down" dates and also presents an opportunity for instructors to get the information as soon as reasonable.

Co-Chair Stoner indicated the other value in hearing early is to inform the faculty not just on behalf of individual students but may guide them to tailor syllabi in general to take into account. This also reflected earlier committee conversations about how the University might provide data to instructors about major religious holidays.

Co-Chair Falcione indicated that updates would be forthcoming on the recipients of the ACIE Innovation in Education awards and asked for feedback on the attendance roster and minutes from the March meeting.

Co-Chair Stoner indicated that several meetings worth of minutes would be circulated for committee consideration and approval.

The meeting adjourned shortly after 4:30.