Faculty Senate Steering Committee  
October 25, 2011  
Minutes

Present:
Paul S. LaFollette (Pres.), Joan Shapiro (V. Pres.), Mark C. Rahdert (Sec’y), Karen Turner (Past President), Mark Anderson (Law), Adam Davey (CHPSW), Joan Delalic (Engr.), Deborah Howe (SED), Forrest Huffman (FSBM), Michael Jackson (STHM), Michael Jacobs (Phar), Tricia S. Jones (Educ.), Charles Jungreis (Med.), Stephanie Knopp (Tyler), Jim Korsh (CST), Laurie MacPhail (Dent.), Joseph Schwartz (CLA), Jeffrey Solow (BCMD), David Waldstreicher (Fac. Herald), Cheryl Mack (Coord.)

Absent:
Nora Alter (SCT), Jeffrey Draine (SSW)

1. Call to order

The meeting was called to order at 12:57 PM. Prior to calling the meeting to order, the President welcomed Mark Anderson, who will be serving as the Law School’s representative to the FSSC in place of Mark Rahdert, who is now Secretary.

2. Approval of Minutes

The minutes of the October 4, 2011 meeting were approved.

3. President’s Report: Status of Presidential Search

President LaFollette reported that on Friday, October 21 he received a request from the Board of Trustees to relay forthwith the names of faculty candidates for the Presidential search committee. Although annoyed by the short notice, the Committee on Administrative and Trustee Appointments (CATA) deliberated extensively on Monday, October 24 regarding potential candidates. CATA reported a slate of five potential faculty candidates, along with a recommendation that the FSSC submit the names of three of those individuals to the Trustees.

It was moved and seconded that the FSSC submit the names of three faculty members to the Trustees. After discussion, the motion carried. The FSSC then discussed the various candidates and determined to submit the following: Lynne Andersson (FSBM); Douglas Wager (SCT), and Luis Gonzales del Valle (CLA). President LaFollette will transmit the names of these individuals and their credentials to the Board of Trustees.

It was moved and seconded that the FSSC recommend to the Trustees that at least one faculty representative on the Search Committee be a woman. After brief discussion the motion carried. LaFollette will convey that recommendation to the Trustees.
4. General Education Executive Committee (GEEC)
Istvan Varkonyi, Director of General Education; Julie Phillips, Associate Director

Istvan Varkonyi reported on the current status of GenEd. The program is now in its fourth year, which is the year designated for recertification. Last spring, GEEC prepared a plan for recertification which was reviewed and approved by the Provost. Varkonyi met with associate deans in all affected schools and colleges to get their input on the recertification process, which has been modified in some respects in response to their comments. The process is being piloted this academic year with 20 courses, representing a broad cross-section of different GenEd course types and colleges. The aim is to have the process ready for full-scale implementation in the fall term of 2012-13.

In the following discussion, several issues were raised:

- How will students be involved? Varkonyi responded that student SFF responses will be considered at an aggregate not an individual level. He also noted that the process will include use of student focus groups for feedback and information.

- Are there resource issues? Yes. Varkonyi reported that under the current budget, GenEd sustained a $1 million budget cut, with funds that had been designated to support enhancement of GenEd courses reallocated to the operating budgets of schools and colleges. The result is that GenEd cannot offer budgetary support to schools to maintain quality and low enrollment caps in GenEd courses.

- What about staffing? Varkonyi raised a concern that last-minute hires and assignments to fill GenEd instructor posts are on the increase. Sometimes instructors get assigned with as little as 72 hours’ notice before the first class. Instruction has shifted toward heavier reliance on NTT and adjunct instructors. Teaching by full-time NTT and TT faculty is now at 56%, down from the mid-60s when GenEd started. In many instances, faculty members who might otherwise be available are unable to teach in GenEd because they are needed to cover upper division classes.

- How does GenEd compare with its predecessor, the Core? Initially, thanks to substantial support from President Hart, GenEd kicked off well and the transition from the Core went very smoothly. Interest in GenEd was high. That initial interest has waned, along with budgetary support. GenEd now represents 1/3 of the undergraduate curriculum but gets far less than 1/3 of the funding. There is a concern that GenEd is becoming a “cash cow” that is forced to run on a low budget so that student tuition dollars can be redirected to support other activities.

- How can the FSSC and Faculty Senate help? GenEd needs faculty advocates. Varkonyi hopes that the recertification process will stimulate a re-engagement with undergraduate instruction throughout the university. He responded positively to the idea of a Faculty Senate/GEEC liaison committee to coordinate efforts.

5. Student Feedback Forms (SFF) Committee
Senior Vice Provost Peter Jones reported on the status of the current project regarding online administration of SFF’s. Jones reviewed the efforts the SFF Committee has made over the last few years to change structure and content of the forms as well as the data that are reported from them. He then reviewed the experiments that have been done with on-line administration in some courses over the last two semesters. The committee has assessed the results and determined that 1) there is a substantial drop (from over 70% to under 50%) in the amount of student participation when SFF’s are filled out online; but 2) comparisons with prior paper evaluations in the same course and instructor show little difference in scoring, with on-line feedback if anything leading to slightly higher scores. In more than 40 instances where the committee did the comparison, only a few showed statistically significant deviations in outcome. The committee has also reviewed experience with on-line student course feedback at other institutions, notably Pitt, Penn State, and Maryland, which has been favorable.

The committee believes that with adequate marketing and incentives, it should be possible to counteract the drop-off in student response rate to an acceptable degree. The committee also believes that students will be better motivated to respond if completion of their SFF’s entitles them to on-line access to course and instructor SFF information. The committee therefore intends to propose to the Provost a move to across-the-board online administration of SFF’s for a two year period, with on-line access to SFF results for students who successfully fill out SFFs in all their courses.

In the discussion that followed, several points and questions were raised:

• Several FSSC members doubted whether the comparisons between paper and online results are sufficiently extensive and representative to assure reliability.

• Will courses with multiple instructors be included? (The answer was yes.)

• Members raised doubts that the incentive for students will be sufficiently strong. Jones responded that it is important to make incentives positive rather than negative, because negative incentives (withholding grades, for example) can skew results.

• What will be the effect on open-ended questions seeking narrative response? Jones replied that evidence shows a drop-off in the frequency of narrative responses but there might actually be an increase in the “concentration” of better quality narrative responses (though he acknowledged lacking empirical data to document that possibility).

• What is needed is to build a “culture of feedback” whereby instructors clearly convey to students the importance of participation and the significance to faculty of the feedback they receive. Jones agreed.
• We need to push harder to ensure that there are other mechanisms in place to evaluate teaching effectiveness. While the committee’s proposal calls for such mechanisms, it should be more specific and forceful about developing other evaluative mechanisms. There is a great danger that SFF scores will be used as a sole criterion for assessing teaching. Jones responded that many of the changes in content and information generation undertaken by the committee have been directed toward those concerns.

• What are the cost savings and are they driving the proposal? Could some of the savings be redeployed to create more tangible student incentives? Jones responded that the SFF committee has deliberately excluded administrative cost considerations from its decisionmaking.

• Members noted that there is a fair amount of evidence that student feedback can disadvantage women and persons of color. Having a mechanism for faculty response is of some value, but may not be sufficient to address the problem.

At the close of the discussion, Jones announced that he expects that the shift to on-line evaluations for all courses (with some temporary accommodations for the Law School because it is currently undergoing reaccreditation) will occur this semester.

6. Budget Review Committee
Rafael Porrata-Doria (Law), Leroy Dubec (CST), Steven Balsam (FSBM)

Rafael Porrata-Doria reviewed the work that the committee did last year, especially during the period when the university was facing the prospect of severe cuts in legislative funding. He stressed that to do its job, the committee needs access not only to the budget overview, but also to budget detail that enables the committee to understand what is included in various operating budget lines. Last year the committee requested budget detail in March, but never received any. The committee offered various steps to guarantee confidentiality of any data that they received, to no effect. The committee did not actually get to see the budget until after it had been passed by the Trustees. While in the past detailed budget information has been placed in the library, that has not occurred for the present year.

This fall, the committee has made several requests to the Provost for budget information. To date there has been no response, and the committee has not received any information.

The committee feels that it is not possible for it to work effectively in these conditions, because it is essentially operating in the dark. This is particularly troubling in light of the prospect that there may be interim budget cuts for this year, as well as deeper cuts for the next fiscal year, along with reductions in Medicare and Medicaid reimbursements for the hospital that could have budgetary implications for the university.

Porrata-Doria observed that, based on what happened last year, it is likely that each college and school administration is presently engaged in contingency planning to
determine in advance where cuts should be made. If the faculty is to have a meaningful voice, it needs to be a participant in that contingency planning, and that is impossible without access to detailed information about the operating costs of various programs and functions. The committee is asking for help from the FSSC in its efforts to get access to meaningful information.

In the discussion that followed, the committee was asked about the 20/20 plan. Porrata-Doria responded that construction is treated as part of the capital budget, which is separate from the operating budget, but that new construction carries implications for the operating budget, and there is some reason to think that the construction is being paid for in part through funds generated by past operating budget surpluses. New construction typically requires state-enabled bond financing, and it is doubtful in the current economic and political climate that the legislature or governor will support additional bond financing.

It was noted that placement of a detailed budget in the library may be a contractual university obligation. Porrata-Doria said he would look into that. He concluded his presentation by encouraging the FSSC to impress on collegial assemblies the need to participate actively, if at all possible, in the budgetary contingency planning that is presently going on at the school/college level.

7. Vice President’s Report

Vice President Shapiro reported on several faculty members who have volunteered for service on Faculty Senate committees. The FSSC approved the following committee appointments: Albert Wertheimer (Phar.) – University Sabbatical Committee; Mary Conran (FSBM) – Student Feedback Form Committee; Joel Maxcy (STHM) – CATA; Judith Flaxman (FSBM) – EPPC; Larry Krafft (Educ.) – International Programs Committee.

8. Old Business

Tricia Jones asked whether it was acceptable for the summaries of the recent FSSC retreat with the Provost to be distributed to collegial assemblies. After some discussion, Trish agreed to review the summaries to make sure they do not include comments specifically attributable to particular FSSC members.

9. New Business

One FSSC member observed that the earlier presentation by the SFF committee (see #5 above) made it apparent that the committee has been operating independently and neither consulting with nor reporting regularly to the Faculty Senate or the FSSC regarding its activities.

10. Adjournment
The meeting was adjourned at 3:25 PM.

Respectfully submitted,

Mark C. Rahdert
Secretary