UNDERGRADUATE COUNCIL MEETING
January 27, 2010
Rowe Conference Room, Knight Library

Present:
Susan Anderson, Andrew Bonamici, Jordynn Didlick, Sue Eveland, Amy Goeser Kolb, Dave Hubin, Karen McLaughlin, Ian McNeely, Caleb Owen, Josh Snodgrass, Caleb Southworth, Karen Sprague, Drew Terhune, Jim Tice, Matt Villeneuve, and Morgan Williamson

Absent:
Eric Carlson, Kathie Carpenter, Paul Engelking, Jennifer Joslin, Dean Livelybrooks, Josh Roering (on leave), Kiwako Sakamoto, Ron Severson, Tom Wheeler (on leave), and Elizabeth Reis

The Chair opened the meeting with a preview of the agenda. Then he called for comments, changes, amendments to the minutes from the previous meeting.

Sue Eveland, who was absent from the previous meeting, offered a clarification on one point raised in the minutes, that “The new budget model is enrollment driven, not driven by the number of majors.” She explained that the new budget model is set up in the following proportions: at the undergraduate level, the budget is composed of 50% for credit hours; 30% for majors; and 20% for degrees awarded. Double majors would split 50/50 between the two departments involved. At the graduate level, all monies follow the majors.

Minutes:
The motion was made to accept the minutes from the January 13, 2010 meeting.

Moved: Drew Terhune
Seconded: Caleb Owen
The motion to accept the minutes passed unanimously.

Introductions:
Agenda

Departmental Discussions on Grading Culture Reports
The Chair noted that the German Department would be discussing the Grading Culture proposals that afternoon. A discussion with CAS department heads will be held on February 8. The Chair will be meeting with Emma Kallaway, President of ASUO, on January 29 to discuss the UGC’s proposals and to preview the FAQ for students.

Reports on feedback from the Human Physiology Department and the Communication Disorders and Sciences Department of the College of Education were presented by Josh Snodgrass and Karen McLaughlin, respectively. The general reaction of both the departments was positive and supportive. They particularly appreciated the Council’s emphasis on grading culture, rather than just the issue of grade inflation and compression. Orienting new freshmen to the college grading culture as different from high school was particularly appreciated. They also support the idea that the university as a whole has a responsibility, not just individual departments and professors. The university needs to work to change grading culture not only in itself, but also beyond, in the K-12 system.

Several questions arose in the departmental discussions that the Council is asked to consider:

1. Is the Council considering looking at uniform grading standards that would be imposed across departments?
   
   Ans: No, the UGC is not pushing that idea because it recognizes that the methods for assessing student work vary among disciplines.

2. Has the Council considered imposing a strict letter-grading system, without +s or –s? That might halt the drift toward higher grades. For example, the difference between “B” work and “A” work would be greater than between “B+” and “A-” work. Thus, faculty might hesitate more than they currently do to move a student’s grade from the “B” range to the “A” range.
   
   Ans: The Council found this idea interesting and worth considering.

3. Has the Council examined the relationship between course evaluations and promotion and tenure for faculty?
Ans: The Council agrees that this is a significant issue with real consequences, as well as perceived ones, that should be considered.

4. Has the Council considered the idea of having a few departments make changes and thus serve as “tests” for these proposals?
   Ans: The Business School and Economics department are already models for these changes. In the case of the Business School the effect can be seen in the grade pattern reported in the 2005 UGC Study of UO grade trends.

5. Doesn’t good teaching practice lead to “A” students? Isn’t that a desired outcome? Does trying to accommodate a variety of students lead to higher grades? If faculty accommodate a variety of learners and meet their needs, shouldn’t the students do better, leading to homogeneity of grades?
   Ans: (See discussion below.)

**Discussion**

Several of these questions promoted further discussion:

Q 2: The practice of using + and – in the grading system is historically connected with reaction to the Vietnam war and served to protect students against the draft. This was also the origin of the “Y” mark on UO transcripts. The “Y” grade meant the student wouldn’t fail a course and therefore would not become subject to the draft.

The pattern of grade changes at UO is worth considering. Out of 12000 annual grade changes (which are supposed to occur only in cases of grading error), nearly all go up. There is a lot of pressure on faculty from students to change grades.
The +/- grading system may encourage faculty to make grade changes without carefully considering their significance – such as a change from “B” range to “A” range, for example.

It should be noted that it is possible to earn a grade that is higher than 4.0 – an “A+” is worth something more than 100%. Since it is possible to have a cumulative GPA that is higher than 4.0, students with a 4.0 may not be able to earn Latin honors.

In some areas, faculty are reluctant to fail students because so much time is required to deal with the consequences (required committee meetings, appeals and so forth). In P/NP courses, it is easier simply to pass a student.

An alternative way of grading would be to use specific numerical designations rather than the standard 5 letters (A, B, C, D, and F).

Q 3: Concern about the relationship between grade inflation and course evaluations is a recurring theme from faculty. This is a real problem when it comes to tenure and promotion. There is an expectation that faculty will come in for tenure review with top marks in their teaching. There is a worry that if UGC does something that could lower course evaluations from students, it would affect faculty promotion and tenure. Some feel that the Council needs to deal with this issue with faculty as the proposals move forward.

Q 5: Although good teaching and varied approaches should lead to greater student success, is it likely that all students will do “A” work? Some Oregon High Schools have adopted a proficiency approach – requiring students to reach a certain level of proficiency in fundamental skills, like math, before they can go on. It appears that the proportion of students who do become proficient is much
higher at these schools than at others, but the students are still heterogeneous with respect to the quality of their work. The schools still use letter grades and not everyone earns “As”. Grading can be thought of as playing two roles: 1. Indicating whether or not a student has reached a defined level of proficiency; 2. Sorting students by presenting them with ever-increasing challenges. Do we focus too much on #2?

**Student FAQ**

The Chair presented a rough draft of an FAQ document being prepared for presentation to students throughout campus. Based on the advice of student members, the Council determined that the best means of reaching students would be via an on-line blog and an e-mail address for them to send responses to the Council. Names and contact information of student representatives will be added to the FAQ as well as a site address for the blog.

The Council discussed some changes in the document that would help clarify the term “Grade Inflation” and the proposed approaches to reducing it. Specifically, members felt it important to clarify the implications of the proposed measures for students as individuals. If these measures are successful, and grades trend downward as a result, an individual’s GPA would not automatically drop.

The Chair identified some tasks to be completed for the next meeting:

- The Chair will work with the student representatives to establish the FAQ blog site and set up the e-mail address for students to respond to the FAQ.
- Caleb Southworth will work on language in the FAQ to clarify the meaning of “grade inflation” and the implications for individual students.
- The Chair will make edits in the FAQ language for clarity and focus.
- Council members will continue engaging in departmental discussions on grading culture.
The proposal for contextualizing grades on transcripts will be further discussed by the Council, but all agreed that it is important to get the three proposals out for feedback from students and the broader campus. The need for consultation on possible FERPA restrictions on context information was pointed out.

The meeting was adjourned with plans to focus on re-modeling General Education at the next meeting.

The next UGC meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, February 10, 2010, 12:30pm at Metolius/Owyhee Rooms, EMU.