UNDERGRADUATE COUNCIL MEETING
December 4, 2009
Rowe Conference Room, Knight Library

Present:
Andrew Bonamici, Eric Carlson, Kathie Carpenter, Dave Hubin, Jennifer Joslin, Dean Livelybrooks, Karen McLaughlin, Ian McNeely, Caleb Owen, Josh Roering, Josh Snodgrass, Karen Sprague, Drew Terhune, Matt Villeneuve, Tom Wheeler, and Morgan Williamson

Absent:
Susan Anderson, Jordynn Didlick, Paul Engelking, Sue Eveland, Amy Goeser Kolb, Kiwako Sakamoto, Ron Severson, Laura Vandenburgh, and Elizabeth Reis

Guests:
Richard Lariviere, UO President
James Bean, Sr. Vice President and Provost
Russ Tomlin, Sr. Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
Scott Coltrane, Dean, College of Arts and Sciences

Minutes:
Prior to the arrival of all the special guests to the meeting, the Chair called for any amendments or changes or corrections to the minutes from the previous meeting. There were none.

The motion was made to accept the minutes from the November 20, 2009 meeting.

Moved: Caleb Owen
Seconded: Andrew Terhune

The motion to accept the minutes passed unanimously.

Agenda
Changing the Grading Culture at UO
The Chair reported briefly on his discussion with the CAS History Department regarding the Council’s proposals for addressing grading culture. He noted that the general response of history faculty to the proposals was skepticism. The history faculty was most concerned the reliability of statistics in addition to privacy issues. In the little time for discussion, there was not much opportunity to consider any impact the proposals might have on students.
- **Discussion**  
  - Council members reminded themselves that it is necessary to remain sensitive to faculty concerns and to allow variation in the degree of public-ness in reporting grading feedback. For instance, grades in small seminar classes at the upper division should probably not be made public – for reasons of confidentiality.  
  - However, focusing only on large General Education courses is too restrictive. Grade inflation or compression occurs across the curriculum.  
  - Notes on transcripts should identify those grades where context information is not appropriate (because of small class size, for instance).

**Introductions:**  
The Chair introduced Richard Lariviere, James Bean, Russ Tomlin, and Scott Coltrane to the Council. Members introduced themselves to the guests.

**Background for Development of Council Proposals**  
Tom Wheeler and Josh Snodgrass presented a synopsis of the development of the proposals for addressing the grading culture.  
- The fundamental meaning of grades has been diminished or lost.  
- There is a disconnect in students’ understanding of what grades mean. Students see grades as rewards for effort, not as indicators of how their work compares to a benchmark.  
- The Undergraduate Council believes that individual schools and colleges should engage in an examination of their own grading practices.  
- Addressing the grading culture is an integral part of the University’s assessment effort.  
- UO is already moving to address the issue by talking with parents and students during orientation about grading expectations at the university.  
- There are very few guidelines for new faculty to orient them to the grading practices or expectations of the university.

- **Discussion**  
  The Chair invited the guests to join in discussion of the Council’s proposals for improving the UO grading culture.  
  1) Promote departmental discussion of grading practices and formulation of a rationale for them that will be available to their faculty and students, as well as to the Provost and the rest of the University academic community.  
  2) Provide faculty with the grade distributions in their Undergraduate courses, along with the average grade distributions in other courses that are considered comparable.  
  3) Provide context information (e.g. the average grade in the course) for grades reported on student transcripts.
Several points were discussed:

Overall:
- It is good that the Council wants faculty to work collaboratively in defining grading standards.
- The Council’s proposals are useful in providing information and promoting dialogue.

Impact on students:
- Due to the nationwide trend toward higher grades, do we put the students of the University of Oregon at a disadvantage by trying to reduce grade inflation locally?
- Grade inflation may help some students, but it is a disservice to the best students.

Impact on faculty:
- Should there be a system in place to rate faculty members on the average grades they award, compared to their peers? That is, do their grades tend to be higher, lower, or the same as the overall average? How would such a system affect the current trends?
- How do faculty know if their grading practices are inflationary or deflationary? [Generally, they don’t know.]
- A simple spreadsheet could reveal if a grading practice is harsher or more lenient relative to others in a comparison group.
- Grade distributions can be looked up by faculty on Blackboard, but this is not highly publicized and generally not known.

Metrics for examining grading patterns:
- Some questions were expressed regarding the quality and interpretation of the data in the Council’s initial 2006 Report on Grade Inflation. If the data are not persuasive, some people may assert that there is no evidence for grade inflation and thus not consider the Council’s proposals seriously. Karen Sprague will follow up by re-examining the data in the 2006 report and identifying the specific questions about it.

There was significant discussion regarding the proposal to provide context information for grades on transcripts. There is general enthusiasm for the first two proposals (local discussion of grading policy in departments and dissemination of grade distribution information, but a range of reactions to the third proposal (context information)). On one hand, it was pointed out that the extra information could cause confusion or misrepresentation when transcripts are reviewed. Moreover, the mechanics of contextualizing grades would be cumbersome. On the other hand, some members of the Council maintained that without taking this action, the Council’s overall effort to change the culture of grades will be ineffective.
The Chair reviewed the items discussed through the meeting, and with agreement from the Council, decided to go ahead with campus-wide discussion of the proposal, noting that there may be changes made along the way. The meeting was adjourned.

The next UGC meeting is scheduled for Wednesday, January 13, 2010, 12:30pm at Rowe Conference Room, the Knight Library.