Senate Educational Policies Committee
Meeting Minutes for October 21, 2019

Present: Bonnie Falcione, Frank Wilson, John Stoner, Nathan Urban, Joe McCarthy, Nicole Cecchini, Barb Kucinski, Michelle Schein, Barbara Vento, Lorraine Pollini, Zsuzsa Horvath, Marian Hampton, Douglas Landsittel, Camille Jacqueline, Pam Rikstad, Kevin Shaver.

Absent: Cynthia Lausberg (excused), Andrew Lotz (excused), Eunjoo Oh, M. Kathleen Kelly, Laurel Roberts, Chris Bonneau (excused), Lori Molinaro (excused)

Co-Chair Falcione opened the meeting, explained the fact that minutes were slightly adjusted (in order to correct attendance record) and that members had until the end of the week to submit changes.

Old Business

Co-Chair Falcione walked through the Old Business and then explained a proposed change to the SEPC Mission Statement which would update the statement to more accurately represent recent business conducted by the committee.

The co-chair then discussed the rollout for Canvas and mentioned a recent email inviting people to November 4th Teaching Partners meeting (9-10:30) held by UCTL about Canvas. Co-Chair Falcione indicated that she and fellow committee member Frank Wilson had been asked to serve on provost's steering committee about Canvas rollout. ~100 faculty are currently using the system, representing a broad diversity of class sizes and disciplines. Surveys are being conducted with both faculty and students. It is expected that ~300 will be "early adopters" in the Spring term and Fall faculty presently using the system will be able to use Canvas for all their classes. A common question is whether to rollover/migrate existing courses from BlackBoard/Courseweb or start fresh. Initial feedback seems to suggest the rollover/migration has proceeded relatively smoothly. Two functions have gained attention, Canvas presently doesn't allow instructors to add additional non-student users who are not enrolled in the course (which had been the case with Blackboard/Courseweb). This seems to take about a day and seems to be handled by Canvas at the moment. Presently, a new "quizzing functionality" is in the works and the timeline for the rollout will ideally precede the Pitt implementation, but may follow resulting in initial availability of the "old" quiz application with update to the "new" application shortly after implementation.

Regarding OMETs, no new major updates are currently available beyond ACIE, chaired by Vice Provost Laurie Kirsch was last year charged with looking into the evaluation of teaching) and a report was submitted to the Provost; the first ACIE meeting for the semester has not yet been scheduled. VP McCarthy indicated the provost has yet to point to new possible directions, but it would be anticipated is likely to continue in the spirit of the "distributed" nature of other previous guidance. VP Urban indicated that there is a cohort of graduate students who are interested in being involved in the conversation about teaching effectiveness and finding ways to bring different metrics of evaluating teaching and in turn provide a means of educating others, recognizing that these metrics might differ across disciplines.

Regarding Pathways the committee was asked about focusing on this topic at an upcoming meeting and general consensus was to proceed. It was suggested to have Amanda Brodish speak to the committee during the new year; Co-chair Stoner will provide some information to share.

VP McCarthy suggested that we consider broader implications at the institutional level with the example of mid-term grades. Pathways allowed OTP to identify large primarily first-year student classes with DFW rates above 15-20% to reach out to faculty to identify students who were "of concern" to them. There was 100% compliance with approximately thirty or so sections and students with one "concern" had resource suggestions sent to them; students with more than one were identified to academic advisor. Early intervention effort shows promise. The question of relevance to policy was discussed as item for the committee to further consider.

Reports of Vice Provosts

VP McCarthy introduced the online catalog of opportunities and explained it will present learning opportunities (operating as an aggregator) to students that are non- or co-curricular. Ideally, this will pull relevant items from the University calendar. Goal is to have a limited number of definitive sources for such opportunities. A two-step process is in motion—build the tool to allow students to find opportunities and then to create a culture of communication by which people know where and how to place opportunities in the appropriate fora. Hope is to have the catalog up and ready by next fall. Will also allow tracking engagement as well. Ideally will be a way to help students who aren't as connected to be able to connect more without being intrusive. To address how to accommodate students who can't attend specific opportunities will initially be handled by Suitable, who is aggregating all databases of activities which will help to understand this

One other "tools" idea being worked on with CSSD is to create a formal degree-planning tool for students (likely mostly UG students). It would provide a way beyond the typical advising audit for students to think about most efficient path to achieve degree goal. Would allow for different iterations of trajectories—particularly important for transfer students who are under increased pressure to complete degrees efficiently and sometimes within a limited window of time.

PACUP has responded negatively to proposal to university-wide department/unit codes. Like CHEM for Chemistry, there might be non-disciplinary codes (life skills for example) or a broader UNIV designation. PACUP was ok with UNIV designation but less sanguine about life skills/professional development. VP Urban thinks there might be a utility to professionally-development minded graduate students. Co-chair Stoner used UCIS as example to discuss challenges with non-disciplinary units as originators of courses. VP McCarthy gave some additional examples of concerns PACUP had with aspects of the proposal. VP Urban introduced the role of the GRE in graduate programs; last spring, VP Urban asked the schools to consider making GREs optional or eliminating them altogether. Since then, 90 graduate programs have eliminated the use of the GRE, 85 are still using it, 56 of which have made them optional (out of a total of 319). Approximately forty of the ninety are Ph.D. programs (all the ones in School of Medicine and a number in the Arts and Sciences). This is voluntary reporting, so the status for a number of programs (approximately eighty) is not yet known. At least one committee member indicated that the issue is under discussion within their own department.

Campus climate survey—while not necessarily a policy issue, bottom line is that we aren't much different than we were in the last round of surveys (certainly not better than we were). The Chancellor has emailed the campus community to announce a number of initiatives in hopes of reducing the incidence of sexual harassment and assault. Education has improved but prevalence remains a problem. There are also questions about the Title IX process and how it occurs.

One of VP Urban's areas of focus (as mentioned last month) is ongoing quest to improve quality of mentoring. At recent retreat of DGS, speaker suggested strategies to improve and assess mentoring. Associate deans have been tasked with producing a plan for how they will assess quality of mentoring in their schools and programs. November 4 event will feature this (faculty development series), there will be an event in December to put spotlight on assessment of mentoring. Co-chair Stoner asked if there are exemplars of institutions that do this better than the University. VP Urban indicated that there are places that do some of this (approval of graduate faculty for example) and NIH requires training of mentors. In regards to assessing mentoring, there is less that has been standardized. Some places have attempted to get at this question.

Updates from meetings

Faculty Assembly: Co-Chair Stoner relayed mention of the Charles Koch foundation agreement to fund new center at GSPIA. $4-5 million. Agreements are public as a result of previous problems. VP Urban indicated that Koch funding paid to help collect data on Ph.D. outcomes for STEM Ph.D.s.

Senate Council: Co-Chair Stoner updated on the SRI conversation that the Chancellor indicated that the investing strategy was the sole province of the whole Board of Trustees and that in his mind the best strategy.

Fossil-Free Pitt was the genesis of this process (per committee member Frank Wilson); advocacy eventually resulted in formation of SRI committee. Wilson notes the students are frustrated with slow progress but that faculty are invested as well. UC example (fig leaf of moving away from less-profitable investments).

New business

Co-Chair Falcione introduced the concern about religious holidays observance brought forward in a recent University Times publication. A copy of the guidelines from OTP website were provided and reviewed and the additional reminder email that is distributed was also mentioned. Question was raised if there is a catalog of holidays/observances that is maintained. VP Urban noted debate over whether to try to catalog may result in inevitable perception of exclusion. Question was raised if it might be useful to add a statement about notification to the course instructor about holidays/observances on the syllabus. The question of whether it would it be possible to make a list of holidays/observances available to faculty for planning purposes was raised and if ODI could possibly create a catalog of religious observances that could be used to educate faculty about the holidays and the possible implications on student performance/attendance, etc. Post-doc member noted what is the implication for post-docs who have a finite amount of vacation? VP McCarthy noted Student Affairs used to publish calendars. He said it was important for students to be able to feel comfortable approaching faculty about the issue and important for faculty when possible to avoid scheduling things that would conflict with religious holidays/observances. Using example of DRS, but not equating the two, VP McCarthy wondered if it might be of utility to do something akin to DRS. Would students do that? Committee member indicated that it would be good to front-load the semester and place the onus on the student to self-report ahead of time. This would allow the faculty member to plan better as well. Topic will be carried over for further discussion and if this might become a recommendation to the Faculty Assembly.