Academic Standards Committee
March 26, 2009
Minutes

Present: Chee, Weinberger, Tomhave, Hands, Kirkpatrick, Roundy, Fish, Weisz, Moore, Austin

Weinberger called the meeting to order at 2:06 pm.

Kirkpatrick moved to accept the minutes of February 28. The movement was unanimously approved.

Petitions report
2 Approved Late Add Petitions
2 Approved Grading Option Changes from Pass/Fail to Graded
1 Approved Medical Withdrawal Petition
1 Approved Waiver of “Last 8 Units Rule”
6 Total

Sub-Committee meeting scheduled for 03/05/2009 cancelled.

Sub-Committee met on 3/12/2009 to approve 1 late add petition and 2 pass/fail to graded petitions. Prior to the meeting, the Registrar approved a late add for a music student to correct a music student registration error and the Petition Preview Team approved a waiver of the “Last 8 Units Rule.”

No Sub-Committee meeting scheduled on 3/19/2009 during Spring Break.

Sub-Committee meeting scheduled for 3/26/2009 cancelled. Prior to the scheduled meeting, the Petition Preview Team approved a medical withdrawal petition.

Total Petitions for the Year 09/05/2008 – 03/26/2009

Registrar Approved: 27
Preview Team Approved: 34
Sub-Committee Approved: 47
Total Approved: 108

Sub-Committee No Action: 3
Sub-Committee Denied: 18
Total Petitions: 129
Leading petition issues:
  Late Add – 41 petitions (31.8%)
  Time Conflict – 29 petitions (22.5%)
Total Petitions: 68 petitions (54.3%)

Discussion of an independent study

There have been a couple instances recently in which groups of three to five students signing up to do the same independent study. Moore explained some of the issues:

- Are these collective independent studies actually ‘independent’? Might one student be proposing a course of study and other students simply signing onto that agenda, without doing their own independent work?
- Do such group independent studies suggest that there are deficiencies in our current curriculum?
- Might students be using independent studies to get .25 or .5 or .75 credits, instead of genuinely wanting to do an independent study?
- And what of the additional burden upon faculty, who are not paid for additional classes?

Weisz suggested distinguishing between a ‘directed research or study’ course, and an independent study. She had brought in the course description for a supervised research course in Communication Studies. This existing Comm course does not require the registrar’s approach, gives .25-.5 credits, and is designed for juniors and seniors.

It was suggested that perhaps a directed research or study course might be added as a possibility for students, in addition to the ‘independent study.’ But it was not clear whether “one size fits all” across departments, since many factors might be department-specific. Weinberger noted that introducing such a new course might enable ACS to tighten up independent study restrictions. Weisz noted again the issue of faculty teaching burdens and compensation. Weisz and Moore also noted that sometimes students assist faculty in the Psychology Department with their research. Weinberger highlighted the advantages of this use of independent studies. Moore then proposed fixing the independent study language in the Academic Handbook, but not tackling the additional problem of writing a new course description for a directed research or study course. Roundy noted that this ball could be thrown to the Curriculum Committee.

Hands asked for clarification, as to whether the group of students all doing an independent study together indicated a broader problem. Moore explained that there was an issue of “quality control”: is there a great deal of variation as to what constitutes .5 credit of work or 1 credit of work in an independent study? As a way of addressing the quality control issue, Weinberger noted that ACS had discussion whether proposals for independent studies should be run through some other body or person. Hands, Weisz and Moore all responded by commenting that the departmental chair did sign off on the form, that the form (from
Weisz then raised the question of whether students were doing independent studies for logistical reasons, in order to ‘fill in a gap’ in their credits when they need .5 or 1 credit, and not because they were inspired to pursue their own research or readings. Moore and Weisz agreed that sometimes students did come to them in Psychology in order to investigate the possibility of doing a .5 or 1 credit independent study in order to gain that credit. Moore then described a meeting with Kris Bartanen, in which they discussed whether students were coming back with odd numbers of credits (such as .5 or .75 credits) after study abroad programs, for instance, and whether this was creating a problem. Tomhave inserted that a student seeking to find a spare half or whole credit might be ‘making their problem their professors’ problem.’ A number of people, including Tomhave and Weinberger, expressed their concern that such students might not be really doing ‘independent’ studies if they were simply trying to rustle up a spare credit. Moore pointed out that such a student, even if she were motivated initially by the desire to find a credit, might then go out and find a project. At the same time, Moore also noted, these projects generally were not as good as those in which students came in with a true ownership—since, as Kirkpatrick commented, students then tended to lack ownership of the project. Weisz then noted a third type of student doing an independent study: those students who wanted research experience, but didn’t have a project. In response, Weinberger proposed that perhaps the University ought to distinguish between independent studies (which are truly independent, and which meet needs not fulfilled by the current curricular offerings), and ‘directed research,’ for students who are less self-motivated.

Hands then noted that he had experienced a fourth type of independent study project: students who did independent studies in order to prepare for graduate school, because such advanced courses were not on books. These projects were not truly ‘independent,’ inasmuch as they did not write the syllabi. Hands explained that he had, from time to time, done independent studies on advanced economics with students who planned to go to graduate school. Because such students were unable to prepare the reading lists or syllabi, Hands wrote the syllabi, not the student. Kirkpatrick further questioned the idea that an independent study must be quite radically independent. In Biology, very few students register for independent studies, since they can do either directed research or a senior thesis. If the project is faculty-generated, then the student typically registers for directed research; if the project is largely student-designed, then the student registers for senior thesis.

The committee then struggled with the question of the ‘independence’ of an independent study. So, Moore asked, “how independent does an independent study need to be?” If you have a group of 3-4 students, is it independent? Roundy and Hands compared such an independent study to a tutorial. Moore then asked whether it was necessary to tighten up the group aspect of it—that is, whether relatively large groups could work together on a purportedly independent study. Weisz and Austin noted that such small groups could alleviate the burden upon faculty.

So what was the difference between a independent study and a directed research or study for a group? A number of committee members asked whether it was possible to distinguish between the two. Weinberger asked to return to the initial example of the large group.
Moore explained that the group consisted of six students, and that ‘six students looks like a class.’

The committee then returned to the question of whether they ought to introduce a new category of a ‘directed research or study’ as separate and distinct from an independent study. Weinberger asked whether people would know the difference between the two. For instance, would graduate school admissions know or care whether a student did a ‘directed research or study’ or an ‘independent study?’ Tomhave noted that the University cares about the difference. Roundy described the problem as a “Gordian knot”: in each direction we go, we arrive at new problems. One committee member suggested, facetiously, that we add a “no glomming on” footnote, so that students couldn’t sign onto their friends’ attractive independent studies.

Fish then proposed that one way to distinguish between a ‘directed research or study’ and an independent study could be that one gave less credit. A ‘directed research or study’ could receive .5 in credit and an independent study 1 credit, in order to acknowledge the additional time of doing the research for the syllabus and other endeavors. Weinberger then suggested that instead of having a separate category for ‘directed research or study,’ that any group project as an independent study should go to the Petitions Committee. A number of people pointed out that such group projects are often difficult to catch. Tomhave pointed out that Petitions would still have to use criteria to judge the projects.

Moore and Roundy asked whether some existing curricular problems were leading to a number of independent studies. Roundy suggested that, if a particular independent study were regularly proposed, that this would point to the need for a new course. Moore wondered whether students were getting stuck with uneven numbers of credits (e.g., .25 or .5), and whether the University could offer .25 or .5 credits.

Having gotten a bit lost in the details, the committee asked Moore to recapitulate the existing possible problems with independent study. She listed the following possible concerns. 1. A group doing an independent study together lacks independence as a defining quality. 2. Such independent studies “mask deficiencies in our curriculum.” 3. Students are scrambling to find .25 or .5 academic credits, especially after study abroad. 4. Faculty are making independent studies into de facto courses, without going through the Curriculum Committee. 5. We have created a culture in which particular faculty are getting particularly burdened by independent studies.

Weisz and Moore then called for numerical analysis of the problems, in order to identify the groups and to determine whether students are using independent studies as a way to fill in their credits. Tomhave pointed out the logistical problems in determining whether people are working together, since they submit independent studies separately. Roundy commented that, “impressionistically,” the numbers are not large.

The committee then circled back to Moore’s point about the uneven number of credits, and thought about the possibility of offering academic credits for less than one full credit. There is a dearth of such courses. It was suggested that Accelerated Reading is the only one. A few (e.g., a course on Excel) used to exist but were taken off the books. Students are
overloaded, and more flexibility would benefit everyone. Roundy pointed out the practical problems of instituting such a complex system—it would have “too many moving parts.”

Moore and Austin then offered some concrete changes that could be made to the form that students fill out concerning an independent study. Students could be asked specifically if they were doing the independent study with any other students. They could also be asked about their motivations: Why are you doing an independent study? Are you doing one because of time conflicts or other problems with credits? Finally, they could be asked about the ‘independence’ of the project: Who designed the reading list? Weinberger volunteered to draft a list of such questions to add to the form. He will bring these to the next meeting.

The meeting was adjourned at 5:00 pm.

Submitted respectfully,

Greta Austin