Academic Standards Committee Meeting

September 25, 2008

Present: Bill Breitenbach, Debbie Chee, Roseann Fish, Wade Hands, Betsy Kirkpatrick, Chris Kline, Martins Linauts, Sarah Moore, Dolen Perkins-Valdez, Drew Shannon, Rob Taylor, Brad Tomhave, Seth Weinberger, Carol Lentz (Academic Advising liaison).

Chair Weinberger called the meeting to order at 9:35 am.

Business

Petitions report: During the period September 5 - September 24, 2008, 30 petitions were approved and 2 were denied. Approved were 16 late adds, 11 time conflicts, 1 waiver of the last 8 units in residence, 1 waiver of minimum GPA for independent study, and 1 attendance at community college as an upper-division student. Denied were 1 readmission and 1 time conflict.

Abandonment language: Chair Weinberger reopened discussion on the Academic Handbook language regarding student abandonment of a course. Currently, the language reads, “When a student abandons a course without completing official withdrawal procedures, the instructor assigns an appropriate grade, normally the WF. If the instructor does not assign a grade, a grade of WF will be entered by the Registrar.” (AH 2008-09, p. 18). Weinberger asked what we mean by “an appropriate grade,” to which Tomhave clarified that any grade other than W is appropriate, given that W does not appear among the options on the instructor’s grade sheet. The only way that an instructor could give a W would be to submit a petition. There was general agreement that we don’t want to restrict faculty prerogative more than the current policy intends, but that the language may not be clear. Breitenbach opined that if we’ve encountered only a single petition to assign a post-abandonment W, then perhaps we shouldn’t worry about changing the language. On Weinberger’s suggestion, Kline M/S/P that we simply clarify the expectation in the language by inserting the phrase “exclusive of the W,” so that the language would read as follows. “When a student abandons a course without completing official withdrawal procedures, the instructor assigns an appropriate grade, exclusive of the W and normally the WF. If the instructor does not assign a grade, a grade of WF will be entered by the Registrar.”

Counting excess courses in the calculation of the major GPA: Kirkpatrick initiated discussion by describing the situation of a former student who failed a cognate course required of the Biology major, and rather than attempt the course again, changed his major to Natural Science-Biology, which does not require that cognate course. However, because the course was potentially applicable as a cognate in the NS-Biology major, the course continued to depress his major GPA to the point that he could not graduate. Therefore, the student was forced to either retake the course that he’d changed his major to avoid or accept the F in his GPA calculation. Tomhave explained that the current policy is designed to accurately reflect the student’s record, but also noted that majors in which cognates, or other categories of courses, are explicitly listed, excess courses, even those within the department, are not used in the calculation of the major GPA. In addition, the courses are entered into the categories in which they fit chronologically, so that which category a course might fulfill, if there is more than one option, depends on the sequence in which the courses were taken.
Much lively discussion ensued, with committee members sympathetic to the situation initially described, but also wary of limiting a student’s ability to raise the major GPA through additional coursework in the major. The committee considered the option of not counting excess work in the major, but allowing students to select which subset of courses were to be counted. Moore felt that this might lead to a disingenuous representation of the student’s GPA in the major, a feeling that was echoed by several other committee members. Discussion took a short side trip to grade inflation before returning to how to count excess courses, after which this latter topic was eventually tabled to give the committee members time to mull over the various suggestions and their ramifications.

**Does requiring a minimum grade for advancement contribute to grade inflation?** Breitenbach opened the discussion by describing the pressure a faculty member might feel to inflate a student’s grade to allow the student to avoid academic disciplinary action, and other committee members added other reasons, such as to use the class toward the major, to graduate, or perhaps to be sure the student would not appear in his or her class again. Moore wondered if there were any data we could collect to assess whether there is a correlation, and whether under such circumstances, a D is essentially a failing grade (F). For a change to take place, the question of departmental grade minima for each course would need to be taken up by the Faculty Senate for consideration, but sending such a proposal to the Faculty Senate was not formulated as a motion and was dropped for the time being to return to counting excess courses.

Weinberger indicated that at the next meeting, the committee will discuss the amendments to the Honor Code language proposed by Breitenbach and Weinberger, and distributed copies of the proposed Code language. He indicated two words that some students found objectionable, both in the fourth bullet point: “I have voluntarily chosen…” and “…I accept the obligations and the consequences of my free choice to join this society…” Some students surveyed about this language felt that some students are not at Puget Sound completely voluntarily (e.g., perhaps their parents chose this school) and since they weren’t here voluntarily, they would not feel bound to such obligations by an Honor Code that begins this way.

With this introduction to the next meeting in hand, **Tomhave M/S/P** that the meeting be adjourned at 10:29 am.

Respectfully submitted

Betsy Kirkpatrick
Secretary of the Day