

Minutes
Undergraduate Studies Committee Meeting
September 22, 2006, 2:00 p.m.

Members Present: Craig Bertolet (Chair), Chris Forhan, Jim McKelly, Bonnie Jean Shamp, Marc Silverstein, Isabelle Thompson

Announcements:

The committee voted unanimously to accept the minutes from the previous Undergraduate Studies Committee meeting (9/08/06).

Business: Assessment Issues

1. The numerical grades from the exams from the 3110 Survey of Linguistics course prompted a discussion of what constitutes “acceptability” in portfolio assessment. The professor who typically offers the Survey of Linguistics course had identified as “acceptable” any grade over 60% (“D” or above). Members of the committee wondered whether, for the unique purposes of portfolio evaluation, a grade of “D” ought to be considered “acceptable.” After discussion of various strategies by which to resolve this discrepancy—adding another evaluative rubric to the existing four (“acceptable—but by the skin of your teeth”), dropping Outcome #3 altogether, etc.—it was resolved that because 3110 is the only advanced undergraduate course the final grades of which are based entirely on exams, it would be adjudged “anomalous” and bypassed in the assessment process.
2. The committee discussed what it uniformly perceived to be the generally poor quality of student writing in longer (8-10+ pages) paper assignments—a judgment based on this year’s portfolio assessment and consistent with portfolio evaluations of the previous five years. Coordinator Bertolet produced data demonstrating that more professors are assigning more 8-10-page assignments; there was general agreement that this trend is a positive one (more writing = good). Yet in the light of this increased expectation the quality of the writing itself is disappointing. Particular deficits in developmental logic and the mechanics of longer papers were noted. The committee discussed whether students were being adequately prepared to write longer papers, raising questions and offering suggestions regarding the developmental modes by which such instruction is, or might be, accomplished.
3. The committee discussed the ongoing issue of the dearth of portfolios voluntarily submitted by students. Having decided last year that portfolio submissions ought to be required of students upon graduation, the committee discussed ways in which such a requirement might be best administered. Some suggestions from the committee: make portfolio-submission one of the check-listed items upon which graduation is contingent, a process monitored by the College of Liberal Arts advisors; give students turning in portfolios certificates of participation in the department Portfolio Assessment Project designating them PAP Fellows and creating another resume line for them; institute a mugs-for-portfolios exchange program; continue the voluntary submission process but with strategically more apt communications. It was noted that the committee ought to deploy more carrot and less stick in the process of submission-encouragement.
4. The committee discussed whether any specific recommendations should be made to the faculty based on the recent portfolio evaluation. It was resolved that faculty members ought to be made aware of what the committee perceives to be the problematic quality of our students’ longer papers, and

encouraged to address this problem appropriately in their respective classes—by means of topic selection, assignment sheets, in-class instruction, office-hours instruction or any other method of instruction deemed by individual faculty members to be appropriate and effective. It was noted that the committee respects the academic freedom of individual faculty members, and ought to offer its recommendation not as prescriptive, but as informational and suggestive.

The meeting was adjourned at roughly 3:35 p.m.

Reported by Jim McKelly