

TO: University of Oregon Senate

FROM: Ian F. McNeely
Chair, Undergraduate Council

RE: Undergraduate Council end-of-year report, 2009-10

DATE: May 26, 2010

Program review

Reviewing proposals to add or change majors, minors, and other programs serving undergraduates is the bread and butter of the Undergraduate Council's work. This year we reviewed and approved an overhaul of the Planning, Public Policy, and Management major and the creation of a new minor in Creative Writing. We also advised Disability Services on its plan to change its name to "Accessible Education Center." Discussions on the revival of a major in General Social Sciences are ongoing as of this writing, and the Council has been working closely with the College of Arts and Sciences on this complicated endeavor.

The Council's review process is rigorous, high-minded, and detailed but resolutely unbureaucratic. Discussions are open and wide-ranging. One key aspect of our review process is to match proposals against the general intellectual standards, policies, and best practices of the University. Another is the adoption of an outsider's perspective to ensure proposals can withstand the scrutiny of students, faculty, administrators, accreditors, state officials, and the general public. Finally, we want the proposals we forward to the Vice Provost to be as strong as possible given proposing departments' own priorities and commitments. Our aim is protect the freedom of departments to design undergraduate programs in ways that best fit the standards of their own disciplines. We recognize that these standards must ultimately be determined by local faculty engaged with their colleagues nationally and internationally. Proposals should at the same time embed these standards in programs with clearly articulated rationales and requirements.

Grade culture

The Council's biggest endeavor during 2009-10 was to conduct a campuswide discussion of grade inflation centered on three specific proposals we formulated to improve the "grade culture" at UO.

An earlier incarnation of the Council had studied the issue of grade inflation at UO back in 2005-06. In subsequent years the Council examined practices and policies adopted at other universities to address this issue. These investigations led in 2008-09 to our three proposals. The current academic year marked the culmination of these efforts as we subjected these proposals to feedback from as many quarters as possible in order to refine

and improve them. We also sought to generate new questions and perspectives we had not thought of before. Along the way, we consulted the UO Leadership Council, the President, the Provost, the Vice Provost for Academic Affairs, the Dean of College of Arts and Sciences, the CAS department heads, a host of individual departments across the university, the ASUO Senate and President, and the UO Senate. In addition, we established a blog (<http://gradeculture.uoregon.edu>) with a FAQ and background documents and invited the entire faculty, undergraduate student body, and GTF staff to submit comments. The blog, which remains active, generated scores of responses, all of them civil, thoughtful, and productive. We also set up a dedicated email account (ugcproposals@uoregon.edu) and held two Town Hall meetings in April.

The Council will submit a separate report to the Senate by early June summarizing our study, the feedback we gathered, and the (now four) specific university-level policies we now recommend to improve the grade culture at UO. This report is intended to lay the basis for possible Senate legislation during the 2010-11 academic year.

General Education

Parallel with our discussions of grade culture, we began to address the issue of General Education reform—though with a markedly different tenor. Here we confronted, not a nagging problem, as grade inflation is, but a largely functional curriculum that has nonetheless devolved into what many students view as a tedious checklist of requirements. We believe the Gen Ed curriculum can be rejuvenated by coordinating the spontaneous initiatives of dedicated faculty and staff across the university. Our aim, then, has been to brainstorm ideas, examine how other universities construct their own Gen Ed curricula, and cultivate synergies and cross-campus contacts among groups and individuals at UO who are already interested in Gen Ed reform.

A focal point of our discussion was Prof. Lisa Freinkel's proposal, originally submitted as part of the Provost's Big Ideas initiative of 2008-09, entitled "Revitalizing General Education." This proposal envisions the creation of Teaching Institutes: clusters or menus of Gen Ed courses that focus on some important theme such as global citizenship or sustainability. Such Institutes might also feature other intellectual, social, or advising opportunities. They offer a way to catalyze the energies of faculty sharing common interests and hungering for interdisciplinary contact centered on pedagogical experimentation. The Council rapidly reached consensus that Teaching Institutes represent an exciting idea in their own right and can at the same time help to generate further reform ideas. Institutes can also readily be piloted within the existing Gen Ed curriculum.

Another high point of our Gen Ed discussions this year was the visit of Prof. Ron Bramhall to one of our meetings together with some of his students in BA 352. As part of their course projects, these students had themselves studied aspects of the Gen Ed curriculum. Their findings helped to spark a lively and productive discussion with the regular members of the Council. Here as in other discussions, the importance of skills in

good writing repeatedly came to the forefront. Prof. Bramhall is also active on the Student Affairs curriculum committee, and this connection led to a follow-up conversation with Dean of Students Paul Shang to explore possible synergies between their efforts and ours.

We also had encouraging discussions with the director of the Writing Program and the co-chair of the Global Oregon Big Idea. In both instances the idea of Teaching Institutes was met with an enthusiastic response. The pedagogy of the Writing Program can potentially be adapted to the particular themes of Teaching Institutes through the production of content-specific print-on-demand readers and the employment of GTFs with interests in the institutes' specific themes. Global Oregon represents a terrific locus of synergy not only because it encompasses many different initiatives in research, instruction, and outreach but also because "Global Citizenship" happened to be the sample Teaching Institute developed in the original Freinkel proposal. The Council therefore endorsed the idea of planning and perhaps even piloting a Teaching Institute in conjunction with Global Oregon as early as the coming academic year.

Miscellaneous

Other topics on the Council this year included input to a multi-institutional survey on academic advising and a policy discussion on the granting of CEP (Community Education Program) credits to high school students taking UO classes. At our last meeting in June, we will discuss a proposal that the "add" and "drop" deadlines for courses be made to coincide on the same date.

Finally, the Council participated in the performance review of Karen Sprague, Vice Provost of Undergraduate Studies. The Council enjoys an especially productive and collegial relationship with the Vice Provost.

Conclusion

The Undergraduate Council has had an extremely active year, a year which coincided with a renewed interest in internal governance campuswide. It is a pleasure to serve as Chair of this exceptionally collegial, diverse, and dedicated group.