
Minutes of the meeting of the **Academic Policy and Planning Committee** held on Thursday 3rd February 2005 from 3:00 to 5:00 p.m. in Room 310, James (Administration) Building

Present: B. Arciero, J. Beheshti, A. Bryan, L. Butler-Kisber, W. Caplin, M. Crago (chairing), V. Errunza, J. Galbraith, W. Hendershot, P. Holland, J.C. Hurtubise, A. Kenjeev, M. Nahon, J. Schmidt, J. Zucchi, H.M.C. Richard (Secretary to the Committee)

Regrets: M. Dowsley, J. Feine, A. Husain, A.C. Masi, S. McDougall, M. Mendelson, L. Vinet

Document circulated at the meeting:

04-APPC-02-38 Course Evaluations – January 2005 Update

Associate Provost Martha Crago, who chaired the meeting, welcomed Mrs Janine Schmidt who joined McGill University on February 1st as the new Trenholme Director of Libraries.

07.01 Proposed agenda

The proposed agenda was approved with one change: full discussion of item 5 on the A+ Grade was postponed to a future date when Associate Dean Morton Mendelson would be able to attend the meeting.

07.02 Minutes of meeting held on 6th January 2005

The minutes were adopted as circulated.

07.03 Business arising

- a) Report on Senate meeting held on January 12, 2005 (366th APPC Report)

The proposed Arts Legacy (Freshman) option, *Making Modernities*, was approved by Senate.

- b) Report on Senate meeting held on February 2, 2005 (367th APPC Report)

The proposed B.Sc.; Major in Earth System Science was approved by Senate

07.04 Subcommittee on Courses and Programs (SCTP)

Report on meetings held on November 11 and 25, 2004 (04-APPC-02- 33)

Associate Provost presented a definition for an addition to McGill's program nomenclature. The proposed "stream" will designate an emphasis in a particular area of study in the form of a set of courses. It will not constitute an official separate program option; it will be of an advisory nature.

In the discussion, it was suggested that **the proposed definition of "stream" should be edited and that the existing list of program nomenclature should be brought to the Committee. On motion by Mr. Bryan seconded by Professor Butler-Kisber, the proposed new term and definition was approved.**

[Note: the following definition is proposed, with correction of an error in the third sentence where "not" was inadvertently omitted in the SCTP Report): *A stream is a specified list of courses that provides students with a suggested set of courses in an area of specialization within a program. It does not appear on transcripts or diplomas. Since such a specified list of courses does not affect degree requirements, it may be added by units as comments to the Calendar. A stream does not require formal approval.*]

07.05 A+ Grade

- Memorandum from Associate Dean Morton Mendelson, 25-11-2004 with info on G10, AAU, and Quebec universities (04-APPC-02-34)
- Excerpts from APPC minutes re. A+ grade, 1998-2004 (04-APPC-02-35)
- “Why McGill needs an A+”, Martha Crago, McGill Reporter, 05-11-1998 (04-APPC-02-36)

The Committee chose to postpone discussion of the issue to a time when Associate Dean Mendelson would be present. It however considered which documents and data other than those circulated for the meeting should be made available to the Committee for the discussion. The list included:

- a) the positions of the faculties as reported by Deans and included in document 03-APPC-09-06 “Reopening the debate on adoption of the A+ grade”;
- b) the use of the A+ grade in the top 25 North American universities listed in “The Financial Times Survey” (Correction: The Times Higher Education Supplement World University Rankings, November 5, 2004) and whether they report GPAs; at its meeting on November 4, 2004, APPC had asked for information on all 62 institutions;
- c) the five recommendations mentioned in the minutes of the APPC meeting of March 26, 1998;
- d) the memorandum submitted by Associate Dean Mendelson in 2003 and the rationale given.

Regarding b), there was concern as to the way Faculty positions on the issue were generated. The responses from Deans to the memorandum from the Provost may not all have been prepared in consultation with Faculty councils. It was suggested and **agreed that the issue should be brought back to Deans for an up-to-date consultation. Furthermore, Deans should be asked to solicit consideration at the departmental and professoriate level.**

APPC members wondered how many students at McGill are affected by the lack of an A+ at McGill. As an example of disadvantage, it was stated that “A” grades are automatically converted into a 3.9 by certain universities when considering McGill students for entry to medicine. Given the lack of unanimity on the issue at McGill, it was suggested that if McGill students are indeed disadvantaged, the University might consider stating on all transcripts that McGill does not use A+.

07.06 Paper Use Policy

Memorandum from Vice-Principal Morty Yalovsky, Chair of the Senate Committee on Physical Development, January 19, 2005 (04-APPC-02-37)

The Committee considered the “Paper Use Policy” which has been developed by the Subcommittee on the Environment (SCE) of the Senate Committee on Physical Development (SCPD) and whose adoption has been recommended by the SCPD. The SCPD is seeking the approval of APPC before submitting the recommendations to Senate as they “might affect the ‘academic side’ of course delivery.”

APPC discussed the section entitled “Paper Use Policy: General Statement”. A number of comments and suggestions were made:

- The term “post-consumer” (PC) as opposed to “recycled/reprocessed” should be defined.
- The use of WebCT is time-consuming for teaching staff who are being expected to do more and more secretarial tasks; its use should indeed be “encouraged”, not imposed, as conveyed in the introductory text: “Academic and administrative units shall make every reasonable effort...”.
- The use of WebCT does not prevent some of the material from getting printed.
- Does the course-outline policy prescribe electronic format? The Committee on Student Affairs should rule on whether course-outlines should be in paper or electronic format and seek an amendment in the “Green book” if necessary.
- Exam book sheets should be lined on both sides for exams papers to be submitted double-sided.

- There may be practical reasons why assignment and examination formats have developed in the way they have. Should title pages be dispensed with? Should students be encouraged to submit texts single-spaced instead of double-spaced? The Committee recommends not to make changes with regard to these items.
- The second-to-last bullet should be changed to read: “~~Inform~~ Encourage students ~~in course syllabi that to submit~~ assignments ~~can be submitted~~ double-sided.
- Should students be encouraged to submit assignments electronically and instructors to submit their comments electronically? This may not be a practical option for reviewing a 300-page thesis. The Committee therefore did not recommend a change.
- With respect to “setting the default on printers and copiers as double-sided”, it was suggested that appropriate signage should be included as well. In response to a suggestion made, it was noted that given the variety of printers, it would not be possible to refer users to a website on “how to print double-sided” as no single method suits all printers.

On motion by Mr. Bryan seconded by Mr Arciero, the policy statement as amended by APPC was approved. This and APPC’s amendments will be communicated to the Chair of the Senate Committee on Physical Development.

07.07 Course evaluations

- Update, October 27, 2004 (04-APPC-11-15)
 - Update, January 20, 2005 (04-APPC-02-38)
- [Associate Provost (Academic Programs) Martha Crago]

Associate Provost Martha Crago reminded APPC of the findings conveyed in the April 2004 report on course evaluations (03-APPC-04-42). Given that not all courses are evaluated and given the three conditions that have to be met for posting numeric results of course evaluations, only a small proportion of course evaluations results are in effect accessible to students.

Professor Crago outlined three options that would meet Quebec’s strict privacy law:

- a. seek approval from the University community for a limited set of questions that would generate information about the course, not about the instructor.
- b. continue seeking instructors’ permission for posting numeric results of course evaluations;
- c. withhold all course evaluation results and have students manage their own “rateyourprofessor.com” site although the sources of the evaluations results posted are questionable.

The discussion of the Provost’s Associate Provosts Group (APG) on January 31st focused on the meaning of course evaluations and the reasons for students wanting access to course evaluations results in the early 1990’s and now.

In the discussion it was noted that students wishing to obtain information about courses usually seek it from other students, as posted course evaluation results require time and effort to comprehend. One member of APPC voiced opposition to a small set of selected questions, but he contended that instructors in his unit would have no difficulty agreeing to posting the numeric responses to a dozen questions if those results were consulted only by students within the unit and not by the entire McGill community. However this is not realistic given that students take courses offered by numerous departments. It was noted that it might be useful to dispel a misconception among instructors that course evaluation results can be downloaded. A deeper and more serious problem than the dissemination of numeric results is the fact that many courses are not being evaluated at all. Course evaluations have three functions: evaluative, formative, and student satisfaction (consumer information) by means of dissemination of the numeric results of course evaluations; whether course evaluations are able to meet all three functions is debatable.

Regarding the consumer-information aspect, it was stated that there should be no need for the dissemination of course evaluation results for courses that are strictly required courses. However required courses might be electives for certain students. Students’ more general intent behind the dissemination of the numeric results of course evaluations may be to ensure that teaching at McGill is important; furthermore disclosure of course evaluation results meets accountability needs, gives students something in return for their

evaluations, and adds to motivation. Aside from the symbolic value of disseminating course evaluation results, and given the number of required courses and scheduling constraints, it was not clear how useful course evaluations results might be for course selection and how many students might need to use them. The Associate Provost stated that she would ask advisers about their recommendations to students with respect to seeking information on courses, for example obtaining course outlines, speaking to students who have taken the course, checking rateyourprofessor.com, etc. Professor Crago stated that course evaluations go back to the mid 1960's when course guides were launched by students, reflecting a drive for students' rights. Students' personal comments were the most helpful aspect of the students' "anti-calendar" that was developed in the 1980's, but comments are now confidential to the instructor and the Department Chair and cannot be used other than for evaluative and formative purposes. Given Quebec's tight law regarding access to information, none of the other Quebec universities disseminate results of course evaluations. McGill has been trying to meet students' wish in granting access to course evaluation results as a matter of principle, but the question of usefulness should be assessed.

It was suggested that the University should be careful about a policy that may create fear among instructors: while course evaluations are intended to be formative, it is important to maintain a good learning environment for faculty. A certain degree of skepticism was expressed regarding the possibility of formulating a set of general questions about a course. Such questions as "is this a good course?" were thought to have no meaning as different people will have different reasons for rating a course "good". It was also noted that ongoing evaluations for continuous feed-back are much more useful for meeting the formative function of course evaluations. It was suggested that thought should be given as to how course evaluations are carried out and as to the principles behind such evaluations.

In conclusion it was stated that the University may be left with no better choice than to encourage instructors to give their permission for their numeric course evaluation results to be disseminated. It was noted that the lack of response or even a negative response on the part of many instructors may be accidental. Given that it would be illegal for the University to opt for disseminating numeric course-evaluation results unless instructors stated their refusal, greater efforts should be made to explain the policy; it is also expected that online permission granting will greatly facilitate the process and help increase the number of instructors granting permission.

Associate Provost Martha Crago will prepare a document for discussion, outlining the major issues involved.

07.08 Other business

None.

The meeting adjourned at 4:43 p.m.

Helen M.C. Richard 2005-02-24