Minutes of the CSBS Senate Meeting on 3/21/11

Present: Tim Strauss (Chair, Geography), Carol Weisenberger (History), Taifa Yu (Political Science), Otto MacLin (Psychology), Cyndi Dunn (SAC), Annette Lynch (SAHS), Jim McCullagh (Social Work), Brenda Bass (Associate Dean)

I. Approval of the minutes

There were no minutes to approve because the secretary had not yet completed them.

II. Curriculum Review: Women’s and Gender Studies

Women’s and Gender Studies was represented by Phyllis Baker and Cyndi Dunn. Two changes are being made to the M.A. in Women’s and Gender Studies. The first is a change to the required methods course. Women's and Gender Studies is an interdisciplinary program in which students conduct thesis research using a wide variety of disciplinary perspectives and methods. Previously, students were required to choose one from a list of 15 different methods course with the approval of their advisor. This has been changed to allow the student to select any methods course of his/her choice with the advisor's approval. This change will provide students with greater flexibility in completing the program with a methods course that is best suited to their research focus.

The second change to the M.A. program is a change in course title and description. The 1-hour course in Library Research Methods is being changed to Introduction to Research in Women's and Gender Studies to reflect the fact that the course not only provides an introduction to library research methods, but is designed to guide students through the process of developing a thesis proposal.

Changes are also being made to the undergraduate minor in Women’s and Gender Studies. The first change is the elimination of the 1-hour senior seminar course. Although members of the Women’s and Gender Studies Board consider the course to be valuable, the logistics of scheduling the course for both students and faculty have been difficult. As an interdisciplinary program the WGS program has no dedicated faculty lines, and it has proven difficult to find faculty in other departments who are willing to teach this course. Students have also frequently had conflicts with scheduling this course, forcing the WGS Director to offer multiple sections as independent study.

There has also been a major restructuring of the entire undergraduate minor. The previous program required students to take 9 hours from a short list of "Core Electives" and then 6 hours from a long list of other electives that included over 50 possible courses. Over the years, many of these courses have been changed, are no longer taught by the same faculty members with the same gender focus etc. The WGS Board voted to eliminate the previous distinction between core electives and other electives. Instead, students will choose 15 hours from a single list of electives that includes the old "Core Electives" with some new additions.
On January 14, an email was sent to all faculty on the WGS mailing list which provided the new list of electives (List A) together with a much longer list of courses to be dropped from the minor (List B). Faculty who taught courses on List B that they felt should be included in the revised list of electives were invited to submit syllabi and a brief description of why the course is appropriate as a WGS course. A week later, Consultation Form J was sent to heads of fifteen departments listing the courses to be dropped from the WGS minor. Again, faculty who felt that these courses should remain as WGS electives were invited to submit syllabi and justifications. On the basis of the submitted syllabi, several additional courses were added back in as WGS electives. The criteria used were that gender and/or feminist perspectives be a central component of the course as reflected in either the course description or the course objectives and topics listed in the syllabus. The new list of electives was approved by the WGS Board on February 14.

There have been some objections to the proposed changes, particularly from Family Services. A total of seven Family Services courses were originally slated to be removed as electives; three of these were subsequently added back to the list of electives based on review of course syllabi. Senator Lynch noted that traditionally a great many Family Services majors have chosen to minor in WGS in part due to the perceived overlap in topics and coursework. Reducing the number of Family Services courses in the WGS curriculum may therefore lead to a decline in the number of WGS minors. She also noted that use of the term “feminist perspectives” may be perceived as requiring adherence to a particular ideological stance and that terminology such as “critical analysis of gender” may be more appropriate. Dr. Bass made the argument that in the case of some Family Services courses that gender may not appear overtly listed in the syllabus precisely because it is embedded in every topic covered in the course and that this should be taken into consideration.

The Senate unanimously approved the proposed changes to the Women’s and Gender Studies curriculum.

III. Discussion of proposed changes to the LAC

Representatives of the LAC-RSC: Deirdre Heistad, Ginny Arthur, Jerry Smith, April Chatham-Carpenter.
CSBS representatives to the University Faculty Senate: Julie Lowell, Katherine Van Wormer.

The Liberal Arts Core Review Steering Committee is currently in the process of evaluating the results of their recent survey. The group has broken into sub-committees to analyze responses to each area within the survey. They are also currently in the process of consulting with the college faculty senates. They plan to present their report and a proposed model to the provost by the end of the spring semester and to begin formal consultation and approval processes with the various faculty governing bodies during fall 2011.

Some general findings that have emerged from the survey is that people are generally supportive of the Cornerstone idea although there is mixed sentiment about whether it should replace or complement the existing courses in writing and oral communication. Faculty also strongly support additional writing instruction integrated across various areas of the curriculum as well as
more attention to critical thinking throughout the LAC. In general, there is sentiment that both the current Capstone course and the Wellness course need to be either restructured or eliminated.

There is currently a pilot program for developing eleven sections of the new Cornerstone course, all to be taught by tenured or tenure-track faculty who have applied to teach the course and will receive substantial faculty development. They noted that currently both the required College Reading and Writing course and the required Oral Communication course are heavily staffed with adjunct faculty. The preference is for the new Cornerstone course to be taught primarily by tenured or tenure-track faculty but it may not be possible to sustain that model if it is scaled up to cover all students.

In addition to logistical issues, another barrier to the institution of a required Cornerstone course for all students is faculty concerns about overly prescriptive requirements in terms of course structure and content. The current program is limited to faculty who have voluntarily applied to the program and have agreed to work as part of a team with library faculty and representatives from Student Affairs. Two faculty who are participating as part of the pilot program noted that they are excited about the opportunity for real faculty development in terms of learning how to teach more effectively as well as the opportunity to collaborate with other faculty with different perspectives.

Many universities structure their LAC program in terms of distribution requirements in which students can select from a very broad range of courses as long as they cover the required areas of study. This allows particularly motivated students to select advanced classes which may provide more intellectual challenge than the introductory courses that comprise both the current LAC and most of the proposed models. The concern with this type of distribution model is that it may result in students taking a handful of relatively specialized courses without receiving the basic foundational knowledge necessary for an educated person.

The current models proposed by the LAC-RSC are fairly flexible in terms of how one populates the proposed categories. On the one hand, there could be a narrowly defined list of courses that everyone would take, along the lines of the current Humanities sequence. Alternatively, there could be a broader range of courses approved on the basis of whether they are demonstrated to meet an agreed-upon list of course objectives for the category. One potential advantage of a more prescribed curriculum is that one would be more able to rely on all students in upper-division classes having had exposure to certain core content.

However, a number of faculty are concerned about the proposal to develop multiple new, interdisciplinary courses that are not grounded in specific disciplines. One major concern here is the need for faculty to teach outside of their areas of specialization. This not only would require support for faculty development, but may also have a detrimental impact on the depth and rigor of the courses since faculty will be teaching about topics in which they themselves have little expertise. The concern is that we may create superficial courses of a level more appropriate to high school than to university education.
Although faculty are greatly concerned about the development of skills such as writing, quantitative analysis, or critical thinking, there is also concern that the LAC courses have in-depth and rigorous content.

A substantial number of faculty strongly support the current LAC curriculum. There are concerns that the strengths and weaknesses of the current model have not been properly assessed. We seem to be rushing off to create shiny new models without first identifying the problems that we are trying to fix. It may be more effective to identify those problems and then make modifications to the existing program to resolve them.

There was strong support in the survey for both raising the existing language requirement (exit requirement) and for doing more to promote Study Abroad. One faculty member argued that ideally every single student would engage in study abroad because this is so educationally and personally enriching. One issue is financial constraints including not only the cost of the programs but also the need to for-go the income from off-campus employment during the study abroad period. Perhaps more scholarship support should be directed towards this area.

Questions were raised about the “Global Heritage” category in several of the proposed models. It is not clear exactly what is meant by “Global Heritage.” Does this subsume or replace the current Non-Western Cultures category? The response was that this varies across the different models. Again issues were raised about whether most faculty are qualified to teach a broad global heritage course that would require comparisons across culture areas with which they have limited familiarity.

It was noted that many faculty have a strong emotional attachment to courses they currently teach in the core and people are likely to resist “giving up” those courses. However, a restructuring of the LAC should also be exciting because it offers us chances to expand our own intellectual horizons, rethink our curriculum and pedagogy, and collaborate with other faculty.

Other concerns were raised about the desire to embed writing instruction and critical thinking more broadly across the curriculum. Most faculty support this as a worthy goal. However, effective pedagogy for writing and critical thinking requires small class sizes. It is not clear whether that is feasible. It would also require faculty development since many faculty have limited knowledge of how to teach these skills effectively.

There was strong support for the idea of requiring a writing competency exam to be administered partway through the student’s program. There are questions about how to devise an exam that would be both valid and reliable as well as about the labor required to grade them. Nonetheless, this option is worth pursuing as a way to ensuring that all UNI students graduate with at least minimal competency in writing. There are plans to use ePortfolios to assess student writing as part of the pilot program for the Cornerstone course. If that is successful, those criteria and rubrics could perhaps be scaled up for a university competency exam. We also need to think about providing more effective support for students whose writing skills are clearly subpar.

It was also noted that clearly defining what is meant by competency in areas such as writing, mathematics, and critical thinking is important for strengthening our articulation agreements with
the community colleges. We have to be able to show what UNI students are able to do in these areas before placing requirements on transfer students. People were unsure of the numbers, but between 30-40% of our students transfer in with either AA degrees or substantive LAC credit. Part of the process of restructuring the LAC will require reworking our articulation agreements.

IV. Other Business

The next meeting of the college senate will be March 28. The agenda will include curriculum review for Political Science and part of the SAC package (undergraduate programs in anthropology and criminology). There may also be discussion of whether the CSBS Senate wishes to make any formal, written response to the proposed changes to the LAC.

We now have candidates for all open seats for college elections. Chair Strauss will contact the candidates to request brief biographical statements and will sent out the ballot electronically.

The meeting adjourned at 5:20 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Cyndi Dunn