Minutes of the February 18, 2020 faculty meeting

The meeting was called to order at 3:32pm in Harris Hall Leopold Room 108 by Dean Adrian Randolph.

I. The minutes of the Faculty Meeting of October 14, 2019 were approved unanimously.

II. Discussion of Ideas for better use of the Pass/No Pass Function

Mary Finn, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Academic Affairs and Advising, shared a handout to help facilitate the discussion of possible changes to grading policies. Currently, Weinberg College students may not satisfy any degree requirements, including distribution requirements and major requirements, with classes completed under the P/N grading option. Because P/N grades are neutral to the grade point average, loosening the current restrictions may mitigate structural inequalities that disadvantage some students. Students with the benefit of AP or IB curriculum in high school may apply at least some test-based units towards satisfaction of distribution and major requirements; thus their University grade point average is affected less in completion of basic requirements. These same students are also more likely to study abroad and thereby are able to apply grade-point neutral transfer credits towards requirements as well. Since 2008, the gap between students with such advantages and those without has grown. There are also more students with ADA accommodations and other students for whom the transition to college is particularly challenging. STEM classes are the most difficult for these high-risk students, causing them to have an early hit on their GPA from which it is challenging to recover. The more risk factors that students have, the lower their GPA can be and the more likely they will end up in the standing process. Both University-wide policies and College-specific policies pertaining to Pass/No Pass grading were discussed at this meeting.

Sarah Broaders, Professor of Instruction in the Department of Psychology, asked if there is a noticeable difference in GPA for at-risk students who are in non-STEM courses. Dean Finn explained that there is a correlation in the data; the difference in GPA for non-STEM courses is not as dramatic, but it is still statistically significant.

Dean Finn spoke more specifically about the Weinberg policies in the context of the future curriculum (distribution areas replaced by foundational disciplines, etc.). Specific changes are highlighted in yellow on the attachment that Dean Finn distributed; Attachment 2 included here.

Discussion followed:
- Professor Broaders asked if the future First-Year Seminar, called the “College Seminar,” might be offered only as Pass/No Pass. Dean Finn said that might be the case based on the proposal approved by the faculty. Professor Broaders said there would be faculty that would not want to teach the course in that case since the general assumption is that students would “phone in” their efforts. Dean Finn asked to table the remainder of this specific point since the new College Seminar is still being developed.
- Enectali Figueroa-Feliciano, Associate Professor in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, inquired how the variability of AP programs across high schools could be mitigated; some students have several AP options and can have those test credits count for distribution areas
versus students who had no AP course options and therefore have to fulfill all their requirements at Northwestern. Professor Broaders suggested that a maximum total of no more than four of the future Foundational Disciplines be satisfied some combination of AP credit plus courses completed with Pass/No Pass grading.

- Susan Manning, Professor in the Department of English, asked for clarification about “When Cultures Meet,” specifically on the policy if it could be Pass/No Pass when taken at Northwestern. Dean Finn said this is still up for debate. Dean Randolph elaborated that there is also discussion about whether a course taken abroad can be applied towards When Cultures Meet - Global.

- Charlie Yarnoff, Associate Professor of Instruction in the Cook Family Writing Program, asked if Pass/No Pass policy change was meant to encourage students to take courses that are outside their comfort zone. Dean Finn said yes, this is already the case, but in the future pass/no pass options could also be used as an advising tool and help undergraduates plan their experience from early on.

- Indira Raman, Professor in the Department of Neurobiology, asked if the departments would decide what courses will have the Pass/No Pass grading option available. Dean Finn said it would be a cooperative effort between the dean’s office and departments and programs to encourage faculty to offer courses with Pass/No Pass grading as an option. Professor Raman asked for support to help faculty calibrate their grading so that passing and not passing is standardized. Dean Randolph stated that this discussion will raise this issue and allow faculty to examine their grading standards.

- Mike Smutko, Professor of Instruction in the Department of Physics and Astronomy, suggested that it may be difficult to manage how students use Pass/No Pass; it may just give more privileged students additional opportunity to bypass the new Foundational Disciplines. Which high schools have more AP courses? Dean Finn agreed and suggested that each high school would need to be researched to see what range of AP courses are offered.

- Arend Kuyper, Assistant Professor of Instruction in the Department of Statistics, asked why at the University level an eighth-week deadline was being considered for changing grading to or from Pass/No Pass. Assistant Dean for Academic Advising Liz Trubey explained that the current deadline is in the third week and is too early for students to make an effective decision for Pass/No Pass. The deadline for dropping a class is week six in the quarter, a Medical Leave is at week eight and course withdrawal in week nine. A change in the policy would give a subset of students the opportunity to change to Pass/No Pass after the drop deadline if they are not achieving the grade they were hoping for while still giving them the last chance to withdraw the next week.

- Baron Reed, Professor in the Department of Philosophy, was concerned that if students are not entirely invested in a course because of a Pass/No Pass, it could be draining to faculty. He was also concerned that students who are struggling may not seek help right away. His final question was why foreign language courses weren’t included in the discussion of expanding Pass/No Pass options. Regarding the first question, Dean Finn stated that there may be some students who will not be invested in a class if they use Pass/No Pass, but the goal is that this will be a tool for students who might be struggling in a class but want the option to finish without having to worry about the impact on their grade point average. Addressing the second question, Dean Trubey explained that if faculty are proactive in identifying the struggling students, the advising office can be alerted. In regards to the final question, Dean Finn pointed out that since multiple language courses are required, in order to move on the
student may have to show higher proficiency in the subject than can be captured in a Pass/No Pass situation (where a pass can be as low as a D).

- Joan Linsenmeier, Senior Lecturer Emeritus in the Department of Psychology, asked if it would be possible to analyze the grades that get translated into a Pass. Dean Finn said this is possible. She elaborated that would be helpful to provide insight into which students are getting a Pass in classes but still may be floundering.

- Valerie Kilman, Associate Professor of Instruction in the Department of Neurobiology, was concerned that for students who are overly focused on grades, making the Pass/No Pass deadline later in the quarter would only create more anxiety because it would give them more opportunity to worry about avoiding grades they don’t want. Dean Finn restated that students will need to work with their advisors.

III. Policy on recording in the classroom

Dean Randolph informed the faculty of the policy regarding recording class sessions. Policy highlighted on agenda.

Bob Holmgren, Professor Department of Molecular Biosciences, mentioned that students can have accommodations for recording in class. Dean Randolph said that legally-necessary accommodations, if approved, trump what is in the Faculty Handbook.

Professor Broaders stated that she has a statement in her syllabus that declares recordings cannot be distributed without permission.

Ian Savage, Professor of Instruction in the Department of Economics, stated that the accommodation for students recording classes overrules the Faculty Handbook. Dean Randolph said that is true insofar as there is an exception according to federal law. Professor Broaders stated that there can be a written contract between the faculty and student so there is a clear understanding of what the recording could be used for.

Professor Reed stated that accommodations should be reasonable and that recording is not always the first thing that should be done.

Justin Brown, Associate Professor, Department of Neurobiology, asked if this policy also impacts students who don’t want to be recorded. Dean Randolph stated that he was not sure and there will need to be follow-up.

IV. Update on finances

Associate Dean of Finance & Business Operations Danny Fisher provided a high-level financial overview of the University and College for the past two years.

Mark Witte, Professor of Instruction in the Department of Economics, asked why the service to debt increased in a low interest rate environment. Dean Fisher explained that this is due to the way the University accounts for new construction. The interest on the debt used to finance new construction is capitalized into the book value of the construction. The University only begins then paying the
interest upon the completion of construction. The recent increases are thus accounted for by the large amounts of new construction recently completed.

Professor Manning asked why the endowment did poorly in 2019. Dean Randolph explained that the University’s investments performed poorly last year. Dean Fisher also stated that the performance reported reflects the fiscal year and timing can impact the observed performance.

Dean Fisher closed by noting that the expense growth problems are being addressed, but there is still work that needs to be done over the next several fiscal years.

V. Dean’s Update and Q&A

Discussion was tabled due to time

There being no further updates, Dean Randolph thanked the faculty in attendance and the meeting was adjourned at 4:50 p.m.

Respectfully submitted by Greg Pritchett, Executive Assistant to the Dean.