Faculty Senate Meeting Minutes

October 19, 2005

Attendance:

Amster, Harriett; Rasheed, Abdul; Prater, Edmund; Priest, John; Vaccaro, Mary; Polk, Elmer; Smith, Johanna; Silva, David; Sol, Toni; Savage, Sam; Hunt, Graham; Nussbaum, Charles; Young, Robert; Kongevick, Joe; Saxon, Gerald; Dias, Rasika; Cordero-Epperson, Minerva; Kribs-Zaleta, Christopher; Brandt, Andrew; Levine, Dan; Crow, Mary Lynn; Ricard, Mark; Boles, Becky; Weber, Mary; Courtney, Reni; Hegstad, Lorrie; Judkins, Sharon; Jordan, Catheleen

Call to Order:

The meeting was called to order at 2:40 p.m. by Senate Chair Reinhartz.

Remarks by the Chair:

As you are aware, we are on a quest for the QEP and SACS reaccredidation. At the last meeting, I scheduled three focus groups for the faculty one of which took place yesterday and was very well attended. A good deal of information was discussed. There is a second meeting scheduled for next Monday here in this room from 2:00-3:00 p.m. Also, she has scheduled a focus group for senate members only on Thursday, November 3, in the Guadalupe Room of the UC which is from 2:00-3:00 p.m. as well. I will send out another notice on it so you are reminded.

Dr. Farrar-Myers is looking for a good deal of faculty and all constituency input. These focus groups provide a good opportunity to do so and also to interact based on the ideas that are put forth.

Secondly, at the next senate meeting we will have elections. We have extended the terms of the officers until the first of the year then we’ll go fully to a calendar year. There are two principal offices up for election. Dan will move into the chair of the senate and I will move to past-chair and his assistant for a year, and then we will have elections for a secretary and a parliamentarian. Right now John Priest is secretary and Harriett Amster is parliamentarian. According to our bylaws, the current secretary is to run the nominations. John will head up the Nominations Committee, and we need a few volunteers from the senate to help him. Rather than ask you publicly to identify yourselves, I would ask you to identify yourselves to John. If we don’t get a couple of volunteers, we’ll get a couple of volunteers the other way. I would really like to see people voluntarily do this and it’s just compiling a list of candidates for the two principle offices. The other offices (chair and vice-chair) are determined by our bylaws, but given now that I’m chair-elect of the FAC (Faculty Advisory Council), I’m out of this.
The representatives for the Council of Texas Senates are appointed or elected from here. Right now our representatives are Toni Sol and Tom Ingram. Next meeting we will have the report from John on who the candidates are and also at that point we will entertain any nominations from the floor. Then we will have the elections for the new officers who will take over after the first of the year.

Thirdly, we talked about two issues that came up at System from the Office of Academic Affairs Vice-Chancellor, Terry Sullivan. There is the issue of teaching evaluations. We are moving toward (system-wide) a re-examination of what our teaching evaluations are all about. What we do, how we do it, what we hope to find out from it, what purpose it serves, and if we are in compliance with all kinds of federal regulations (FERPA) were some of the topics of our initial discussion. We realized that just about every campus is out of compliance in one way or another and we are no different. What I have done is turned over the business of the teaching evaluations to the student liaison committee and at this point the chair is on leave so I’ve asked John Priest to organize it and begin discussions about the teaching evaluations. Eventually, we’re going to be asked to do this campus-wide and you may even have a best-practice meeting. The vice-chancellor was noticeably confused and upset the first time she figured out all of the differences and problems that existed across the system.

The second thing that came up was the issue of the retention of faculty. It does seem that across the system, there is a good deal of movement of good, valuable faculty members out of system schools. The issue of faculty retention at the tenured ranks has come up. We’re going to hear more about this. We had the Academic Liaison Committee begin looking at this under Christopher Kribs-Zaleta, and I’ve asked him to continue to do this and not just looking at the demography (i.e. who we’re losing and where), but also to try to determine reasons, causes, responses and so on. Both of these assignments will be for the longer term. We don’t expect immediate results on any of this.

I’ve asked Budget Liaison, Professor Rasheed’s committee, to take on the ongoing discussion of upper administration salaries and perks. That which was begun under Ad Hoc Committee Chair, Harriett Amster, will now become internalized in a regular committee which Professor Rasheed chairs.

We have asked the Provost to discuss one of which is the plus/minus grading system.

**Remarks by the President:**

The president is in China attending a graduation of MBA’s.

**Remarks by the Provost:**

One of the first things I would like to share with you is a report on the issue of graduation rates. Cheryl Cardell headed the task force. Faculty and academic support staff generated this report which has become a model for the system. In fact, the Chancellor has now asked that every UT System institution produce something like this because they
were pleased with the work done here. This report includes a number of recommendations for the university as to steps we might take to improve our graduation rates and to lessen the time to graduation. We are currently working on an implementation plan and have already taken steps to implement several of the recommendations in the report. I thought it would be useful for you to have this information as many of the recommendations clearly touch on the work of faculty and the departments. This is out on the web as well and is on my webpage and has been for some time. If you are not aware of it, please spread the word and I’m open to discussion of this at any future point given that most of you have not yet read it. Unless you have questions or comments about it, I won’t say anything else today.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
As I think everyone should be aware, graduation rates are becoming a more important issue for us and for all the components in the system. The legislature has become extremely interested in this as of late; therefore, we become extremely interested in it even though we are always. You may have also noticed, especially since the arrival of President Spaniolo, that we really are beginning to address this issue and make it more public and see what we can do about. I reinforce what the Provost says about how important this is to us. We should all be aware and do what we can to make people aware of it to see what we can do to implement it.

Provost Dunn:
I am very pleased that there are a number of issues that have brought various campus constituencies together this semester for discussion: graduation rates, the plus/minus grading issue, QEP, and the strategic plan. President Spaniolo and I are also showing the video “Defined by Degrees” which I believe we mentioned at the last meeting in hopes of encouraging even more discussion and debate of issues. I think it’s delightful that people are participating in these discussions. I think its encouraging that we don’t all agree, but that we are coming forward with our opinions.

Having said that, I do want to share that it’s come back to me and the President via several different venues that there is some concern about anonymity in terms of the expression of ideas about issues on campus whether it be a QEP theme, plus/minus grading, etc. I’m always taken aback when faculty feel that they’re placing themselves at risk to express their views. That is why we become faculty because we provide an environment where that’s a part of what we do. I just want to ensure you that my own view on such matters and, I can also speak for the president, is that we are here to speak our minds. We are not supposed to agree. We’re supposed to come together and dialogue, have discussion and debate, and out of that will come the best answers for this institution. To the extent that there is any trust or in any belief in what we say, there’s no reason to be concerned on this campus about expressing your views about academic matters. On some level we expect you to do so, and we applaud you when you do irrespective of whether we agree or disagree. If anyone you know feels concerned about attaching their name to their sentiments, please reassure them that there is nothing to fear.
In the recent focus group session, it is indeed the case that Dr. Farrar-Myers asked people to sign in. She asked this for a couple of reasons: 1) our accrediting entity requires incredibly detailed documentary evidence that meetings have been held, who was in the attendance and the like, and; 2) she also wanted an opportunity to be able to follow-up with the participant because we value that people did take the time in their schedules to contribute their ideas on this plan. We may need to communicate with you further about those ideas. There is no intent to trace or track people or somehow engage in retribution for ideas that may not be our favorite ones. I just want to ensure you that I feel strongly about it and we’re trying to create more occasions for dialogue and debate and we’ll only succeed if people can feel they can do this in a spirit of openness.

The last thing that I would like to raise is plus/minus grading which hopefully you’ve heard something about. Either you’ve read the report in entirety which is available on the web or at least followed some of the buzz that is now developing primarily in student circles, but is spreading rapidly to the faculty at large. To remind you of the history, about a semester ago, the graduate assembly asked me to convene a task force to study the issue of plus/minus grading and see if it might be something we would want to consider on this campus.

I asked Andy Kruzic, who is here today and far more expert than I on the issue, to chair the task force and assemble a group of individuals to study the matter. They did great work and issued a report which has been a subject of much of the discussion of late. The dialogue continues.

We’re scheduled to discuss this issue not only here today but at the next meeting of the Undergraduate Assembly. This morning I was recontacted by the Graduate Assembly and actually told that a formal resolution was forthcoming asking me to formally survey all faculty. I responded that I’m inclined to do that, but I indicated that I preferred a way to have these discussions because we’ll all be more informed having debated the issues. I also asked that there would be some volunteer assistance in crafting a survey because I believe very strongly whether or not some of us elect to support or not support will depend on how it’s implemented.

There are many fine grain decisions including translatability into American grade point averages to transcripting issues. Some may elect to support or oppose based on how the plan will be implemented. Constructing the survey instrument is going to be a difficult task. I raise that here because as we move forward with that I might also ask the chair that we get a volunteer or two from senate having been informed by discussion we had today to help draft that instrument if we do move forward with the survey.

I have brought along one of our expert task force chairs, Andy Kruzik. He is here not so much as to make a presentation, but to make brief remarks and respond to questions about the report.
Andy Kruzic:
I would be happy to give you a summary of basically our conclusions. We also considered at one point working on survey questions engulfing this type of issue, but our timeline was pretty tight. In order to move forward on this issue, I think there was some hope that we might deal with this before the end of spring semester and it didn’t work out. The committee members met typically every other week for several hours at which time members were assigned tasks. Some of us came into the committee with one viewpoint and other people had another viewpoint. I’m sure that you all have some feeling about this issue even now. Not everybody on the committee went out with the same view they came in with. I can tell you that I am concerned about a survey which is done without the opportunity to educate and think about this issue.

The net result was a majority, but not a unanimous majority, of the committee recommended the university use plus/minus grading at the undergraduate and graduate levels. The decision was made based on a summary of what we found in the literature, but there is very little in the academic literature. We hoped that schools of education or other people would have dealt with this topic in detail, but surprisingly, that was not the case. We did have a representative from education and others who did their own searches and I think there are some very reasonable conclusions you can draw from what’s out there in terms of some of the literature and reports from committees like ourselves.

One of the basic findings that you should be aware of is that, a switch from straight grading to plus/minus grading did not significantly drop the overall GPA of the students at universities. Most of the studies reported 0 drops in GPAs, some reported as much as a .06 GPA decrease. I would suspect that most of that drop in GPA is because of non-use of A+. There is going to be a slight drop in the highest GPA bracket. Our reports detailed that there were some students who would wind up with higher GPAs, same GPAs, and lower GPAs which is what you might expect. How much a student might experience is hard to tell.

First, our concern was that it would result in a strengthening of or a decrease in the rate of grade inflation or a reversal of grade inflation. In general, most schools are experiencing grade inflation. We did not have the resources to determine whether we were experiencing grade inflation in detail, but I suspect that we probably are since most schools are.

There was a lot of concern about the consequences, fairness, but ultimately, the rationale for recommending plus/minus grading. It is tied to, quite simply, an opportunity to more accurately reflect a student’s performance in a course. Some faculty felt that it was something they wanted to do. Basically, an 89 is not the same as an 81. However you want to cut that, the bottom end of the straight grade is not the same as the top end of the straight grade. One of the things the committee did respect is the importance of each faculty member’s responsibility to and privilege of this grading process. Nobody wants to come in and tell someone else how to grade a class because that is something that each of us as instructors feels very personally tied to.
No matter what the students say, I think it’s much more important about what faculty think than taking the view of students who would be hurt by the system. Are there some students who may lose scholarships because of this? Possibly, if they were marginal students in terms of their scholarship ranking in the first place, it’s entirely possible that if we switched to plus-minus grading that they would wind up losing their scholarship. We don’t know what’s going to happen, but we can’t predict what a student is going to do. I would make a case that a student has this in their control to maintain their academic standard. I think we should do it. For me, it’s something I’ve wanted in the classroom. There were equally strong feelings against plus-minus grading on the committee which brought many lively discussions about the issues.

Why should we do it? Accuracy and fairness. Hopefully, this is an issue related to motivating students to stay engaged throughout the semester. If they (students) know they are in a solid B range, then they’re not going to work to get a better grade.

You should be aware that over 80% of the Carnegie identified research schools use plus-minus grading. When you look at, however, the overall use of plus-minus grading among all colleges including community colleges, they are saying it’s dropped significantly to something less than 50%. That’s telling you that you have a heavily weighted straight grading, if you can draw that conclusion, at the non-Carnegie schools and a very heavy weighting for plus-minus grading at the Carnegie research schools. Some on the committee felt that was an issue that addressed academic strength and academic standards of a university.

It identified potential concerns that some students would lose scholarships, that this is actually slightly more work for the faculty to do or advisors to deal with, there are some issues that need to be addressed as to what grade should be accepted for a passing grade. Is it D minus? The College of Engineering uses a C requirement for certain courses in order to move on to the next course. Is a C minus acceptable? The committee didn’t actually state that in our report, but that any grade within a D minus is a passing grade and a C minus is an acceptable grade. Those issues are not necessarily defined at this point. We did not investigate what other schools did in that regard.

Senator Alavi:
I assume that the undergraduate assembly has already rejected the idea.

Provost Dunn:
No. It is going to be discussed at the next meeting. It will be a primary agenda item.

Senator Alavi:
I come from a school which had a grades and values as follows: A=5 points, B=4 points, (MIT and Purdue valued A at 6 points), C=3 points, and so on. If you look at it, if a student does 80-90% of the work, I’ll give you a B which is 3 points which means 75%. Already the system is flawed. You have to campaign to make the students understand. You do 85% of the work and you get a 75. The grade of B is 3, and 3 out of 4 is 75%. It is very simple. Most people think that a grade between 80 and 90 would be a B, and 90
to 100 would be an A. When we put it in the numeric system of GPA calculation, a B is 3 out of 4 which is .75. So 85% of the work brought a 75% grade. The plus/minus would alleviate some of that. In other words, if you did 85% of the work, you get a B plus or A minus. Another thing is the function of grade inflation because there is a limit of 4 which is grade compression. Thirdly, I don’t know how long this has been in discussion, because none of that has happened in my classroom or faculty meeting.

Andy Kruzic:
At the beginning, we went into this with the idea that we would immediately do a survey. I think each member of the committee was asked to do an ad hoc quick discussion with their colleagues. I think Susan Grove of Nursing actually took a poll of nursing faculty directly. Nursing is very close on plus/minus grading. One of things I would always ask opponents what they think is unfair or they don’t like about plus/minus grading?

Unknown:
Business just had a faculty meeting where there was discussion on this. There are two things for business which are: 1) the lack of A plus because we feel you’re penalizing the top students who don’t have an A plus which is a big negative, and; 2) we often have small classes and subdividing the grades in small classes is nonsensical.

Andy Kruzic
The vast majority of schools that use plus/minus grading, I’m guessing probably 95% or higher, do not use A plus. If they do use A plus, they only use it in a reporting mode, not in a GPA altering mode. You can make a case for using pluses in a way to average, but one consequence that we’ve identified is that probably the greatest negative impact of plus/minus grading on a student’s GPA is going to be at the higher end. Again that’s because of the fact that A plus performance is something that would be in the 96-100 range is not assigned a 4.33. Some schools do that and we could do that; it’s not out of the question. There is nothing to prevent this university in terms of the process.

There was some concern about it being headed toward grade inflation. There is the idea that somebody would graduate from a university with something higher than a 4.0 when we traditionally think of a 4.0 as being the top performance possible. What does it mean when somebody says they graduated with a 4.3 or a 4.2? Does that mean they are superstars beyond belief? I personally don’t like the honors program in high school. Most honors courses now are probably standard courses for many students. We know there is a problem with grade inflation in high school.

There is nothing in the system that forces a faculty member to do anything. If you have only one student and they get an A, then they get an A. All instructors have within their rating options a full range of possibilities. It doesn’t prevent you from doing what you want to do. It gives the opportunity for instructors to do a more refined or accurate reflection of performance.

Most of us give numerous assignments. We collect those assignments and assign some type of percentage of the total grade for those assignments. And then go through and
mathematically calculate, on 100 points, an average for a student in a course. I would dare say that is the typical way we all function. I image that somebody in Architecture or English, which we might from an Engineering perspective think is slightly more subjective, that you might not do it exactly that way. Assuming that you function in that mode, you certainly have the opportunity to distinguish between an 89 performance versus an 81 performance. My average grade happens to be around a 65. I think everybody functions differently. Sometimes it seems a little silly to have a passing grade out of 50 on an overall average of a class, but that is the way it works out.

Senator Smith:
If we adopted plus/minus grading, that would mean that people who wanted to do plus/minus grading could do so. It would not mandate that everybody would have to do plus/minus grading. Is that correct?

Andy Kruvic:
There was some concern if we do this would faculty be forced into doing this. What Provost Dunn said about academic freedom is something we all treasure. I would personally be repelled with the idea that someone would say I had to do this. I think that’s why schools that have problems with this is because someone is telling them what to do in the classroom. However, if you went to a university with plus/minus grading, would it have been an important factor for you in signing to go to that university or not? I dare say that none of you would have even thought about it or used it as a factor in your decision. You would have looked at the academic standards of the university, but only as a final thought. It would probably be something you would conform to.

Provost Dunn:
We’re getting lots of student feedback and will be disseminating that and sharing some of it at the Undergraduate Assembly. It’s leaning in favor of opposition to this, but there are also supporters. From my perspective, were there a decision to go with plus/minus grading it would simply mean that every faculty member had at their disposal a full range of grades as they currently do, but the full range would include pluses and minuses. The issue of A would have to be assigned at the committee’s recommendation. There are many aspects of the decision to consider. I do see one potential problem, but I don’t know how large it would be and it would be for those classes for which we have multiple sections and those multiple sections offered simultaneously in the same semester. Given that the students’ sense in my view perhaps in a bit of an overreaction that this is going to have profound consequences on GPA. I’m concerned that we would have students who would be making choices about the instructor of the course they took based on their knowledge or what they thought they knew about whether somebody offered plus or minus grades. One consideration I would put on the table, if there is a recommendation to go forward with this, is whether or not there shouldn’t be some consideration of these courses and adopt it within the units as a common practice as a way to avoid the situations where students choose their courses based on a faculty member’s grade practices.
Andy Kruzic:
The committee’s consensus was that it was too complicated to have some faculty teaching a section of a course doing it and other faculty not doing it.

Senator Amster:
Has this committee considered a transition where, in the interest of fairness, a student would continue to be graded in the present system if that student came in under that system. I know it creates complexity, but there could be a transition period that might be relatively short. It would require a student to continue under the system under which they came and in the interest of consistency that is what we have done all along. I think that would dispel the student problem that has to do with inequity for the time.

Andy Kruzic:
Did the committee consider a phasing? Yes, for a short time, but the downside of the phasing that would be greatly outranked by the positive side. The downside is that somebody has to keep track. The system can probably do this by the grading system. I could imagine that it is possible.

Student Congress Representative:
Obviously this is a hot topic. Student congress has looked at the information and basically your number one thing to your average student is: 1) in the state of Texas, the major institutions with students that we are going to be competing against for jobs, law school, med school, being hired in corporate world, etc. don’t use plus/minus grading. If this is such a great system, why aren’t other universities in Texas (e.g. Texas A&M, UT-Austin) on it? Is UTA strong enough at this point to be the leader? 2) implementation: When I was a freshman and sophomore, it was much easier to get an A in a course because Junior and Senior level courses get harder as they should. What about the people who are junior and seniors that have a 91 or 92 in a research method class which is outstanding? It’s no longer a 4.0 it’s a 3.67. So the implementation period is an issue. Is it going to be grandfathered in? That is a common question. We’ve opened up a petition – student congress is against this. I wrote a resolution of what was said. It does scare students not having a possible A plus. If the school is very strong into having a plus/minus grading system, maybe take away the A minus and keep the A as it is. Also, you have the students who are very worried about a C minus. The failing grade would be going up. Plus, the State of Texas is all pretty much on the same scholarship program. UTA will be different from that and there’s a question in that area.

We opened up the petition for one week and didn’t really advertise it and we have over 1,000 signatures of students from every single major just from students who are against it.

Andy Kruzic:
If you’re applying to a graduate school or professional programs in the State of Texas, they all use the same process. Actually, because of the law, they take pluses and minuses and remove them. That is a standard procedure for all schools in Texas. They recalculate
GPA on the basis of taking plus/minus and putting in straight grades and assigning three or four to them and recalculating the GPA. Two, I think that there are many other factors other than just GPA an employer considers on looking at the picture for a new hire. Not the least of which is the academic reputation of the school as well as if the student has work experience. I think plus/minus grading is really openly up to the faculty. There is a question about 91 and that is really a great grade. If your instructor feels that 90 is really an A performance, he gives it an A. There is nothing cast in stone. I just told you my average grade is a 65 and my 65 is a B. That’s because the way I grade, that happens to fall out at that grade. I think it’s up to each instructor to decide. That would be my response to your issue about jobs. The implementation I’m not sure about the grandfathering idea. It’s problematic.

Senator Young:
The report says that in 80% of Carnegie research universities use this. What percentage use it for undergraduate and what percentage for graduate? My perception is that most all of them use it for graduate programs, but not necessarily for undergraduates.

Andy Kruzic:
There was a great preponderance of schools using it in both cases. There were only just a few schools which made the distinction between grad and undergrad and, by the way, UT is using this in the graduate program this year. They recently adopted it. UT-Dallas uses it at the graduate, but not undergrad. My personal belief has always been that if I have two acceptable grades at the graduate level: A or B. I really want that better distinction at that level. You talk about the problems between A, B, C and D. When you only have A and B and there are tremendous differences between some B’s in graduate classes and other B’s in another graduate class, that’s why I felt the strongest personal desire to reward the students who were not quite what I consider to be an A before a B+ student. If you tell the student who was kind of slacking off they got a B, that’s not the best B in the world it’s a B minus. There are consequences associated with that. It’s not a 3.0, it’s a 2.67. That could put you into academic probation or cause you to lose your scholarship. I would have to realize that and make a decision.

Senator Young:
My sense is that there would be less controversy doing it at the graduate level. My other question was looking at the distribution you have here under outcomes and perceptions, 34% of students have a lower GPA. We’re so concerned about retention and graduate rates. We need to look at that very carefully and ask what the implications of that are because I suspect we’ll have a lot of students graduate with barely a 2.0. This could adversely affect graduation rates.

Andy Kruzic:
The College of Science moved to a 2.25. I think personally we do need to deal with some of the issues. I’ve got a high school senior who I think is not prepared for college. He’s a smart kid. We have a lot of problems. We’ve been throwing them off at the high school level saying it’s their problem, but it’s our problem because they’re coming in unprepared.
Unknown:
I’m kind of confused. Looking at the distinction here on the grades, it says that the actual GPA’s dropped, so what’s the point. Why would be go to all this trouble to do this when their actual computation for the final analysis would be that all these have dropped? That’s a lot of time and trouble to go through if it’s going to be discounted.

Andy Kruzic:
If you’re talking about what the State of Texas does in relation to special programs and private schools, I couldn’t argue with that view. I would still be personally in favor of it just because I want to let the students know their performance and motivate them to do well. I want to set an academic standard that is comparable to other schools. You have a valid point. I wouldn’t disagree with you that the net result is going to be that when students apply to graduate programs in the State of Texas, they don’t take pluses and minuses into account. The likely result is that it doesn’t make that much difference overall in a student’s GPA, but it could. Graduate schools don’t use just GPA for positions anymore.

Senator Alavi:
First, there are many sides to the coin. I really enjoyed listening to you because it is important to me how we serve our students in terms of motivating them and rewarding them. I have made a lot of A students out of people who thought they were B students. Also, I don’t want to give an A to someone who didn’t quite make an A, but a high B. Here is a suggestion, let’s have A, B+, B, C+, C, D, F. I don’t know why you have a D. D is 1 out of 4. That is passing someone who did 25% of the work. I don’t how students will react to that.

Senator Formanowicz:
In thinking about this, one of the questions that occurred to me is what is the benefit? The longer I sit here and listen, the less benefit I see. I am aware of the issues of the graduate schools in this state and actually it’s done variously throughout the country where they’ve dropped pluses and minuses. This is a general question that I don’t expect you to answer. The most important question to answer is: what is the benefit and who is going to benefit? If we gain some precision as faculty members, that’s fine. Beyond that, I have trouble seeing where the benefit is. My first job was at a small Northeastern School where they had plus/minus. To an individual within the College of Science, they ignored it. In the two years I was there, we were called on the carpet by the Academic Vice President 3 or 4 times and they’d been doing this for 20 years and apparently been having this argument for 20 years. That’s one of the things that bothered me about this system. There is no way to make it uniform. You can tell me as a faculty member that I have to use pluses and minuses, and I can still assign my grades A, B, C, D, or F and simply tell you that there wasn’t any plus or minus grades in my class. As a result, I would also then disagree with the idea that student complaints would not necessarily increase. I’m talking from the perspective of someone who sits in a department with
1,700 names, of which 99.9% are in their first year as pre-meds and to whom every point makes a difference.

Senator Savage:
I came from schools that did plus/minus. In retrospect, I like the delineation it gives you. It is ultimately negated by statewide rules, federal rules, and it doesn’t do much of anything. I think I’ve seen it at some places where you actually have the option of putting those grades on the transcript, but the numbers are not altered.

Andy Kruzic:
There are a lot of people who don’t share my views so I am respectful in that regard. I find it disturbing in a sense but in another sense I don’t. They have to function within a certain way and have a uniform way to deal with all the applicants that come in, in terms of calculating GPA. They are forced to do that. Personally, again, I wish the students could be motivated without the grades, but it doesn’t seem to work that way. The whole benefit is to better motivate the students who are interested in grades.

Student Congress Representative:
Most students are strongly against the undergraduate use of plus/minus grading because they feel that if we were considered a research institution, then it should take place on the graduate level rather than the undergraduate level. We don’t understand why you would move in that direction. Why would you use it when 80% of the Carnegie identified research institutions don’t use it on the undergraduate level? Most of the students believe that in the graduate program, it would be an excellent program, but none of the other major universities in Texas use it for undergrad. You have a lot of students who are low A students who are going to be affected by this as well as low B and C students. It’s just hard for us to understand this because most of the students in Texas and most high schools have used this system from the beginning. You like the fact that each faculty has the individuality to do what they want. To me, this is forcing or encouraging more faculty to go under the system. You mentioned that in your class a 65 was a B. Would you change it to this scale?

Andy Kruzic:
No.

Senator Courtney:
I’m curious about one thing, when comments have been made that individual faculty can choose to implement or not, do I understand correctly that the electronic grade would be reported like a B plus and/or if I reported a B for a student, then the university would still calculate all the grades based overall GPA on a plus/minus. Correct?

Provost Dunn:
Yes you are correct. That is a very important distinction. On some level, there is not faculty choice if you recommend this system. Because it means that the translation from the letter grades with or without pluses or minuses to the numeric score will follow the new scale. A grade of B will be under the new scale as opposed to the old. It just means
you would not be forced as a faculty member to make a finer distinction in your own grading, but there would be a consequence.

Senator Young:
To me the strongest recommendation for it is that it will motivate some students to continue to work through the semester rather than saying they’ve got the C locked down now, so they coast for the last quarter of the semester. That bothers me frequently. I think this is one way to motivate and do that.

Senator Amster:
I want to know if you found any data or any corroboration of your assumption that students would be more motivated.

Andy Kruzic:
There are certain things that we might call findings and other things are purely speculation. While there’s a rationale, this is a logical result that you think should cause motivation. I don’t know how you guys feel about motivating students, but I find it puzzling. I would also agree that if you didn’t use grades it would be very hard to motivate students.

Senator Kongevick:
I rate on the 100 scale. For me, this is real simple to go plus/minus. The thing that irks me more than anything else is at the end of the semester and I have these students that are 89. Half of them contributed tremendously and you can see the growth that they have. The other half were just getting by at that point. It’s that balance. I know we have the option of swinging it one way or the other, but the thing is on the plus/minus it helps to even the field with those students at least in my experience.

Senator Smith:
I would just like to stress that the assignment of grades is not, except secondarily, about motivating students it is about doing our job as faculty. My own view is that my job would be easier if I could differentiate more clearly which I think a plus/minus does. Again, I want to stress that as faculty we should think about this as an issue to deal with faculty rather than students.

Andy Kruzic:
I made one comment about student complains. For your information, we know from what we’re finding that student complaints are going to go up. Just so you’re clear on that. We think it will go up for a while until students come into the system with the expectation this has always been here and then it’s going to go down. I would argue that I have less trouble arguing with a student when I have plus/minus grading than I do with someone who’s got that 89 and begs for an A. There’s a big different between that and a B. There’s not a big difference between a B plus and a B minus. That has a much smaller effect on them.
Senator Courtney: I think the representative from Student Congress deserves an A+ for his comment.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
I might point out that the representative from Student Congress, while always here, is usually silent because we’re dealing with issues that aren’t directly affecting the students. That is exactly why we have student congress presence here because there are issues where we can learn a great deal from their point of view. I am personally looking forward to see what your petition does and what you’re further discussions do as one of the more important constituencies that have to have input in this process.

Senator Alavi:
I’m wondering if in your discussions that you have that you intend to invite some of the professors who are in favor of it or some people who can explain positions on it. How is the process of discussion going on? In my classes, it has only come up once in a help session not in an actual class.

Student Congress Representative:
We’re relying on faculty members to decide how it will affect the overall classroom for them and the students will decide how it will affect them. Then we can come together and discuss it more.

Provost Dunn:
I’m intrigued with our student representative’s comment about student/faculty interaction. There’s nothing prohibiting Student Congress from holding a forum and inviting the faculty to come talk about it. That would be a very stimulating venue for discussion.

Committee Reports

Special Projects Committee:
Professor Nestell’s committee is accepting applications for Professor Emeritus. If you are considering nominating someone, the time is now to do it – not in the spring. This allows the committee to gather all information.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
I encourage everyone to participate in the QEP discussions. First of all, SACS requires there be broad input. Secondly, there is a golden opportunity to influence the process and this hinges on strategic planning. The more we make our points of view known, the better off we will all be. The Provost has learned that you cannot mandate the faculty to do anything, then we are becoming successful in our efforts. I have always suggested that if something sounds stupid, don’t do it, regardless of who is telling you to do it.

On the ongoing issue from Michael Moore’s office of putting syllabi on-line, I am on record that I have never put a syllabi on-line because there are too many hurdles to jump.
In other words, by the time they want them on-line, I don’t know what I’m going to do and maybe I change. Therefore, the Provost is learning we’re increasing the administrative learning curve. That is always a positive factor.

Some of the departments and senate officers are up for re-election. In the spring, we may have a different senate perhaps because of people being replaced, terms running out, or people being renewed. Remind your units that if the elections are due, they are due before the first of the year. Michael Moore’s office will probably solicit from the individual units who the senators are so we can get an accurate roster for the spring. It doesn’t hurt for you to nudge your units to make sure that they carry out the elections in a timely fashion.

Senator Young:
Would you like to have results of the elections as soon as they are available?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
Yes. Michael Moore usually does it also.

Senator Alavi:
My question is regarding something that was brought up is the issue of student evaluations.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
That is now in committee. The committee will begin a major investigation of that. In brief, there is a very mixed feeling not only here but in System about what these things are supposed to do and what we can find out from them. There is a big issue that we are all in violation of FERPA guidelines. For example, most of us get the written comments back in the original form which is illegal. Any way of identifying who a student is, breaches that students privacy. UT-Austin has in fact gone to the process of copying all of the comments over and putting them on-line. That also is illegal because you can grammatically analyze a student’s statement and figure out who they are. Then the issue comes that we should have not have comments, but then what good are the evaluations? To make some administrator’s life happy so they get a little number they can put in a little box on some report. Is that how we evaluate our teaching? I don’t think so. Therefore, this has become a major issue. Vice Chancellor Terry Sullivan, could not believe the mess that this was in. She is now gradually being educated on that. The more she finds out, angrier she gets. We’re going to hear it from System, but I would like us to know what we’re doing, why we’re doing it, and how we’re doing it.

Senator Formanowicz:
It’s important to understand that the FAC is dealing with this as well. The Faculty Quality Committee that I co-chair has been dealing with it for over a year now. We continue to survey other campuses trying to figure out what’s going on and what the next step is. I can’t overemphasize what Dennis says enough. Vice Chancellor’s Sullivan’s response to OGC’s presentation, who basically told us we’re doing everything illegally, was very interesting. There is going to be something coming from System.
Senate Chair Reinhartz:
There is no movement toward uniformity. We will stop that dead in its tracks. We’re just trying to figure out what we can do to meet the federal guidelines, but also make the teaching evaluation meaningful. That is, to make it do what it is supposed to do which most of us still believe is to help us improve our delivery in the classroom. This will be an ongoing issue.

Senator Alavi:
The other issue is the fairness, integrity and reputation of the professor. A student behind the guise of being protected can write anything they want. If you are accused of something in court, you face your accuser, you have your defense, with these you cannot. One of the questions on the teaching evaluation asks if the teacher always been on time. If the student has missed one class, he should automatically disqualify himself from answering that question. Another question, asks if the professor provided a syllabus. I get a 4.3 in that. I should either get a 0 or a 5. My specific question is what does the task force think specifically about these issues?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
It’s beginning at several levels. Some campuses are further along like Austin. It’s costing them an enormous amount of money to put this stuff on-line. We don’t want to go there, we don’t have that kind of money and they also don’t have that kind of money. There are a lot of things going on right now. It’s just beginning. It’s going to come down to us as a storm from the Chancellor’s office. We find it absurd. There is a point to be made, if a student takes you for another course, even though you don’t see the comments until the course is over, in theory you could discriminate in that future course. There are incredible problems. Now we’re hearing, the FERPA rules don’t really mean what they say.

Senator Priest:
If the teacher evaluation information is being used for the teacher, it’s public information. If it can tie to the student, then it’s private.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
That is one interpretation, but there is another interpretation. Austin is assuming that it’s all public.

Senator Alavi:
It could be public information or public misinformation. How do you protect the faculty from subjective, unfair, and unscientific comments?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
The Vice-Chancellor said that if you do not know the comments and you do not respond to negative comments so that a response is in your file, next to those negative comments, you are being remiss. In other words, if you feel like someone is unfairly commenting on
you, you have the right or obligation to rebut that argument and put in your file along with the comments.

Unknown:
Isn’t that just if there is some grievance?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
No. She said we should probably be doing this on a regular basis.

Senator Formanowicz:
In fact, some of the members of the FAC member institutions indicated that that occurs regularly on the campuses where they actually put rebuttals to written comments they’ve gotten in the files with them. This is the other side of the issue that we’ve discussed at the FAC. How are these comments used, who is seeing them, are they used for tenure and promotion decisions. It’s one of the other things we’re discussed down there.

Senator Alavi:
I’m sorry but rebuttal is not sufficient protection for me.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
That is so far one of the answers we gotten.

Senator Hegstad:
I think that the other thing we need as faculty to implement, and we are in a professional school, is teaching our students to critically think and how to evaluate. Evaluation is not slamming what you don’t like. I can guarantee you that faculty who hold the line will have very mixed comments, some of them vitriolic, and some use curse words. In beginning courses, there should be instruction on evaluation. You don’t give comments without some constructive criticisms. They don’t know. They’re going to have to evaluate colleagues. There is no rebuttal. We encourage our faculty to read the evaluations and do instructor comments. You may describe about how you changed what you’re doing. Again, it’s a forum. Students can just be carte blanche and be anonymous. There are some who fill out multiple forms of the evaluation if they seem to have something to vent. The process is unfair to them because they are not learning what is appropriate.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
These are the things that we need to address here. Dan’s committee at System will because every time we get deeper into this, we find it to be more and more unreal. I’m not sure what the outcome is. I was talking to Mary Lee Crow and we remember a series of teaching evaluations, none of which were prefect, all of which had their problems and were misused by administrators. Even over our longer perspective, we can’t see perfection or even close to it. Some of us have been complaining about it for three decades. Finally, it has come home to roost. We’re going to experience a tremendous amount of turmoil in this area.
Senator Levine:
I’ve had the experience of somebody complaining to me about why they have to cover this stuff, etc. because it’s not relevant and so on. But later, when this person was a graduate student, she came back and said she really appreciated my comments.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
That’s an issue that came up at the QEP. How do we evaluate whatever QEP is decided with regard to outcomes and how do you judge those outcomes. Many of us have advocated that we need to do a better tracking people and finding out what they think now? There are anecdotal results you can get if a student comes back and founds a scholarship in your name. I was absolutely shocked that it happened. We are so bad at tracking in this institution. We need to do much more of that.

Senator Hegstad:
I think this is an issue for faculty retention. Whether it be our young, new tenure track faculty or other faculty who were hoping to come on. I can tell you from having counseled. You can get a couple of young faculty who the class turns on for some reason and they’re ready to leave. Even though it is nothing to do with them and they’re doing what they’re supposed to, but if a group gets sideways, we’re not helping our retention of faculty if there is not accountability. Yes. The faculty is accountable, but the students are also accountable.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
Speaking of younger faculty, it was pointed out at the QEP yesterday, that most of us there were very senior. We’re not going to be around in 5 or 10 years to carry out the QEP. It would benefit us all to get our younger colleagues out to this QEP because whether they have a say in it or not, its going to fall on them to carry it out. So again, go back to your units, and tell your younger faculty they really need to get involved with this because it’s going to be yours. You will inherit it.

Senator Alavi:
The problem doesn’t stop here. In some departments and colleges, when you ask research, service, and teaching. Teaching: how do you base the teaching? It’s only student evaluations. Some departments do not go beyond that?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
This is all part of the discussion.

Unknown:
We have several individuals in our department who are trying to clarify the annual review for tenured faculty. The school of nursing has its policy. I went to the web to look at the university policy and came up with the document that I’ve shared with Harriet already. What is posted on the web is following suggested changes to the current version of the guidelines. It has Harriett and her committee’s name which she said is about 2 years old. On another location in the website is a policy that periodic performance evaluation of
tenured faculty adopted May, 1998 and updated in the year 2000. It’s very confusing and hard to know what the correct answer is. What would be your idea for clarifying this?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
We’re in the process of trying to clean up the website, but that is what needs to be done, and bring everything up to date.

Senator Formanowicz:
It should say whether it’s been approved or whether it’s pending. There are several other documents on the website as well.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
We are mandated to do review on the website on a regular basis.

Unknown:
I’ll send you the URLs. Who do I send them to?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
Send to Dan Formanowicz.

Unknown:
As a quick follow up, may I clarify the various problems so you could speak to that. We elected a committee for the 6 year post tenure review, but it looks as through there should be separate elected committee who does the annual review of tenure and faculty. Is that you understanding?

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
Yes. It is a submission of a yearly report of your activities. Usually the chair reacts to that and should be commenting or talking or writing to you on a yearly basis.

Senator Young:
Annual post tenure review of everyone has a check sheet.

Senate Chair Reinhartz:
Post tenure review is an issue the legislature will figure out as soon as they figure out the problem of financing education.

**New Business**
None.

**Old Business**
None.

**Announcements:**
None.
The meeting was adjourned at 4:20 p.m.