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Curriculum Committee Minutes

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9-17-2009

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**UMM CURRICULUM COMMITTEE**  
**2009-10 MEETING #2 Minutes**  
**September 17, 2009, 8:00 a.m., Behmler 130**

Present: Cheryl Contant (chair), Talia Earle, Janet Ericksen, Mark Fohl, Sara Haugen, Michael Korth, Pareena Lawrence, Mike McBride, Dave Roberts, Gwen Rudney, Dennis Stewart, Elizabeth Thoma, Tisha Turk, Clare Strand, Nancy Helsper

Absent: USA and student reps to be named

Visiting: Dorothy De Jager, Jeffrey Ratliff-Crain, Jeri Squier

*In these minutes: First-Year Experience and First-Year Seminar Discussion.*

**1. APPROVAL OF MINUTES – September 10, 2009**

MOTION (Lawrence/Rudney) to approve the September 10, 2009 minutes with one minor correction. Motion passed by unanimous voice vote.

**2. FIRST-YEAR EXPERIENCE DISCUSSION**

Contant welcomed guest Ratliff-Crain to the meeting and explained that he was invited to help the committee frame its work on the First-Year Seminar (FYS) and the broader First-Year Experience (FYE).

Ratliff-Crain explained that he visited the committee last spring to talk about FYE and FYS. The 2008 Disappearing Task Force on the First-Year Experience did a lot of background work on FYE and FYS. The Task Force looked at the experience of a new student from the time a student admits to UMM, through orientation, through FYS, and afterwards. They looked at what a first-year experience means and how it fits in the larger context of the college experience. The Task Force report recommendations and observations cited that UMM has a number of the elements of an effective and successful FYE but not much integration and not much after FYS is concluded. Ratliff-Crain stated that he would propose taking the discussion a step further. After the committee discussed the issues regarding FYE last spring, learning outcomes were discussed and approved, and the campus has since passed a revised mission statement. Both documents articulate what we think a student should accomplish in skills and competencies at UMM. How do our FYE and FYS at the front-end prepare students to move into that broader set of contexts? Is what we have in place now the best set of elements to create a successful FYE?

Much of the focus on the FYE has been on FYS. Students in the required course are a captive audience, and there has been an expectation that one two-credit course will handle a number of issues, such as coping with the transition to college, learning, critical thinking, and diversity. An issue that came to this committee earlier last year was whether to remove the focus on diversity from FYS. It was not removed and is in the current catalog as part of the title. The Task Force suggested that FYS may not be successful in teaching diversity, and the required topic constrains what can be done with FYS. Also, since we have a larger number of transfer students and international students, it would be good to look at how that impacts the way we conceptualize the larger FYE.

Contant asked the committee members to identify purposes of FYE and determine what elements of it are of significant importance to this group. Turk answered that FYE has two related purposes: 1) getting students used to analytical work and expressing it in writing, and 2) learning the social etiquette of working in an academic environment. It is unfair to expect them to magically know that. To even the best of high school students, academic analytical thinking is unfamiliar and challenging. McBride said that he had a big problem knowing how to address his professors when he came to college.

Ericksen stated that she hears over and over again from students that they came to college to take classes in their area of interest and do not see the value of a seminar on a topic that was randomly chosen for them and is not in their major. Roberts replied that students are right to voice their feelings. We should respect that feeling of irrelevance and try to remove it. Lawrence stated that we set ourselves up for that response by asking students on the FYS course evaluation if

there is useful value in the course. We don't ask about the value of other GenEd courses.

Thoma stated that she had a good FYS experience but felt that she was one of the abnormalities on her floor. A lot of others did not like the course. McBride stated that the manner in which the sections are taught varies too widely. Some sections are very interesting and others are absolutely useless. Roberts stated that there are students who liked FYS and the subject matter was in an area they eventually chose as a major. Ericksen stated that when she was in college she was required to take a course like FYS. Ten years later she realized that it was the most useful course she had taken. Sometimes it requires a long perspective before students can appreciate the course.

Stewart stated that if we are really having a discussion of FYS, there should not be a presumption that we have to modify it to make it better or that we have to have it at all. Strand stated that not all students have a small class opportunity when they come to Morris their first semester. That was one of the reasons why the course was introduced in the 1980s. Thoma stated that it was helpful to her as a freshman to have at least one class that was smaller and consisted of all first-year students.

Rudney stated that she thought it was important for students to have a shared academic experience their first semester. They probably don't have a particular love for other classes they are taking their first semester either. Roberts disagreed and said he had never heard anyone say microeconomics is irrelevant, but hears it all of the time about FYS. As we think about what to do about FYS, the word "tweak" should not be in our vocabulary.

Rudney stated that students have other shared things that are not academic, but an academic experience is needed. McBride replied that the academic experience should not be expected to take care of the other large things. Ericksen added that it is frustrating as a professor to be expected to teach content but also fit in a list of other things. Contant asked what other things would be on the list. Answers included bibliographies, library use, convocation speaker, source use, and how to cite.

Lawrence stated that another inconsistency between FYS and other courses is that nearly all other classes have exams. Students don't take this course seriously because there is no test. Ratliff-Crain replied that his intention is not to solve or fix FYS in this setting. What we have is at least a requirement for GenEd and a requirement for students to take the course. The one course is trying to cover a lot of different things. What are the different things we want to happen the first year, without focusing on FYS? For example, a lot of colleges have added courses in money management. What other issues are important?

Ericksen stated that a lot of what we are asking is covered in the college writing course, but fewer and fewer students are required to take college writing. We could have college writing and FYE. Contant asked if there is evidence to suggest that those who don't take our college writing course do not know how to do those things the course covers. Ericksen answered that there is evidence. McBride added that he had opted out of college writing and did terrible work his first semester when it came to writing, although he was a much more talented writer than his peers. His citations were not coherent and his writing was not good. He regretted not taking the course. Strand stated that exemptions from college writing started many years ago because of a lack of resources.

Strand shared the work that the Twin Cities campus does in preparing first-year students. This year a workshop was given during welcome week in which financial literacy was covered. Students were taught how to keep their debt down. Every student was required to attend. Almost all of the 5400 new freshmen came to a two-day registration session where they learned how to be a college student, followed by a week-long welcome week.

Ratliff-Crain stated that in planning a FYE, resources will need to be a part of the discussion. FYS courses are larger this year because of resources. Whatever this committee considers will need to be done with the resources we already have unless priorities and resources are shifted. Other activities are in competition for the same pot of resources. It is important to place a priority on what is more important.

Helsper stated that an early purpose of FYS was retention. We know that students decide within their first six weeks whether to stay or transfer. They need to feel connectivity with their entering class cohort so they will want to stay here.

Contant stated that another purpose of FYE is to expose students to a grand diversity of topics that are discussed on a college campus much more so than on a high school campus. The college experience challenges students to engage and open up their horizons to new things, which may indicate why students change their majors many times their first year.

Lawrence stated that it is really important to determine what is FYS and what is FYE. We need to figure out what is FYS academically. All of the other pieces are FYE. Turk said that it seems that there are at least three different categories of information that we are trying to stuff into one two-credit class. One is how to learn to adjust to the new setting and the bureaucratic and financial literacy needed in college. Another category is the writing component, academic analysis, sources, and bibliographies. A third category is the need to experience at least one small class with other first-year students, and learning how to have academic intellectual discussions. A class is potentially a great setting in which to cover those things. When Turk was in college, the class was a four-credit writing-intensive class that was a version of a senior seminar pitched to a first-year group. It was not a fluffy, flakey class, which is how a lot of people perceive FYS.

Contant stated that it is more of an issue now that FYS is a two-credit course. The University of Minnesota has created special financial aid programs that require a student to take 30 credits. Students resent having to take a class that only carries two credits. Stewart replied that changing FYS to four credits would cause a massive resource issue. Strand suggesting changing it to a non-credit-bearing experience.

Ratliff-Crain asked Thoma if, as a Community Adviser, she could share some of the other transition issues she is aware of for first-year students. Thoma stated that they talked about the W-Curve, a predictable pattern of stages that occurs when a person experiences culture shock: honeymoon, cultural shock, initial adjustment, mental isolation, and acceptance & integration. Right now students are at the honeymoon stage and don't have anyone telling them that staying up until 4:00 a.m. when they have an 8:00 a.m. class is not a good idea. Also, they don't have anyone harping on them to go to class, eat a balanced diet, do their homework, and start studying early. These are experiences they are dealing with right now. There is also an emotional side to it. They are put into a new environment, not knowing that they can go to the professors when they need help with a class, or to student counseling if they are having a hard time. Student orientation includes a tour of campus and its resources, but not all of the students go on the tour.

McBride added that there were two other things he had a problem with his first year. Money was a big one. He did not have student loans but managing money is an important thing to learn. The other problem is tying people to Morris. He works at Don's Cafe and hardly ever sees underclassmen in town. There is a lot more to do in Morris than students are aware of in their first year. Ratliff-Crain added that when looking at student appeals for academic suspensions, a lot of these issues come into play. A lot of them are having academic problems because they are working a lot of hours.

Lawrence asked where students are taught what liberal arts means and why we have the general education categories we have. Ratliff-Crain answered that it goes back to the question of what is the overall purpose of the FYE. Is it to have people be successful in specific skills, or is it a way to introduce people to our ideals, learning outcomes, and mission?

Stewart answered that he never taught FYS, but are analytic skills, methods, and cause-and-affect taught in FYS? Ratliff-Crain answered that critical analysis and critical thinking is a part of the FYS course description. How it is taught varies widely among sections.

McBride stated that it is important that we don't hand-hold people all through their FYE. There is something to be learned from the experience of dragging your sorry butt out of bed to go to class when you stayed up all night.

Thoma stated that it is important for professors who teach FYS to be enthusiastic. If they are not, that affects the overall experience. Rudney answered that we have to think about why the faculty member is not showing enthusiasm to it. Thoma stated that when a professor who is teaching FYS gets a bad review, they should not be put back on that course. Ericksen responded that she recognizes that the best faculty should be teaching FYS but they should also be the ones who teach intro courses and courses in the major. It is really difficult from a staffing perspective. Roberts responded that he did not like the phrase "best faculty." All UMM faculty should be at a high enough level to teach FYS—and they are. Ericksen replied that the ones with the most enthusiasm should be teaching it. Roberts stated that he faked enthusiasm when he taught FYS. He was not enthusiastic, and the students had no interest in learning mathematics across cultures.

It isn't a question of picking out the right faculty to teach it. Ericksen said that the interest or field of some faculty fits very well with FYS and for others it does not.

Contant stated that Ratliff-Crain will be invited back to talk about General Education at the next meeting. In three weeks we will give subcommittees their charges. By December we will know whether or not to continue FYS next year, revamp the course, suspend and revamp the course, or cancel the course. So, if we make modifications we would have to get them through this committee. Roberts asked where Campus Assembly fit into the process. Contant answered that if we make a change, we need to bring it to the Campus Assembly. Ratliff-Crain asked if it is accurate to say the default is that we have what we have unless this committee says we are doing something different. Contant agreed.

Adjourned 9:01 a.m.

Submitted by Darla Peterson