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FACULTY SENATE MINUTES  
Wednesday, February 9, 2011, 3 p.m.  
Holmes Student Center Sky Room  


Parliamentarian Ferald Bryan was present.  


I. CALL TO ORDER  

Meeting called to order at 3:07 p.m.  

II. ADOPTION OF AGENDA  

A. Rosenbaum: We don’t have any walk-in items or changes. I need a motion to accept the agenda.  

J. Kowalski: So moved. S. Willis: Second  

The agenda was approved without changes and without dissent or abstention.  

III. APPROVAL OF THE MINUTES OF THE JANUARY 19, 2011 FS MEETING  
(sent electronically)  

P. Henry: Motion to accept the minutes. A. Lash: Second.  

The minutes were approved as written without dissent or abstention.  

IV. PRESIDENT’S ANNOUNCEMENTS  

A. Rosenbaum: I have just a couple of announcements and Nancy Castle has also asked for some time to talk to us about her role as Service Learning Coordinator. We learned last week that the Board of Trustees Executive Session minutes are released from time to time, and someone asked how one would get access to them. Someone gave the opinion that you need to file a Freedom of Information Act request, and that may yet be true, but we looked into this and if somebody wants to see the Executive Session minutes, requests can be directed to Sharon
Banks-Wilkins, who is the secretary to the Board of Trustees. She receives the request and then gets approval from Legal Services.

Austin Quick has asked me to mention to the Faculty Senate that the Huskie buses, are supported by student funds. They are generally available to faculty without fee, but there are two routes for which faculty are charged $0.75, and those routes are the one that serves Walmart and the hospital, and the one which serves Taylor Street and Schnucks. He has asked me to advise you that you must pay that $0.75 and that faculty who fail to do this are in violation of the agreement that apparently we have with Student Services. So, you can use the Huskie bus to get around campus, but don’t try to get to Schnucks on the Huskie bus.

Nancy Castle has asked for five minutes to discuss her new role as Service Learning Coordinator.

**N. Castle:** Many of you who open the emails that we get from the administration saw that I have been asked to help facilitate service learning on campus. My action plan is to first figure out what we’re doing on the academic affairs side with regard to those opportunities that we take advantage of, to send our students out into the community. We might call it community service, we might call it service learning, we might call it community engagement, and there’s a whole variety of ways that we do that, but to try to get a handle on what we’re already doing because there are a lot of us on campus doing some part of that that could probably even stand just some moral support from each other. Student Affairs has a database on volunteerism and they’re the people who do externships and coops and so they’re in a position where they’re engaged in activities where students go out into the community. Also on this campus, the Administration and Outreach Division, that’s the division that reports to Ann Kaplan and it has the Center for Governmental Studies, it’s got the Association Resource Center. They too are engaged in opportunities and activities where they interact with people in the community and I’ll be trying to figure out what each unit is doing but then also to be looking at what kind of infrastructure can we take advantage of to streamline some of our efforts. I can tell you that I’m also going to be working with the external community somewhat, and I’ve gotten feedback already that they would love to see Northern be more streamlined. I will be looking at each of the silos and trying to come up with recommendations for how we might develop a streamlined way for them to get to us.

So, those are my marching orders really and any step of the way, you’ll likely be getting an email from me, asking if you’re doing anything, if you are, what, if you’d like to be doing something, what could we do to help you and along those lines, I’m working with Faculty Development in the Provost’s Office to bring an expert to campus who would help people incorporate service learning into their classes. Related to that, there is an organization called the International Association for Research on Service Learning and Community Engagement. They’re having their annual conference at the Palmer House this November 2nd-4th. NIU is a co-sponsor of that conference and the call for papers will be coming out any minute now and so I’ll be sure to get that to you. We would encourage people to apply to present what you may be doing with regards to community engagement and service learning.
My last request is anybody who has got any questions, contact me. Email is the best way because at this point, I’ve got like three offices on campus or three places I need to be. In the last week in April, typically 15 different students will call the director of, name the agency, and say, “For this class I’m taking this semester, I have to interview a professional in this field, so can I come and interview you?” So, they’re happy to do that except if we could come up with a way where maybe we have two different days, three-hour blocks of time where we could do round-robin interviews and all the students could come to that, it would be a huge service that NIU could be providing to the community

A. Rosenbaum: Nancy also gave us a document, it’s only about a page and a half long, that we have agreed to post on the Senate Blackboard website that summarizes what she has just told us plus adds a little bit more detail.

As many of you have been aware, we made a request to the administration a long time ago for salary data so that we could do some analyses and answer questions about the rate at which different constituencies within the University are receiving raises. That data has now been provided to us. It does not include all of the points that were requested. We’re not completely clear at this point whether we would be able to get everything that we wanted to get from it. We will have to play with it a little bit and see, but you should at least know that that data has been given to us and the Raise Equity committee has been given access to it. So anyway, it’s one small step for faculty-kind, I guess.

V. ITEMS FOR FACULTY SENATE CONSIDERATION

VI. CONSENT AGENDA

VII. REPORTS FROM ADVISORY COMMITTEES


B. BOT Academic Affairs, Student Affairs and Personnel Committee – Kerry Freedman and Ferald Bryan – no report

C. BOT Finance, Facilities, and Operations Committee – Alan Rosenbaum and Greg Waas – no report

D. BOT Legislation, Audit, and External Affairs Committee – Jay Monteiro and Todd Latham – no report

E. BOT – Alan Rosenbaum – no report

VIII. REPORTS FROM STANDING COMMITTEES

A. Academic Affairs – Charles Cappell, Chair – no report
D. Goldblum: These meetings always start with us getting a sense of whether or not Dr. Williams is sleeping at night, and he said he is sleeping at night still, so conditions can’t be too bad. He says the overall State debt is around $16 billion. From our perspective, we’re still owed about $77 million from the State, which is about 70% of our state funding, which is a little bit worse than it was last year. Also, we have not received any MAP money yet. We have paid out MAP money to students, so we’re out that money as well. We did talk quite a bit about the change in the State income tax. He said it should generate about $6 billion a year, which is a lot smaller than the debt, but he is optimistic that it should start to make things better in the State if everything else is done responsibly. We did talk about some of the bonds that they have issued at the state level to meet pension obligations and quite a bit of discussion revolved around the efforts to reduce pension costs at the state level. We’re aware of the fact that new hires now have different pension rules than existing faculty. He did say there’s actually talk about extending that to existing employees retroactively, so capping pensions at a certain salary level and benefits as well. He said we should be watching that carefully. We talked a bit about the Cole Hall renovation and saw some plans. The money apparently is in place on campus now, so that’s going to be going ahead and also some discussion about how NIU is trying to raise money to make the campus more attractive to students given the competition we have with other out-of-state universities and for-profit universities. So, they’re aware of that and they’re working on the new dorm obviously but also renovation to the Student Center and other facilities to make the campus more attractive and hopefully increase enrollment. The committee is meeting with President Peters on the 22nd of February and also with some lobbyists.

A. Rosenbaum: Well, if anyone has some issue that you would like brought to the attention of President Peters or Provost Alden, you should talk to either Laurie or David and they can put that question to them on our behalf. The State, apparently in its wisdom, has decided that the biggest problem in the state is our pension. So, that’s what they’re going after instead of all the wasteful spending that they engage in. For our purposes, I feel obligated to mention that our representative in this process is the Annuitant Association and that all of us can and should join the Annuitant Association. It’s not just for people who are nearing retirement. It is also for our brand-new faculty members and the only language apparently that legislators understand is numbers and so when you have large numbers, it gets their attention. So, the more people who join the Annuitant Association, the larger the constituency is and the more likely somebody will pay attention to anything we have to say, and this is critically important.

D. Goldblum: On the report here, the item 1F actually is the link to House Bill 146, which is what Alan was referring to, this extension of the restrictions on pension benefits. So, if you want to read it for yourself, that is the long web address there. I think the Annuitant Association costs only a dollar or two a paycheck, I think it’s very, very inexpensive.
D. Haliczer: I’m so happy you’re bringing this up. The administration has posted on the NIU webpage the budget and pension information. I looked at that earlier today. I really encourage you to look at that because Ken Zehnder and Kathy Buettner’s people are all posting up-to-date information with links to these pieces of legislation. You’ve got to read those things and pay attention to what’s happening. Another thing that a lot of the Annuitant Association members have done is to join Linkedin, one of the social networks that professionals use. You can join the SURS membership group in Linkedin. So, think about that because we get blasts almost every day of people’s reaction to articles, links to newspaper articles and journal articles about pensions. The Benefits Committee, your representative, Sonya, will be talking about these very issues next week.

A. Rosenbaum: The other thing to keep in mind is that besides being faculty members, you’re also citizens of the State of Illinois, and you have representatives that are supposed to be responsive to the citizenry. So, you could write to your representatives as well if you wanted to. The only thing that we should remind you is that when you write, you cannot write as an NIU employee, you have to write as a citizen and you can’t do it on NIU letterhead or imply that you are associated with NIU.

E. Rules and Governance – Nancy Castle, Chair – no report

F. Elections and Legislative Oversight – David Wade, Chair – no report

IX. UNFINISHED BUSINESS

A. Plus/Minus Grading System

A. Rosenbaum: First, I want to thank so many of you for going back to your departments and actually taking votes. I think this is very important. This issue has come up before. I don’t know if it has ever come to an actual vote. We did get votes from more than half the departments in the University, so we did not get anywhere as close to all the departments. We got votes from, to be exact, 21 departments. Of those 21 departments that voted, 17 voted in favor of plus/minus grading. Three departments voted against it and one department had a tie. The vote was 201 faculty members voting in favor and 87 faculty members voting against. Keep in mind that this is a sample, and half the departments haven’t voted. It represents fewer than 300 faculty members, and that is not a majority of the faculty in the University. Many senators included comments made by their departments about things that they were concerned about.

Among the things that people were concerned about had to do with the cost of doing this The committee, itself, made a request to Gip Seaver for an exact number and didn’t get it. I also went to see Gip, and he also did not have an exact number, but he did not think it was a major financial problem. The reason he didn’t think that is because we already have plus/minus grading in the College of Law, and so the software or whatever is already in place at this University. He also noted that changes would have to be made in catalogs and other department documents, which we are aware of and again, many people in departments noted this. One of the big problems that people noted was that there are courses where students must get a grade of C
or better in order to either be accepted into the major or to advance and the concern was what happens if a student gets a C-. Since they are unable, at this point, to repeat a course in which they’ve gotten more than a D, they would be stuck with a C- and therefore, have to drop the major. So, this is a concern that was raised by several departments. I spoke to Gip about that as well and his feeling was that this is a faculty prerogative and if we don’t like that, we can change it. I also spoke to President Peters and Provost Alden, both of whom were supportive of the faculty making an informed, thoughtful decision regarding grading policies and felt the decision should be made independently of the costs. So, if the faculty felt strongly that this was an important issue for us, we should weigh in with that vote and then the cost issue would be considered later and both of them encouraged us to have these kinds of discussions. So, what I have been getting from administration is sort of, if not outright encouragement, at least them saying to us, “If you feel this is important, then vote for it and we’ll see what can be done about it.” So, it was not in any sense discouraging.

Someone asked me at the last meeting where this would go if we passed it and my response was that it would go to the University Council. I think that’s really not a correct route to take. I think that this should go to the Academic Councils (UCC, GC, APASC). They would then have to bring that to the University Council for approval and I think that’s the more appropriate time for it to go to University Council.

D. Goldblum: I don’t need to know the three departments that were against it, but can you see any pattern of types of departments, whether they’re humanities or science, physical or natural science?

A. Rosenbaum: It’s hard to see a pattern in only three departments. I can tell you that one of them was a social science department, one of them was a hard science department and one of them was a more technology department.

P. Henry: One of the questions I think that also arose was the matter of it being up to the instructor’s prerogative if they did not want to use the plus/minus system that that could be their option. I think there was some skepticism as to whether that would be allowed to stand. Then, the second point that I think could be considered in some context is that this business of having nothing lower than a C, I think there’s nothing that says we couldn’t just decide to have A+, A, A-, B+, B, B-, C+, C and then D and F.

A. Rosenbaum: It’s not clear where we would get a definitive ruling on that. From what I’ve heard from people in administration, they’ve suggested that this is an academic freedom issue. Faculty assign grades, so nobody can force you to assign any particular grade and I think people who have gone to institutions or have worked in institutions where there is plus/minus grading know individual professors that don’t use the plus/minus system. I think it’s also fair to say though, if there is a plus/minus system in the University, professors that don’t use it could face some pressure or face grade appeals from students who feel they would have gotten a B+ or an A+ or something like that, had there been plus/minus grading in that class. I don’t know where those would go, but this is an issue that I think we don’t have to actually put into the motion, that we can simply claim academic freedom. I don’t know this for a fact; this is my opinion.
D. Wade: I don’t believe grade appeals would apply because it’s not capricious. As long as they consistently treat everybody the same in a class, then I think they would be fine.

A. Rosenbaum: The Committee, I believe, is recommending the A+, A, A- system, but there are other systems that we could use, such as an A, A/B, B, B/C, and then D and F. I think some departments bristled against the plus/minus system in that it gives you too many different gradations and questioned whether you could make distinctions between a B+ and an A-, with any reliability or whether this was just going to be error. These departments might be more comfortable with a system that has fewer gradations. So, we can certainly, in our discussions, either support the model 3, or we could decide to use a different model, and that would be up to the Senate.

J. Kowalski: Regarding the question of cost, that was one of the concerns that the dean of our college raised when we asked him about this issue, and is the MyNIU grading system basically tied into this issue of cost, but in terms of Seaver’s response that it’s not as large a concern?

A. Rosenbaum: Yes, he didn’t seem to think that this was a major problem. Now, that doesn’t mean it isn’t, because he was beginning to engage in a process of looking into the exact costs and also trying to create a list of what else would have to be changed, because this will impact on a number of different catalogs and other policies in the University.

J. Kowalski: In my own opinion, any cost is an issue in this day and age for the university system, but by the same token, if we don’t determine whether or not we want to proceed one way or the other, then if it becomes possible in terms of cost or an opportune time arises, to think of implementing this, it would help to be on record as favoring it or not wanting to proceed.

D. Valentiner: I just wanted to speak to the question about within my department, we had a discussion, and there was certainly some sentiment against it, but the issue of cost never came up, and the types of concerns that people brought up were, one individual had worked in a university where there was a plus/minus grading system and brought up a lot of practical considerations having to do with what he perceived as a much greater number of informal appeals from students at the end of the semester because there was a greater number of cut offs. He also talked about how it was more difficult to discern where the cut offs should be. So, sometimes within a distribution, you have all these cut points. Right now, we’re trying to find four cut points, and this would dramatically increase that. A lot of people were concerned about measurement, and there was a body of literature that was cited and brought to bear on this, which some people found to be convincing. There is at least some argument that could be made on psychometric grounds.

J. Jeffrey: As one who began as a big skeptic of the whole proposal, I have to say, I’ve pretty much been convinced by the arguments that I’ve heard, primarily that the many other universities are doing this quite easily and successfully to my knowledge. To me, this seems to speak to, is it too hard for faculty to do? No, it’s not. Lots of other places do it. The other thing that I consider very important is that a faculty member who objected to it who felt that they could not accurately assess to this degree of precision will not be forced to do it. The academic freedom seems to me to take care of a lot of things. I would, though, like to echo what Jeff said.
I would hate to see us go on record as ignoring cost. It may be nice, but I don’t think it’s a time to do things that are just nice unless they’re truly, really down and dirty cheap.

**B. Henry:** Now, I don’t want 17 grade levels either because that’s hard to manage, but do we have a sense that when we’re looking at recruiting students, retaining students, moving students forward, encouraging students, whether one type of grading system might be better than the other?

**A. Rosenbaum:** We can ask the committee if they have any comment about that. The one thing I would add to that is that the last time APASC took this up, which was 2004-2005, the students lobbied very hard against it and APASC went with the students on that. Now, I think one of the differences is that system did not have the A+, so that might have been part of the problem. But, I think there is a concern that this will lead to what has been called by some grade deflation, but I don’t think it’s grade deflation from the actual accurate grade.

**J. Kowalski:** Just returning to that cost issue, I just wanted to make clear that I didn’t have any set figure in mind regarding minimal or maximal cost expectations. My point is more that I think it’s our responsibility to propose what we think is preferable. If the administration feels the cost is unacceptable at this time. I’m certain we will know that and that we, however, will make it clear that when it becomes possible to implement such a system, this is where we want to move.

**A. Rosenbaum:** And I think the fact of the matter is that because so many faculty have raised this issue, it’s clear that we’re not going to pick up arms and go to the barricades if the administration tells us that this is going to cost an exorbitant amount of money. So, we can accept that as a reasonable excuse for not going forward at this time.

**W. Pitney:** One concern that was expressed to me relates to the grade deflation issue and I’m wondering if the committee, someone on the committee might be able to speak to whether or not there’s information that exists as to whether or not the number of students receiving financial aid goes down or up in the instances where a plus/minus system has been implemented?

**C. Cappell:** No study that I reviewed addressed that question. There was some rationale given in some of the other universities and cites and even in the literature that this could have an effect to deflate grades and they proposed that in a very positive sense as one method that would fight a pretty well documented grade inflation that has taken place all across the country. One study in particular found that there was a slight decrease over time in the underperforming students, their grades tended to go down a little bit with the added plus/minus distinctions, but the higher level students, there was really no effect and there might be even greater motivation for them to shoot for those pluses and higher scores. I suspect that in most universities, Ds and Fs make up a really, really small proportion of grades, particularly as the academic caliber of the university increases. So, faculty are basically just operating maybe within two or three categories. So, going to a plus/minus system will raise that to about a five or a seven-level category distinction, which is, I think, not going to be inconsistent with notions of greater reliability.

**D. Valentiner:** I don’t know the specific literature my colleague was talking about, but it appeared to me that he was making a distinction between grades that involved some subjective
decision making versus those that might be objectively graded such as, you think of a chemistry test or some other type of fact-based or problem solving where there is in fact a definitive correct answer that has high reliability and in those cases, when you’re aggregating across many problems and many tests, the graded degree of precision is probably appropriate. But, when you come to other areas where nonspecific factors are likely to influence, I think that his argument was about four to seven categories is about what the human mind can discriminate between and it’s probably closer to four. I’m not sure that we do have an informed evaluation and that’s what concerns me. So, as things move up, I think that it would be important to make sure that we have some way to draw upon the expertise of our faculty to speak to this issue, to provide supplemental information and coming back to the cost issue, perhaps there’s a way we can express, if we do endorse this, we can express how high a priority it is for us. So, as in some way to communicate how much value we would hope the administration would put on this recommendation because they have to balance it against the other costs and initiatives that they want to take for the University.

A. Rosenbaum: And I think that is why I wanted an actual vote and why we’re going to report an actual vote of departments so that they know how strongly the faculty feel about this. I think the vote that we come out with today will give the administration a good indication of how strongly we feel about it.

S. Willis: Just belaboring that point perhaps slightly more than it needs to, but I would agree with whoever said that really we don’t have all that many gradation points, particularly at the graduate level. In graduate courses, you’ve got As and Bs and everything else is more or less equivalent. So, I think, particularly there, it would be nice to have some more gradations that you could use.

P. Henry: Following up on the C- issue again. To me, that one’s the real problematic situation because for teacher certification or for any number of other programs, you would really be sticking people if you gave them a C- and it seems like I don’t know if we need to resolve that in terms of what we pass on, but instead of just having C+, C- and C, I would argue that it would make more sense and be more efficient to just say, “We have a C and below B- is C, D, F.” People do try and take courses over. I have no idea how many repeat the D, the ones that they got Ds and Fs in, but it’s a terrifically inefficient way to process students, to get students through school if you have them taking classes over. If we tried to make the argument that if they got a C-, they could take that class over, I think that would be craziness.

T. Fisher: I was curious if anyone knew about the rough estimate or a close estimate of the number of faculty on campus?

D. Haliczer: Somewhere in the neighborhood of 1200.

J. Jeffrey: I agree with Pat Henry’s comment about C- in the sense that we certainly would not want to see a student doomed by a C-, an irreparable grade problem. But it seems to me that that’s fairly easily handled by department standards. If you had, the departments would certainly know if they have a situation that a program in which a student must not get below a C and
therefore a professor, an instructor better not give a C- because it’s irreparable. I don’t see that as a body here in the Senate, we need to establish an overall faculty policy for that.

**V. Collins:** I just wanted the Senate to know that, in our department, the vote was split, a little bit more in favor. But the prevailing concerns for those who were against had to do with the measurement concerns, that measurement error comes into play with, as we increase the distinctions of our system. So, that was a concern that was expressed by just about all of those who were not in favor. The other had to do with folks not being in favor of the A+, seeing that being different from what other universities are doing.

**M. Kostic:** I think we are overanalyzing it. This is just a finer scale and some faculty may choose not to split in so many pieces. Grading is nonlinear and we are now too much worried about how to achieve higher GPA.

**R. Feurer:** I’m from History and our vote was pretty lopsided in favor. But one of the faculty members who went through the University of Illinois’ transition said that the exact same angst about the transition went on there with faculty mulling it over and having a hard time with it and students as well. And when it was finally implemented, it was seamless and people really came on board. That was his perception, at least in the History Department, that it was much easier and they regretted all the angst.

**G. Bisplinghoff:** One of the big questions that we debated was covered pretty thoroughly in our discussion was the fact of this optional nature. Folks said that it either had to be one way or the other. We took two votes and on this optional business, people very much voted against it. When we came to an idea of mandated, they were slightly for it, 13-9 with some abstentions. So, the question also from folks who had been in schools where this had happened and they said that it became mandated. You know, the optional was out there but eventually the pressure was that everybody had to go to this system because it simply wasn’t workable or there were so many problems that they encountered because of different systems being out there.

**G. Bennardo:** Well, if a faculty member decides not to use the A+ and -, the plus/minus system, he may create a problem for students because if some students have a class with him or her, you’re going to get a specific grade. If the student takes it with another instructor the next semester, he might get a different grade with the same points and may end up with a different GPA. Isn’t that the case?

**A. Rosenbaum:** Yea, I think that would be the case but again, if you took two courses with different instructors, you might very well get different grades anyway.

**R. Feurer:** That happens now, as far as I can see, that if you luck out. We teach Intro to History and students fish for the right instructor who is going to give them grades.

**G. Bennardo:** What I’m trying to say is that if you introduce a system, I personally believe you need to introduce it throughout the University, everybody has to use it. You cannot leave this optionality because if you leave the optionality, you discriminate against certain students.
A. Rosenbaum: I don’t know if there’s anything we can do about the optionality. This is an academic freedom issue. Professors are going to assign grades as they choose. It doesn’t matter whether we call it optional or not.

C. Cappell: On behalf of the Academic Affairs Committee, I will make a motion that the Senate support a change in the grade system to a grading system that has 10 distinctions, A, B and C with plus/minus, a D+, a D and an F, and that this recommendation, if passed, be forwarded to the appropriate university committees.

A. Rosenbaum: Okay, we’ll get the exact wording right but the essence of this is that if you vote yes, you’re voting for a change to the plus/minus grading system that includes the A+ and doesn’t include the D-. If you do not like the plus/minus but prefer another system such as the A, A/B or something like that, then you would vote “no” on this. If it gets voted down, you can then introduce another motion for a different system. So, if we vote “yes” on this, we are voting to put forward the plus/minus grading system.

P. Henry: Seconded C. Cappell’s motion.

The motion passed by a vote of 36 in favor, 3 opposed, and 4 abstentions.

A. Rosenbaum: Thanked the Senators for their efforts.

X. NEW BUSINESS

XI. COMMENTS AND QUESTIONS FROM THE FLOOR

XII. INFORMATION ITEMS

A. University Assessment Panel – December 3, 2010 minutes
B. Committee on Initial Teacher Certification – November 12, 2010 minutes
C. Committee on Advanced Professional Certification in Education – December 6, 2010 - minutes

XIII. ADJOURNMENT

D. Valentiner: made the motion. There was an unidentified second.

Meeting adjourned at 4:17 p.m.