

UOAC Minutes 4/22/2011

The Undergraduate Outcomes Assessment Committee held its fourteenth meeting of the year at 2:00 pm on Friday, April 22, 2011, in the Taylor Room of the Campus Center.

Present: Peter Christopher, Michael Egan, Mustafa Fofana, Peter Hansen, Art Heinricher, Lance Schachterle

1. The committee approved the minutes of the meeting of April 8, 2011.
2. The committee continued its discussion of student writing at WPI. The question for this committee was if the data about writing warranted potential changes in academic policy to be referred to CAP.

The committee briefly discussed international students and evaluating writing in teams. The number of international students had increased and it was unclear if we were doing enough for English-language learners on campus. Discussions were ongoing concerning courses in writing, speech, and US history intended for international students that serve as a gateway for further work in the humanities for students with limited proficiency in English.

The committee discussed how to evaluate the writing of a project team, an issue not limited to teams with international students. Much difficulty follows from structuring project assignments to “do the work” and only at the end “write up” the report. Especially in multi-term projects, writing difficulties can be identified and addressed if students are required to write throughout each term and at all stages of a project.

For faculty to respond effectively to such writing, it would be helpful to provide additional training for faculty about how to assign and respond to technical writing in their professional field. Alumni surveys indicated that alumni report they did not get preparation for technical writing in their field.

The committee concluded that there were no immediate “red flags” for referral to CAP in the data on writing. Surveys in the fall should ask questions about international undergraduates to see if the requirements for English-language learners should be revisited.

3. The committee briefly continued its discussion of the evaluation of writing in MQP reports undertaken in self-studies by ABET-accredited departments. It would be helpful to involve the Dean of Engineering in discussions about generalizing from any particular report formats.
4. Art Heinricher distributed draft notes on student satisfaction and academic advising at WPI based on an analysis of the Noel-Levitz survey. While there is much good news in the survey and high levels of student satisfaction in many key areas, the survey still provides good information about areas in which WPI can improve. The seven questions where WPI saw a decrease in student satisfaction between 2008 and 2011 are related to service in the Registrar’s Office, course scheduling, service in the Bookstore, service in the Health Center, service in the Library, safety and security on campus, computer labs. Particular questions related to academic advising received more detailed analysis and were compared to results from 4-year Private Colleges for the same period.

Of the 11 questions related to academic advising, the question with the lowest average in 2011 records student satisfaction with the availability of courses. This was also the question with the largest decrease between 2006 and 2011. Most of the drop occurred between 2006 and 2008 (0.27) but the decrease continued between 2008 and 2011 (0.04).

The question with the next lowest average in 2011 asks about the academic advisors role in helping students to set goals. Once again, most of the decrease occurred between 2006 and 2008, with a slight increase in satisfaction for this question between 2008 and 2011.

There is also good news: WPI student satisfaction with tutoring services has increased and remains well above the benchmark. The position of the Assistant Director of Academic Resources and Learning Strategies was added to the Academic Advising office in October of 2009. That position assumed the responsibilities of overseeing both the Advising Office's Math and Science Help (MASH) program and the tutoring program. Since that time, several enhancements have been made to both programs. Similarly, student satisfaction with faculty availability remains well above the benchmark.

The report compared changes in student satisfaction between 2006 and 2008 and again from 2008 to 2011. A key finding was that most of the decline in student satisfaction occurred between 2006 and 2008, during the first phase of the expansion in the growth in the undergraduate population. The first-year class was over 900 for the first time in 2008. During the more recent period, from 2008 to 2011, with first-year enrollments over 900 each year, student satisfaction improved on 9 of 11 questions. Student satisfaction continued to decline on questions related to the availability of classes and customer service for registration.

The undergraduate population has grown by about 21% over the past five years (from 2006 to 2011). While the faculty (both tenure-track and non-tenure-track) have grown over the same period, the growth has not yet caught up with the student population. For example, the average credits delivered per faculty have increased by about 13% over the same period. Each faculty member's commitment to academic advising is not captured in this summary of credits delivered. The increased demand for academic advising has been met primarily by increasing the number of advisees assigned to each faculty member. It is possible to add sections and hire adjunct faculty to teach added sections. It is not possible to hire a part-time adjunct to provide academic advising.

When WPI adopted The Plan, the faculty defined academic advising as part of its teaching responsibilities. Academic Advising is not service provided by the staff in the Office of Academic Advising and advising is not something done by a few faculty in addition to, or in place of, their work as scholars and teachers. Academic advising is teaching. The WPI program has evolved since the creation of The Plan, but academic advising remains as important and complex as ever.

Dean Heinricher also noted many initiatives to respond to the higher enrollments, including larger classes, additional sections, added support and a plethora of new programs. In particular, the Office of Academic Advising, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, and the Associate Dean for the First Year have been working over the past three years on programs to improve academic advising and student satisfaction with academic advising at WPI.

The committee discussed this analysis of student satisfaction surveys. The small number of classrooms continues to limit options for course scheduling. It was noted that a recent SGA survey indicated that this year's registration process was significantly better than last year's.

Meeting adjourned at 3:00 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Peter Hansen, Secretary