
The Profession

The Politics of Curriculum Reform

Susan Webb Hammond
The American University

Legislative politics are legislative politics—whether in that premier legislative arena, the U.S. Congress, in state or local legislative bodies, or in a university. Thus, empirical research on politics is relevant to the university situation, and professional training as a political scientist is useful in developing strategies to bring about institutional change. These conclusions are based on my experience as a participant in a two and one-half year process at American University which reshaped undergraduate distribution requirements. Applying political science analysis to the experience illuminates the parallels between policymaking in diverse institutions, and confirms assumptions of our discipline: that political processes determine outcomes, and that the political science perspective assists understanding. And, a report on the process of curricular change may be helpful to those who are engaged in a similar endeavor on other campuses.¹

The Setting

At American University the spring semester, 1985, offered a window of opportunity (Kingdon, 1984) for new policy on curriculum. It was a time of reassessment and ferment on the campus as a program review process begun two years earlier was under way. A faculty poll would have shown general dissatisfaction with the existing distribution requirements, but fragmentation on possible directions of change and total disarray on proposed solutions. The University's mood sup-



SUSAN WEBB HAMMOND

ported change, program review served as a focusing event, and there were two policy entrepreneurs: the director of the University's existing General Education Complement, who raised the issue in articles for the Senate newsletter and in meetings of the University Undergraduate Studies Committee (USC), and the Faculty Senate chair who asked the USC to focus on curricular change. Undergraduate distribution requirements and general education moved through the window of opportunity and onto the University's decision agenda.

Faculty meetings and the work of two subcommittees during the spring and summer 1985 raised the salience of the issue, at least among the attentive public, and resulted in a very preliminary data set of ideas, concerns, and strategic considerations.

Structure and Issue Are Joined

The major work of curriculum reform got under way early in the autumn 1985 semester when a new University committee, the Ad Hoc Committee on General Education and Honors, was established. (Cf. a Speaker-appointed ad hoc committee in the House, or moving hearings on the Iran-contra matters from the Intelligence Committees to the Joint Iran-Contra Committee—although neither analogy is quite accurate.) The committee's title indicated its mandate: to examine and make recommendations regarding undergraduate general education (distribution requirements) and honors programs at American University.

Compromise, based on a search for a satisfactory solution rather than on logrolling, emerged as a comfortable working process.

The committee was unlike the typical legislative committee, for it was consciously diverse and representative of all University constituencies—more like the "little legislatures" considered by the House Bolling Committee of 1973-1974 (Davidson and Oleszek, 1977), or somewhat analogous to the House Budget Committee. All undergraduate units of the University (Arts and Sciences; Business; Public and International Affairs) were represented, as were major divisions of the disciplines—humanities, sciences, and social sciences. The seniority of committee members was also atypical: all were full professors. Overlapping memberships, which characterize the U.S. Senate, were extremely important for this committee as the proposed legislation moved toward final approval. Several on the committee were also members of the Undergraduate Studies Committee of the Faculty Senate,

to which the Ad Hoc Committee would eventually report, and four also served on the Faculty Senate. The Ad Hoc Committee was chaired by the Associate Dean of Faculties, who brought two particularly important factors to the deliberations: an expertise in education, including a knowledge of curriculum reform efforts elsewhere; and a position in the administration which enabled an overview of, rather than pressures for participation in, turf issues. Having a member of the "leadership" as chair is also unusual for a legislative committee (it was, after all, not a party committee). All factors were critical to the eventual outcome.

Active student dissent could have strengthened faculty opposition, and offered a reason to vote against the proposal.

The general education distribution requirements in effect in 1985 were a compromise, the result of fierce turf politics operative at the time of the last "reform" of the undergraduate curriculum. The outcome had meant departmental equity, but many on campus continued to be concerned with a lack of direction and coherence in the required undergraduate program, and were coming increasingly to believe that students were badly served by the existing system. The committee began its work with support for change from a small attentive public. Most on the campus, however, were watching but not involved: some groups had vested interest in the existing program, others might become opponents if adversely affected by specific changes. A major problem was to get people constructively involved in shaping a new program.

The Autumn 1985 Task

The committee's immediate task was to develop operational norms and procedures which would facilitate its work and

give it legitimacy on the campus. If this experience is typical, norms and procedural guidelines emerge very gradually in new legislative committees. (Cf. Fenno, 1986, 1973—the Ad Hoc Committee's work offered an opportunity to analyze the development of strategic premises and decisionmaking processes). Frequent meetings and hard work were expected. Brief minutes documented committee agreements and jogged member's memories about future work (many were lists of issues not yet addressed). Drafts of questions, curriculum models, and report sections focused discussions and facilitated the search for agreement.

Disagreement was expected and polite (cf. the congressional courtesy norm). In order to keep final decisions on general education open, members could change their positions without explanation and early decisions could always be reconsidered; this helped the committee come to agreement on difficult matters. An unspoken agreement emerged that voting would be counterproductive and that operation by consensus would result in a stronger, more defensible, report. This came, perhaps, from the very divisive effect of the previous reform battles, and was made easier because of the agreement that committee decisions could be reconsidered. Compromise, based on a search for a satisfactory solution rather than on logrolling, emerged as a comfortable working process.

. . . implementation issues, which the committee had dealt with briefly but, it believed sufficiently, became important. . .

Partisanship was minimized (cf. Fenno, 1973 and Manley, 1965). All were aware that turf issues had been important in the 1980 curriculum reform. The committee

therefore attempted, first, to understand the issues intellectually; this fit in well with learning about curricula and identifying questions for consideration. But turf issues continued to lurk beneath the surface, undiscussed. They were finally raised when the committee considered possible curriculum models for its Interim Report. By

Moving significant and controversial legislation to final passage requires involvement and support of the legislative leadership.

that time committee members were able to discuss unit interests candidly, informed by knowledge of curricula and helped by norms of analysis and open discussion. Subsequently, departmental or unit interests were on occasion brought into discussions, but neither drove nor undermined decisionmaking.

Although no one element of the external environment dominated committee agendas and deliberations (cf. Fenno, 1973), environmental constraints—and especially the need to achieve Senate approval and the committee's agreement to try for University consensus—shaped the context of committee interactions with the University community. Committee minutes were not published, but committee members made an effort to discuss issues under consideration with colleagues, and regularly sought reactions and advice from the University community, and especially from those who might be affected by a particular decision.²

The committee's strategic premises (decision rules) and decision-making processes were set by the end of the first semester of work. The goal was to propose a new undergraduate general education program, maintaining legitimacy and faculty-wide support through development of a program which corrected the in-

The Profession

adequacies of the existing system and was intellectually sound. Although the committee hoped to minimize uneven turf effects, it would rely on the combination of an intellectually attractive program and con-

In a university, however, there are no institutionalized procedures or accepted norms for marshalling votes and building coalitions.

stant discussion with and input from individual faculty, departments, and colleges to overcome problems. The committee would arrive at consensus through open discussion, and the norms of hard work, limited specialization, and non-partisanship would govern. The result was a well-integrated committee (Fenno, 1966), prepared to make the hard choices which would result in a proposal and Faculty Senate legislation.

The Interim Report

In March, 1986, the committee released a "Progress Report on Deliberations," signed by all committee members. It was circulated to faculty, departmental chairs, and deans. A covering memorandum posed questions on various issues and requested comments.

The progress report was important for several reasons. First, the committee made good on its stated intent to involve the entire University community in the curriculum reform effort. Second, the Report gave the committee an opportunity to state unequivocally the expectation that there would be *one* general education program for *all* undergraduates. The Report also gave indication of directions the committee was moving. The new general education program would be more structured than the existing system.

Departments could use a "local option" to add requirements for their majors. A laboratory science course probably would be required—a significant change. In this way the committee sought to signal likely outcomes, and to respond, in a preliminary way, to other proposals for the new curriculum. By October, 1986, the committee had a book of formal responses and a growing knowledge of curricula. Its next task was the most difficult: to develop, without losing sight of political considerations, a new general education program based on sound pedagogy.

Shaping the Proposals

Much of the 1986-1987 year was devoted to keeping the playing field clear for the committee to develop a proposal. The committee carefully and successfully guarded its jurisdiction (cf. John Dingell). Students were involved in deliberations through a formal meeting with the full committee, numerous meetings with the committee chair, and an invitation to participate in open University-wide discussions. Active student dissent could have strengthened faculty opposition, and offered a reason to vote against the proposal. When curriculum changes that might impact on general education were proposed to standing committees, Ad Hoc Committee members with overlapping memberships prevailed, and consideration was postponed until after the Ad Hoc Committee reported. The committee and its chair successfully stopped individual colleges, faculty, and administrators from pushing their own versions of a "new" general education curriculum. In addition, the committee chair met continually with groups of faculty to discuss, and negotiate on, possible proposals.

By December 1986 the committee had agreed that the program requirements should include two courses from each of several curricular areas, a foundation course including methodological and conceptual material to introduce students to methods of inquiry and analysis, and a second-level course which would be linked to the foundation course through subject matter or methodology. The committee

also agreed that elements such as critical thinking, writing, ethical values and a variety of perspectives should not be taught in isolation but should infuse all general education courses. And there was tentative agreement that curricular areas should be content rather than discipline based; this eventually became a crucial element in gaining faculty approval.

By February, 1987, after extended discussion, the committee agreed on a general education curriculum of five curricular areas—The Creative Arts, Traditions that Shape the Western World, International and Intercultural Experience, Social Institutions and Behavior, and The Natural Sciences—with every area required. The total requirement would be 39 hours: 10 courses from the curricular areas complemented by 6 hours of writing and 3 of mathematics. The proposal overcame the turf issue: each of the five components would be both content and conceptually defined, and although some disciplines would fit most easily into one of the component areas, no discipline would be excluded from proposing courses in any of the areas. The committee had a proposal which had intellectual integrity, could be justified to “home constituencies,” and could be approved by the Faculty Senate.

Final Action

When the committee “reported” its proposal, activity shifted from policy content to political strategy. Previously established norms and procedures served this stage well.

The Executive Committee of the Faculty Senate held three University-wide meetings for discussion. Now the issues which would be obstacles to final passage surfaced openly. Rather surprisingly, implementation issues, which the committee had dealt with briefly but, it believed sufficiently, became important: how could the University ever meet the expected implementation date of autumn 1988? Would there be enough classrooms? How could courses be limited to no more than 50 students? Would there be enough faculty? With data, some of it gathered after the sessions, and with compromise—the

implementation date was delayed a year—these concerns were worked through. The number of credit hour requirements, however, became a major stumbling block, although the committee tried to meet the concerns by adding a course substitution option.

Senate Consideration

Moving significant and controversial legislation to final passage requires involvement and support of the legislative leadership (Hammond, 1987). At this stage, two major University actors became important in giving urgency and support to the issue and in setting the parameters for Senate debate. The chair of the Senate publicly and strongly supported the proposal, talked with colleagues to build support, and handled the parliamentary situation on the Floor with skill. And the Provost of the University began the Senate debate with a speech of support and promise of necessary resources.

Nevertheless, these were not enough. Those concerned about the required number of credit hours were determined to change, or kill, the proposal. They prepared amendments to each recommendation. In a two-and-one-half hour Senate meeting, only the first recommendation (of 14) was fully considered. And at adjournment, an amendment to an amendment, if approved, would have gutted the program. Timing of the next Senate meeting gave the committee a two-week break

Politics was decisive. The Program would not have won on policy grounds alone.

for spring vacation; by the next meeting the program could unravel completely.

It was time to activate the grass roots, seek to shape public opinion, and whip and count the votes. Activity proceeded on several levels, both publicly and in behind-the-scenes negotiations, with the commit-

The Profession

tee and administrators galvanized into political action. Media coverage was sought (the Senate newsletter) and thrust upon it (the student newspaper, which gave very fair coverage but hoped to uncover a major story of nasty conflict). In Congress, the leadership can activate both formal and informal processes for whipping and counting votes. In a university, however, there are no institutionalized procedures or accepted norms for marshalling votes and building coalitions. The Senate chair, operating as Chief Whip, organized committee members and

*For universities, although
not for legislatures,
building a consensus,
and not only a majority
coalition, seems
important for approval
and for subsequent
implementation.*

senators to persuade voting colleagues and to compel attendance for those in support of the proposal. The committee was a second whip organization, actively lobbying and tracking senators' votes. A conservative count indicated that the proposal was likely to be approved, although some senators might be persuaded by opposition arguments. The Provost strongly supported the proposal in discussions with dissenters. The previous Senate chair, who had been instrumental in starting the curriculum reform process, had a final decisive role. The morning of the final Senate meeting to consider the proposal, he met with faculty opponents of the proposal. Citing the clear campus momentum for change, he brokered the development of a one-sentence amendment which in effect recognized their concerns but did not change the general education requirements. With this action, they were per-

sued to drop their opposition.

At the Senate meeting on March 25, 1987, the new General Education Program won unanimous approval. Politics was decisive. The Program would not have won on policy grounds alone. The committee's openness, responsiveness and community involvement had given its proposal legitimacy. One college's opposition in the Senate challenged the central administration and deans and galvanized them to strong support. Public statements of some administrators which appeared to challenge the legitimacy of the faculty role in policymaking further mobilized support (cf. War Powers legislation or the Iran-contra congressional investigation). And, on this issue, University consensus became so legitimized that at the end of the process a significant and vocal group of dissenters felt sufficiently isolated to shift their votes and support final passage.

Conclusion

What lessons can be learned from this saga? A committee with diversity, seniority, and membership overlap, which brought all constituencies into the process, was critical. A two-year period for development and consideration of major reform was needed. An interim progress report offered opportunity for consideration and input by the University community. And leadership support was important in achieving legislative approval.

Committees develop strategic premises and decision rules gradually, and as Fenno has shown us, these shape committee outputs. And rules are not neutral: the procedures the committee developed shaped the policy outcome, and parliamentary procedures in the Faculty Senate favored the minority until their opposition collapsed. Time constraints (Oppenheimer, 1985) gave a special urgency to reaching agreement; at the end of the spring semester, 1987, it would have been difficult, and perhaps impossible, to have time for numerous amendments and ensuing discussion.

For universities, although not for legislatures, building a consensus, and not only a majority coalition, seems important, for

approval and for subsequent implementation. Unlike legislatures, university colleagues must implement the programs they legislate.

Finding a way to overcome turf issues and at the same time to incorporate constituent interests was critical to approval. It was not pork barrel legislation, like the typical water projects bill or an Omnibus Parks Bill. And yet no unit of the Univer-

sity was excluded from participation in the proposed program. The Ad Hoc Committee, a mixed goal committee, had functioned primarily as a policy committee, but the clientele goals had contributed to final passage.

In the final analysis legislative politics are indeed legislative politics, whatever the arena.

**Appendix I
Overview of General Education Curriculum**

All undergraduates at The American University will fulfill the requirements of the General Education Curriculum. The objectives of the program are:

- to build among undergraduates a strong intellectual foundation
- to expose students to a wide range of intellectually and culturally important disciplines
- to develop skills of inquiry and analysis
- to ensure that the curriculum affords students an understanding of the inter-relatedness among fields and offers the opportunity to study in depth
- to guide students toward a recognition of ethical and social responsibility

General Education Curriculum 39 hours		
University Requirements—Two Foundation Competencies:		
College Writing	6 hours	Any exceptions based on examination or higher-level course.
College Mathematics	3 hours	
General Education Requirements—Five Curricular Areas:		
I. The Creative Arts	6 hours	a) Students select one Category A foundation course in each curricular area, from 10 to 15 foundation courses in each curricular area, in some cases taught in multiple sections.
II. Traditions That Shape the Western World	6 hours	b) From each curricular area, students select a Category B second-level course that is linked with the foundation course in a specified way from 15 to 40 second-level courses in each area, in multiple sections, as appropriate.
III. International and Intercultural Experience	6 hours	
IV. Social Institutions and Behavior	6 hours	
V. The Natural Sciences	6 hours	

Source: Ad Hoc Committee on General Education. Curriculum approved by Faculty Senate, March 11 and 25, 1987.

APPENDIX II

In 1985, when the Ad Hoc General Education Committee began its work, all American University undergraduates were required to take six hours of English (College Writing; Literature) and 24 hours (usually eight courses) of distribution requirements, balanced among the arts and humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Approximately 295 courses were designated by departments on an equity basis, ten courses per department.

The new General Education Program includes nine hours of university foundation competency requirements, six in College Writing and three in Mathematics (students will satisfy the Math requirement by a course or by examination). The general education requirements in five curricular areas (The Creative Arts; Traditions that Shape the Western World; International and Intercultural Experience; Social Institutions and Behavior; The Natural Sciences) are the heart of the program. In each area, students take a foundation level course which includes methodological and conceptual components to assure explicit treatment of methods of inquiry and analysis, and a second-level course which is "linked with and builds upon foundation courses to form a coherent curricular sequence." Second-level courses, which may be in a different discipline from foundation courses, offer students an opportunity to study in more depth a topic, a discipline, or a method of analysis. Students must take a science course which includes laboratory work.

The curricular areas cover specific areas of knowledge, and are both content and conceptually defined. Courses within the curricular areas are normally discipline based, and students learn perspectives, skills, concepts and analytic techniques appropriate to each area.

The new General Education Program offers students both breadth (through the five curricular areas) and depth (through the two courses required in each area). It offers choice, and flexibility. Throughout the curriculum, courses explicitly seek to promote writing and quantitative skills, critical thinking, ethical considerations, active engagement with primary materials, and a variety of perspectives and interpretations.

The Program provides a common experience for all undergraduates by requiring introduction to specific areas of knowledge through an intellectually integrated group of courses. Basing the curricular areas on both content and conceptual approaches rather than the more-traditional tripartite Humanities, Sciences, and Social Sciences, and requiring courses from an

International and Multicultural Area are especially distinctive features of the Program.

About the Author

Susan Webb Hammond is professor of political science at The American University and during 1987-88 a guest scholar at The Brookings Institution. She is coauthor of *Congressional Staffs: The Invisible Force in American Lawmaking* and is currently working on a study of congressional caucuses.

Notes

1. This report would not be possible without my colleagues on the American University's Ad Hoc Committee on General Education and Honors 1985-1987: Ann Ferren, Chair; David Crosby, Harold Durfee, Mary Garrard, James Girard, Robert Gregg, Phil Jacoby, Dorothy James, Ruth Landman, Ira Klein, David Martin, Kay Mussell, Nina Roscher, Roger Simonds, and Angela Wu. They share responsibility for the data, but bear no responsibility for my interpretation and conclusions. I am grateful to Ann Ferren for comments on an earlier version of this article.

2. Eventually this meant presentations at faculty meetings, reports in university publications, and innumerable meetings—most undertaken by the committee chair—with department chairs and college deans. Proposals were discussed with some departments, and reports made to the university administration. Eventually, three open meetings on the proposed program were held with students, faculty and administrators.

References

- Davidson, Roger H. and Walter J. Oleszek. 1977. *Congress Against Itself*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1966. *The Power of the Purse: Appropriations Politics in Congress*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Fenno, Richard F., Jr. 1973. *Congressmen in Committees*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Hammond, Susan Webb. 1987. "Committee and Informal Leadership in the House of Representatives." Paper prepared for the Dirksen Congressional Center/CRS Congressional Leadership Project.
- Kingdon, John W. 1984. *Agendas, Alternatives, and Public Policies*. Boston: Little, Brown.
- Manley, John F. 1965. "The House Committee on Ways and Means: Conflict Management in a Congressional Committee," *American*

Political Science Review LIX: 927-939.
Oppenheimer, Bruce I. 1985. "Changing Time Constraints on Congress: Historical Perspectives on the Use of Cloture" in Lawrence C. Dodd and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered*. Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.

Part-Time Faculty In Political Science: Stepchildren of the Profession

Nancy E. McGlen
and
Meredith Reid Sarkees
Niagara University

Editor's Note: The National Education Association has recently issued a report, "Report and Recommendations on Part-Time, Temporary and Nontenure Track Faculty Appointments." As reported in the Chronicle of Higher Education (March 9, 1988, p. A13), the NEA recommends that "Part-time instructors should be given the same salary and fringe benefits, prorated, as full time faculty members. They should be included in faculty governance procedures. They should be used only to teach specialized courses, replace absent professors, or address unexpected enrollment increases. And they should be hired on a full-time basis whenever possible."

The full report is available from NEA, Office of Higher Education, 1201 16th Street, NW, Suite 320, Washington, DC 20036.

The employment of part-time faculty at universities and colleges has recently become a headline topic (*Wall Street Journal*, 1986, *Time*, 1987, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 1987). Projections are for further growth in the employment of these "academic stepchildren" as institutions of higher education attempt to grapple with the twin demons of declining enrollments and rising costs. What are the dimensions



NANCY E. MCGLEN



MEREDITH REID SARKEES