Academic Priorities Council
Minutes
March 3, 2009

Present: Jim Kurose, Shaw Hsu, Danny Schnell, Mike Williams, David Gross, Monroe Rabin, Matteo Pangallo, Ernie May, Carolyn Cave, Margaret Allard, Andrew Barto, Scott Stangroom, Joe Goldstein, Bryan Harvey, Randall Knoper, Jim Rinderle, Richard Bogartz, Kathy Debevec, Jane Fountain

1. Dean Jim Kurose and his colleagues were invited to share their perspective on the Chancellor’s Proposed Reorganization Plan.

2. Dean Kurose described his college, NSM, as very interdisciplinary in both research and graduate program offerings. He sees a great deal of collaboration among departments within and outside of the natural sciences. Currently in NSM, there is collaboration between the physical sciences and life sciences. There are no boundaries in the physical sciences. Faculty in physics, polymer science, computer science, and chemistry do life sciences work. Funded grants are a priority in NSM.

3. Bringing Life Sciences together in a college is viewed positively. This should lead to more interaction, although having separate schools hasn’t been an obstacle for research collaborations. Currently, there is joint funding with Engineering. Randall Knoper indicated that for undergraduate education and general education, it is important to have the ability to use teaching resources more effectively. The integration of the life sciences could facilitate this.

4. David Gross suggested that bringing the sciences together will facilitate processes involved with multidisciplinary grants in the life sciences. Currently, PIs must to go multiple Deans to get things done and if all were within the Life Sciences, it would be easier. Dan Schnell supported this view. In addition, integrating the sciences would break down administrative barriers to sharing teaching resources across colleges. In both NRE and NSM, departments have expressed a willingness to share the load. Agreement on curriculum requirements, such as the language requirement, could be worked out and encourage multidisciplinary study for students.

5. Currently on campus there are 88 centers. These centers tend not to function across disciplines. An institute involving the Life Sciences would give interdisciplinary graduate programs in the Life Sciences an identity that can be strengthened and used to draw grant funding and recruit students. A single unified institute for Energy or the Environment could also be interdisciplinary and involve faculty across departments. While a faculty member’s identity is first with their department, institutes could foster collaboration among faculty in different disciplines and colleges. These institutes would convey an image on the outside of faculty research and expertise at UMass. They could create funding opportunities and politicians and would know where to go and who to talk to concerning different areas and opportunities. Jane Fountain suggested that we should also be proactive in promoting our institution’s expertise and be out there selling all the
time. We should be seeking out policy priorities that could generate funding opportunities. It would be useful to have a point person for this.

6. The question was raised why Computer Science would want to go into a Science college. In many universities, computer science is in the same college as engineering and polymer science. Computer science is with engineering in 13 out of 17 programs, according to Jim Kurose. Many in engineering are favorable to that grouping. Others viewed it as a model of the 80s and 90s. Andy Barto indicated that the roots of computer science are in engineering but that they reach out to other colleges as well. Some of the strongest connections are with ECE and computer science may be taking a step back if placed with engineering. Informatics and computing is hot and in some universities, there is a College of Informatics (Cornell, Indiana, Berkley). This may be similar to our IT major.

7. The scale of a large Science college would be a challenge under any organization. Deans now work 70+ hours a week. When faculty size within a college increases from 240 to 375, the organization becomes more difficult to manage. On the positive side, cross-fertilization can often happen at meetings. Nine to ten individuals meeting together may be OK but 15-18 is too many. The load of personnel committees may be unmanageable in the larger college as well. This is an issue that would need attention and thought. Research on best practices for such personnel committees would be advisable. Is there time to do the working out?

8. What structure positions the university best for success? We need to consider which structure facilitates grant funding. Undergraduate teaching may be best when the life and physical sciences are together. On the other hand, it is more challenging to evaluate faculty teaching across borders at the undergraduate level. TA resources may be another issue. All of these things and more need to be considered.