MEMORANDUM

TO: Members of the Faculty Senate  
   Dr. Joseph P. Kelly, Speaker of the Faculty  
   Dr. Terence N. Bowers, Faculty Secretary  
   Dr. Robert F. Perkins, Jr., Chair, Faculty Curriculum Committee

FROM: Dr. Brian R. McGee, Chair  
   Department of Communication  
   Dr. Bethany C. Goodier, Chair  
   Department of Communication Curriculum Committee

DATE: April 6, 2010

SUBJECT: Additional Information – Department of Communication Appeal  
         C-minus Minimum Grade Requirement for COMM Major and Minors

As Faculty Senators know, in a memorandum written by Brian McGee and dated March 11, 2010, the Department of Communication appealed three recent recommendations made by the Faculty Curriculum Committee. The department’s appeal is scheduled for consideration during the April meeting of the Senate, which begins this evening. We thank the faculty colleagues in all six schools who have made inquiries about our appeal and, in many cases, expressed support for our proposals.

In a second memorandum, dated March 24, 2010, Brian McGee supplied enrollment information relevant to these proposals to the College’s Budget Committee. As a courtesy to the Senate, this memorandum is attached.

Like other faculty colleagues, we are worried about the length of the Senate’s April agenda. In a second attempt to supply information and, we hope, reduce the time spent in Senate debate regarding our department’s appeal, we provide below some brief replies to several potential objections to our department’s C-minus proposals, as those objections have been described to us by a few faculty colleagues and members of the Senate.

In no particular order, we have heard the following eight potential objections raised by some colleagues:

1. The communication proposals would set a precedent that might be followed by the science departments (or the mathematics department, or the foreign languages departments).
Our proposals certainly might set a precedent. However, this would be a precedent only in the minimal sense that some faculty colleagues in other departments might think our proposals are sound and consider making similar proposals for their programs. The Department of Communication is not making policy for the School of Sciences and Mathematics or the School of Languages, Cultures, and World Affairs, nor would we try to do so.

The communication proposals apply only to a single discipline and department. Our proposals are supported by evidence concerning the performance of our students, especially in upper-division courses. We do not speak to course prerequisites and course sequences of the sort used in mathematics or foreign-language instruction.

Any academic department wishing to adopt similar C-minus requirements will have to conduct enrollments and grade-distribution studies, complete internal approval processes, seek the support of the relevant school dean, and submit their proposals for review and discussion by four committees and the full Senate. The barriers to the approval of such proposals are not insubstantial, as we in the Department of Communication have learned. Each department making these proposals would have to supply evidence relevant to its own situation and cannot simply invoke COMM’s requirements to justify other C-minus minimum grade requirements.

In addition to the need for separate proposals, we remind the Senate that the C-minus minimum already has been established at the College of Charleston in both our own department and in another school. While the use of C-minus minimums in course prerequisites and major admission is not the same as a C-minus requirement for all major courses, our proposals are an extension of the C-minus precedent already in place at the College.

Finally, we are a bit disturbed by two possible rationales for this “worrisome precedent” objection to our proposals. The first possibility is that some faculty colleagues would oppose the communication proposals because similar proposals might later be made by other units in which those faculty have specific interests. The second possibility is that some faculty colleagues would put their own, relatively uninformed judgments ahead of those rendered by the departmental faculty responsible for disciplinary instruction in communication, even when the communication faculty members have offered carefully crafted proposals supported by the experience of many other universities. Both rationales strike us as narrowly parochial.

2. The communication proposals would override the graduate requirements set by the College of Charleston and set up a separate graduation requirement for one major.

We disagree with the premise of this objection. The College of Charleston does establish minimum requirements for earning degrees and graduating from the College. However, departments regularly propose major and minor requirements that go beyond those minimums announced for all degree recipients. For example, most departmental majors require far more than the 27-hour minimum for major programs set by the College. Further, some departments specify completion of mathematics and other support courses not required by the general education curriculum or the major program itself. The requirement for a minimum C-minus grade in major courses is no different than these other departmental standards that go beyond institutional minimums at the College of Charleston.

In addition, the Department of Communication is not setting standards for degree completion. We are asking the Senate to do so for one undergraduate major and two undergraduate minors, given all the available evidence. We already have supplied several arguments in support of C-minus standards, all of which are centered on our attempt to help our students succeed. Almost a month
after first appealing the decision of the Faculty Curriculum Committee, we still have seen no empirical evidence that the C-minus standard will do any meaningful harm to students, as noted below.

3. The communication proposals could be unfair to students, as some professors teaching the same course assign more D grades than do other professors.

The choice of instructor is responsible for some variability in course grade assignment, we agree, and all academic departments should be sensitive to the equity issues inherent in wide variations in grade distribution among faculty teaching the same courses. However, such variation is not unique to our proposals or departmental experience. For all six schools at the College, some faculty colleagues assign more F grades than others, for example, but this difference is not used to discount F grades or argue they should no longer be assigned.¹

At present, we have no evidence of wild disparities in D grade assignment among the communication faculty. As noted in Brian McGee’s memorandum of March 24, D grade assignment in the Department of Communication is consistent with the practice of other departments in the School of Humanities and Social Sciences.

4. The communication proposals would require the College to check student grade records in ways that would be inefficient and time-consuming.

Along with one Faculty Senator, we are aware of a large university that is about to abandon a C-minus requirement in a communication studies major, in part because that university’s grade-tracking software is far more primitive than our own at the College of Charleston. At that institution, the departmental staff members have to review the letter grades assigned in each course section in order to identify the students who earned D grades in major courses. Beginning in 2010, that department is abandoning the C-minus requirement in favor of a 2.5 GPA minimum for multiple gateway courses in the major and a requirement for a minimum 2.5 cumulative GPA. The cumulative requirement is in part a response to the software limitations of that university, if we understand their situation correctly.²

Happily, the College’s new software systems (and our legacy systems) at the College of Charleston will allow us to run grade reports that readily identify all students earning a D grade in COMM courses. Even in a large department, this will not be a difficult process. The departmental staff can and will notify students of their need to retake such courses, especially in cases where the College’s course-repetition policy requires timely schedule adjustments to allow repetition of prerequisite courses. The review-and-notification process for D grades should not impose an undue burden on the Department of Communication or the Registrar.

5. The Department of Communication could and should change its grading standards to make more D grades into F grades (or eliminate D grades as an option).

¹ In Brian McGee’s memorandum of March 24, he alluded in fn. 2 to the (quite predictable) research finding that student motivation and student preparation are the most important variables accounting for the course grades earned by college students.
² Monica Madura, University of Iowa, personal communication with Brian McGee, April 5, 2010.
In comparison with the A, B, and C grades, we doubt that it would be fair to create very narrow D ranges when the D+, D, and D- grades appear to be defined by the College in a fashion similar to the higher course grades. Further, in our opinion the outright elimination of the D grades as a possibility in one or more undergraduates courses would be a violation of the College’s grading provisions.

While creating a narrow D range and expanding the F range will appeal to some communication faculty if the Senate rejects our proposals, the more straightforward and transparent approach where our students are concerned would be to uniformly define the D grades as qualifying for free-elective credit, but not for major credit. We also wonder if pushing more students into the F range solely to force course repetition would raise certain ethical concerns, in addition to creating some practical problems for student retention.

6. D grades at the College of Charleston are defined as “barely acceptable, passing.” The Department of Communication should not be able to redefine D grades as unacceptable.

We reject the premise of this argument. The Department of Communication does not seek to revise the institutional definition of a D grade. If our proposals are adopted, COMM courses in which D grades are earned will continue to apply to the College’s graduation requirements as free electives, assuming the student does not repeat those courses. Such courses will not be applied to major requirements, however.

While a D grade is passing, we should remember the College itself discriminates quite regularly against courses in which a D grade is earned. A student who earns too many D grades (and C-minus grades, for that matter) will fall below the 2.0 cumulative GPA requirement and be prevented from graduating or be placed on probation. A student who earns a D grade (or C-minus grade) in a course at another university will not be allowed to transfer that course credit to the College of Charleston, even if the student had a bad semester (see #7 below) or was assigned to a difficult instructor at a prestigious university. Students already know that a D grade is much worse than a C grades, given our existing institutional rules and policies.

To provide another perspective, currently the College requires that students earn a 2.0 major GPA and cumulative GPA in order to graduate. The College already defines an excessive number of D and C-minus grades as unacceptable. The Department of Communication proposals do not represent a notable departure from this logic, which understands that D grades are indeed different from other passing grades.

7. The communication proposals discriminate against otherwise strong students who have a bad semester.

We understand that some good students have bad semesters. A C-minus, however, is not a particularly high grade. As we know, a C-minus average would fall short of the 2.0 minimum GPA required for graduation in the major. With respect, in some cases a semester goes so badly for a student that the student should be required to repeat certain courses, especially if that course applies to major requirements.

8. The College of Charleston policy for course repetition prevents any prerequisite course from being repeated if the successor course has been completed. The current College policy could make course repetition more difficult for some communication students.
Problems with this facet of the course-repetition policy can be avoided, as long as the department runs a D-grade report at the conclusion of each semester and contacts students earning D grades in a timely fashion. These students can be given assistance in altering their course schedules to prevent problems with the course-repetition policy. In extreme cases, the department chair can approve course substitutions to address inequities created by the current repetition policy.

In conclusion, the energy expended on our appeal might suggest to some colleagues that we are proposing a substantial change to College rules. We are not. The communication proposals would not be noticed by the majority of communication students, who never earn a D grade in major or minor coursework. The new C-minus rule, further, would have no effect on other departments and programs. At dozens of institutions ranging from elite private colleges to leading research universities, such rules have worked for years or decades to ensure programmatic quality, without doing any great harm in the process.

We hope this review of eight possible objections to the Department of Communication proposals will make our April Senate debate more efficient and productive. We thank the members of the Senate and campus community for taking the time to consider this memorandum and the other documents we have circulated. As we originally believed our proposals would not be controversial, we regret that reviewing these materials and preparing for the Senate debate will take up so much time for individual Senators and draw attention away from other important matters before the Senate.

Please let one of us know if you have questions or concerns about this memorandum.

cc: Roster Faculty, Department of Communication
    Members, Faculty Curriculum Committee for 2009-2010
    Members, Budget Committee for 2009-2010
    Members, Academic Planning Committee for 2009-2010
    Members, Committee on Academic Standards, Admissions and Financial Aid for 2009-2010
    Heather Alexander, Faculty Secretariat