

MICHIGAN STATE UNIVERSITY

April 22, 2008

To: UCAP

From: UCAP Subcommittee Consideration of the Sustainability Specialization
(Schechter, Loeb, Shah, Smith, and Volkening)

Re: Report and Recommendation

Charge to the Subcommittee:

The Subcommittee was charged, using the Sustainability Specialization as a prototype, “to consider various possibilities and recommend a strategy for how to move forward with the development of guidelines and/or principles that would form the basis for consideration of the Sustainability Specialization and future proposals of this type”.

Recommendation of the Subcommittee:

The Subcommittee unanimously recommends that the Sustainability Specialization and future proposals of this type be housed in academic units, presumably a consortium of colleges, with a single college as the lead academic unit. That is, no change in Policy is recommended at this time.

Accordingly, the Subcommittee strongly urges that those who have developed the Sustainability Specialization be informed immediately of this decision and be encouraged to submit the proposal to the relevant college curriculum committee(s) so it can be considered by the University Committee on Curriculum (UCC) in the near future. The Subcommittee believes that the University would be well served to have a Sustainability Specialization and thus further delays in processing of this request are undesirable.

Rationale for the Recommendation:

The Subcommittee focused on the policy questions before it rather than the curricular merits of this particular proposal, but the two issues were inevitably intertwined.

The Subcommittee believes that the interests of students are best served when curricular proposals get careful review by faculty as well as students. The Subcommittee also believes that many program proposals, such as the “prototype” before us would be well served by having significant input from non-academics as well. The Subcommittee is aware that the proposal before it has had considerable input from faculty and students as well as non-academics, but housing a Specialization in a non-academic unit does not ensure that that will occur, either when the Specialization is first developed or as revisions are needed. The University Committee on Curriculum as currently organized does not require sufficient materials about academic programs to do the sort of detailed review that the Subcommittee



Michigan State University
South Case Hall
East Lansing, MI
48825-1205

Main Office
517/353-6750

Dean's Office
517/353-6753

Admissions
517/353-5260

Academic/Student Affairs
517/353-6754

Field Experience
517/353-6757

FAX: 517/432-1804

believes serves the best interests of the students who would enroll in such programs. The Subcommittee also notes that input by students at the UCC is often minimal if not non-existent. And while the Curriculum belongs to the faculty, student input in the process of curricular innovation and revision is often quite valuable.

The Subcommittee believes that the “prototype” before it makes the case for collegiate level curricular review perhaps more emphatically than any already approved Specialization. That’s because the core courses in the Sustainability Specialization are UGS courses, which means they have not been reviewed by, and would not be required to be reviewed by any collegiate level academic body. And the materials that UCC now receives for new course proposals are too minimal for a careful student-faculty review of such courses.

The Subcommittee found no compelling argument for this Specialization that merits it being housed in a non-academic unit. The Subcommittee was asked to view it as a “transdisciplinary” Specialization, presumably distinguishing it from multi or interdisciplinary Specializations. But since many Specializations transcend single disciplines – the Subcommittee reviewed a number of existing ones – and many are open to students in all majors in the University, the Subcommittee couldn’t see what was distinctive about this one except that its core courses were not disciplinary and thus not housed in any academic unit, which the Subcommittee found as a reason *not* to move its home outside of traditional academic units. The Subcommittee also would suspect that coordinators of many Specializations would rightly argue that their Specializations transcend several disciplines, and thus seek to leave academic units; this would lead to reduced faculty and student oversight of their programs, something the Subcommittee considers undesirable.

The Subcommittee also thought that a Specialization housed in the Office of the Associate Provost for Undergraduate Education, especially one with core courses also housed in his office, would likely be buried in terms of visibility and not attract the enrollments that the Subcommittee would like for Specializations like this one. Advisors in academic units are much more likely to bring to students’ attention Specializations housed in their own academic unit or a Specialization for which they share responsibility. The ill-fated history of Thematics, which were housed in the Assistant Provost for Undergraduate Education’s office, provides some empirical evidence to support the Subcommittee’s fears here.

The Subcommittee wishes to add that the timing of this discussion is, in some ways, particularly unfortunate. It would have been preferable if it could have come after UCC, UCAP and Academic Council had reached some definitive judgment on the taxonomy question as it relates to Specializations versus Minors. The Subcommittee would have even stronger reservations about having a Minor housed in a non-academic unit and thus its opposition to the idea of housing programs like this “prototype” in a non-academic unit would be even stronger than it is now were a decision reached that all Specializations were to become Minors, as was earlier proposed by the UCC and Office of the Provost.

If the full Committee of UCAP does not endorse the Subcommittee's recommendation, then it would prefer such Specializations to be housed in the Office of the Associate Provost rather than a truly non-academic unit. And it would recommend that the review process by the University Committee on Curriculum be changed to ensure that it has much more material available to it to for a serious review of such proposals and that they be reviewed by all relevant Subcommittees. The Subcommittee would also recommend that a parallel, altered review process be established for UGS (or any other non-academically housed) courses, as they might, as in the prototype, play a significant role in Specializations. Obviously, if UCAP chooses to go this route, conversations with UCC would have to be held, as UCAP cannot dictate procedures to another standing committee of Academic Council.