Education Committee Minutes  
Friday, October 24, 2008

Larry Davis convened the meeting at 2:10pm on October 24, 2008. He turned the meeting over to Alan Sussman who summarized the course proposal for CMSC 312. Alan mentioned that a text book had been added to the proposal given the recommendation from the last meeting as well as a transition plan. He and Neil Spring will look for a more up-to-date text book to use since the one listed is out of date. The transition plan includes the need to probably teach CMSC 311 one more time.

A question was asked as to how many projects would be included in the new course? CMSC 212 does have a large number of very detailed and long programming projects which seems to either turn off some students or cause others to feel that they can’t handle the load and eventually leave the major. Alan mentioned that the goal of 312 is to offer a computer systems course and not a “C programming” course. CMSC 312 is planned as a 4 credit course and is not a prerequisite for CMSC 330.

Another question was raised about the number of credits needed for graduation and whether this would be a problem for students with the change in the course structure (what courses and their credit hours). After further discussion there was agreement that this would not create a problem for graduating CS majors.

There was concern voiced that there are both time issues and assumptions being made with the new course that this can all get through the university’s approval process in time for the course to be taught in fall 2009. The course structure assumes that students will learn on their own much of what is now covered in the current course sequence. This could result in students not being properly prepared once they are taking the upper level courses. A practical matter of how best to advise students this coming spring 2009 concerning what courses to take and whether to wait for the new course to be offered was mentioned.

A suggestion were made to either teach the course on a trial basis in fall 2009 or prototype it, perhaps using a CMSC 212 course to do so. Offering a trial course would mean offering an extra course in fall 2009. No matter which option might be selected, all 400 level prerequisites need to be checked.

A question was asked whether students are coming out of CMSC 132 with insufficient knowledge or is CMSC 212 the real problem? The department does not want CS majors at the lower level to think that programming is the main objective of the science, especially since many students have an incorrect view about the major’s content. It is also true that the faculty would like students to move through the major without getting discouraged early in their course work.
A motion was made to table the discussion and send this to a sub-committee. The motion was seconded and a vote held but the motion did not pass.

A motion was then made to offer a trial course of CMSC 312 in fall 2009 and concurrently submit paperwork through the university process for approval. The motion was seconded and a vote held: 20 in favor; 4 against; 3 abstentions. The motion passed.

The floor was then turned over to Samir Khuller to summarize a new course on “The Science behind Computing” also proposed to be offered in fall 2009. Samir mentioned that he had contacted the campus office handling new course proposal review and was told that it is relatively easy to get approval to teach a course for one semester to sample student interest and refine the course content if needed before submitting the course through the university’s approval system on a permanent basis. The target audience of the course is for non-CS majors. It covers the great ideas in computer science and a suggestion was made that perhaps CS majors should also be taught this information in some future course. Such a course is required for all CS majors at CMU. Both Samir and Bobby Bhattacharjee have indicated a willingness to teach the course in fall 2009 and 2010.

There are two broad categories under which the course might be listed as a CORE offering:

1. fundamental studies (oriented for heavier math content) or
2. emerging issues (would attract a broader student base)

A suggestion was made that if there was an option to offer the course under both categories, this might expand the number of students registering for the course.

Since the proposal is for teaching the course on a trial basis, a vote was not needed to offer it in fall 2009.

Howard Elman mentioned that he had been speaking to a variety of faculty members concerning the topic of changing graduate student benchmarks. One option might be to consider having both three and four year milestones depending on a student’s specialty area. Howard will be on travel for the next ten days so he asked that people email their suggestions on his return or ask to meet with him about their ideas/concerns.

The next scheduled Education Meeting is Nov 7; however, it may need to be cancelled and another meeting scheduled for December or early in the next semester depending on when Howard is prepared to present a revised proposal on graduate student benchmarks.

The meeting was adjourned at 3:05pm.