

Committee on Educational Policy

February 16, 2023

In attendance: Faculty: Robert Benedetto, Chair; David Hanneke; Mekhola Gomes; Chris Kingston; Geoffrey Sanborn. Provost and Dean of the Faculty: Catherine Epstein, ex officio. Students: Zane Khiry '25; Gent Malushaga '25. Recorder: Nancy Ratner, Director of Academic Projects.

Rob Benedetto, chair, called the meeting to order at 2:30 p.m. in Porter Lounge, Converse, and the committee approved the minutes from the previous meeting.

Course proposals

The committee began with a discussion, in general, of the 121 course proposals that have been submitted, considering when it was appropriate to scrutinize course caps, the frequency of course meetings, or courses that are co-taught. With respect to co-teaching, Catherine said faculty who are doing so receive full credit for the co-teaching. She thought faculty should not co-teach more than one course per year, in general, but she saw advantages in the cross-disciplinary perspectives that co-teaching brings to a class. In some departments, faculty double the enrollment for a co-taught course, but in other departments, this is not the case.

Turning to complaints from faculty who received emailed questions about their proposed courses, Rob noted that in the December letter inviting course proposals, the committee had clearly outlined (and italicized in bold print) its expectations for course caps, frequency of course meetings, and proportion of courses at the introductory and upper levels. He further noted that the letter merely said that courses running against those expectations would be given greater scrutiny, which in his understanding meant that emails requesting further information and justification would be sent. He felt any such email was a very modest request from the committee, and one that should have been expected, as part of the scrutiny promised in the letter.

Mekhola asked if the committee should distinguish between the justifications for different disciplines because they can require different approaches. Geoff said he thought a cap of 15 students in an advanced humanities seminar or a writing course was reasonable. Faculty can communicate different things to 15 students than to 40 students. He suggested committee members were making pronouncements without the expertise to make the comparisons and should be more circumspect about intervening in those cases. Rob disagreed, saying that the same logic (of a better student experience in smaller classes) applied to all subjects across all divisions of the college. Moreover, while low caps may result in an improved experience for those who get into the course, they have the opposite effect for those excluded from the course by the cap. Mekhola said a low cap in her field allows her to teach students how to skim through large quantities of information and to synthesize what they are reading. She thought disciplinary methods might not be fully understood by faculty in other fields. Catherine

suggested the committee devise general guidelines: courses at the 100- and 200-level should have higher caps, but 300- and 400-level seminar courses may be capped at 15, etc.

Dave, noting that this is a committee on educational policy, thought the questions should look at the larger picture: how many students want to take the class, how many are being cut, why the class is not attracting more students, whether the department is offering enough lower level courses, and so on.

Rob noted that some departments have better staffing ratios than others, and in the end, this is a question of equity and fairness. Therefore, he thought that faculty should explain why a course should be so limited in size, and that a request from the committee for such an explanation was quite modest. Catherine said a better question might be whether faculty are teaching a range of courses, including some that are not capped.

Chris noted that FTEs give the committee a chance to evaluate the department's approach to caps. For now, he thought the committee should focus on individual courses. He thought faculty should have a good reason for co-teaching. Geoff thought the committee should only question courses that included truly egregious requirements and should approve the great majority of courses. He said the committee should look at department offerings more holistically and not question why advanced seminars are capped at 15 and meet once-a-week; doing this made the committee appear uninformed about how other disciplines are taught.

Rob disagreed, saying that while the vast majority of such requests turn out to be completely reasonable, there can be less than ideal reasons for capping courses or teaching them once a week, and it is the committee's duty to vet such proposals by asking for modest justifications whenever such a request is made. Dave said the guidance in the letter is helpful and should allow the committee to tell a department that none of its courses would be approved if the department is not abiding by the committee's guidance but should probably avoid approaching individual faculty about some of these issues. Chris said that in his view the approval of individual courses should be decoupled from these broader questions. It would be possible to enact policies about how course times should be spread across the day, the appropriate ratio of lower to upper level courses and capped to uncapped courses at the department level, etc., separately from the discussion of individual courses. The committee then turned to individual courses.

Observing that certain courses referred in their enrollment criteria to requiring attendance at the first and second meetings, Rob noted that college rules prohibit faculty from dropping a student if the student was on the roster after the second round of pre-registration and showed up for the first class. Dave asked whether faculty should be allowed to exclude students based on their grades, even if it might be in the students' best interest to do so. Several members noted that faculty no longer have access to students' transcripts. Nancy will write to the department chair about its use of grade-based prerequisites and the department's policy of cutting students from the roster if they fail to show up for the second class.

The committee had several questions about studio arts courses. Mekhola asked whether the limits on some studio arts courses were based on studio space or pedagogical needs, since the justification was unclear which was the driving force behind the cap. Dave noted that the 200-level arts courses would be extremely popular and was concerned about the very low caps on these courses. Catherine volunteered to discuss with the chair whether there could be a better balance between very small studio courses and a few larger studio art opportunities.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 p.m.