

**ANNUAL REPORT  
of the  
UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION COUNCIL  
Academic Year 2019-2020**

**Submitted to the Faculty Senate  
at its 9xxth meeting on September 17, 2020**

**COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP**

**Carol Barr  
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MJ Peterson (interim chair)  
Sarah Pfatteicher  
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The Faculty Senate Bylaws specify that the Undergraduate Education Council is to advise generally on the academic aspects of the undergraduate experience on campus, and in particular to:

- (a) Strengthen teaching excellence;
- (b) Investigate curricular and programmatic resource problems that affect undergraduate education;
- (c) Monitor and make recommendations on both immediate and long-term challenges to the quality of undergraduate education on the Amherst campus;
- (d) Deliberate and make recommendations on any policy, programmatic, curricular, or resource issues relating to undergraduate education brought forward by the campus administration; and
- (e) Help to coordinate the work of other Councils and Committees on undergraduate education.

The Council held 8 meetings during the year, on September 24 October 29, November 18, December 16, 2019 and on January 27, February 24, March 30, and April 24, 2020.

Three matters received the Council's most extended attention in 2019-20: meeting the class and advising needs of the extra-large incoming class coming to campus in Fall 2019, employment of advanced undergraduates as course assistants, and addressing the disruptions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic.

#### **1. Meeting the needs of the Extra-Large incoming Class**

The number of admitted students choosing to come to campus for the fall 2019 term was significantly larger than expected, and concerns had been expressed all summer about providing quality education and advising to the higher number students. Members discussed how their particular part of campus had met the challenge of ensuring that there were sufficient New Student Orientation sessions over the summer, sufficient sections of 100-level classes, including College Writing and General Education-designated courses. All praised faculty and staff for the effort involved in ensuring that the incoming students got a good start. There had been concern over the summer about availability of sufficient classroom space, particularly for the increased number of first year seminars. Senior Vice Provost Barr reported in October that needs had been met and that current renovations of Goodell Hall will give it more classroom space. She also indicated that the process of classroom scheduling will become easier and more efficient when the Registrar's Office completes its transition to a computer workflow-based system.

#### **2. Proper roles of Undergraduate Course Assistants**

At the September meeting, some members suggested that there is need for a campus policy on employing advanced undergraduates as course assistants. Several departments do so, particularly in the large introductory courses. This inspired a discussion spanning most of the year. Initial discussion indicated that all departments using undergraduate course assistants require that they take FERPA training before beginning their work. This is because they often enter attendance or on-time submission of assignments handed in during class or lab, so had partial access to student grade records. Council members agreed that undergraduate course assistants should not be involved in any grading that

requires qualitative assessment. Secretary Peterson provided information about policies or lack thereof at 10 public RIs to the October meeting and Council Member Allison Messier provided more detailed information about policies at a somewhat different set of peer institutions. Members noted that the College of Natural Sciences was working on two college policies – Guidelines for the Use of Undergraduate Teaching Assistants and a set of Student Learning Objectives for Undergraduate Teaching Assistants who earn course credit for their course assistant duties. CNS shared the then-current drafts of these documents with the Council in January, and they were discussed at length in the January, February, and April meetings. The January and February discussions provided some suggestions for CNS as they refine their drafts and for other departments or colleges employing undergraduate course assistants. While some rules, such as requiring FERPA, could be adopted campus-wide, members felt that most of the details would need to be set at the college or department levels because of the different ways course assistants worked in the various disciplines.

### 3. Covid-19 and the transition to remote instruction

At the March and April meetings, the Council assessed developments at UMass and in the other of the Five Colleges as they sent students home and shifted to all-remote instruction in response to the Massachusetts public health emergency orders addressing the Covid-19 pandemic. These included changes to pass-fail policies on all Five College campuses. It discussed the adjustments made on this campus in more detail. These included the Library's efforts to ensure that students were aware of the full range of electronic resources – including digital versions of textbooks being supplied gratis by publishers – available to them even though the Library building was closed and faculty efforts to identify ways to undertake class projects remotely. The Council was very impressed that IT had been able to keep systems running even as the number of meetings held via zoom on campus went from 2000 for the entire month of February to 4000 a day when classes resumed after spring break in March and demand for other services surged.

Other items discussed included the process of College Rankings, developing a system for easy identification of courses using Open Education Resources during registration, use of Independent Study courses towards majors and certificates, a policy regarding multiple in-class midterms held on the same day, and the number of credits it was reasonable for major to require.

### 1. College Rankings

Release of the 2019 US News and World Report Rankings in August, in which UMass Amherst rose to #24 among the public research universities inspired some discussion about next steps in the campus's declared goal of becoming one of the top 20. One member noted that the rankings are based on answers to several questions (some surveys; some comparative data reported by the individual institutions) and weights each set of questions as follows:

- 35% student outcomes (4 and 6 year graduation rate, % low income)
- 20% faculty resources (number of faculty, salary levels, class size)
- 20% experiential opportunities (internships, study abroad, etc)

- 10% financial stability of the institution
- 10% student characteristics (SAT scores; high school GPAs)
- 5% alumni donations

The heavy weight given to student progress inspired discussion of advising systems. One member noted that the Attention turned to the sufficiency and quality of student advising since student progress weighs so heavily. One member noted that the National Academic Advising Association (NACADA) guidelines indicate that universities should have 1 professional adviser for every 300 students, a ratio not all campus units attain. There was also long discussion of the positive effect on student progress and first to second year retention of the change from having a single campus-wide “undeclared” pool of incoming students not declaring a major to the college-focused exploratory tracks matching such students with they choose.

## 2. Tagging courses using Open Education Resources

The student members brought to the Council’s attention the drive to persuade the university to adopt a way that students can identify which courses use Open Education Resources (cost-free materials available online). Students leading that effort were invited to present their ideas at the January Council meeting, which was also attended by two Librarians working on Open Educational Resources. The idea was regarded as useful, but concerns were expressed about whether it could be implemented in Spire. A second discussion at the April meeting included the outlines of a solution using options within the course materials ordering system that would display in the Spire course notes.

## 3. Using independent study credits towards majors and certificates.

Student members asked about the possibility of using Independent Study courses towards majors and certificates. Discussion revealed that many majors do permit counting a limited number of Independent Study credits towards major requirements, and a reminder that decisions about what counts towards a particular major are made by faculty in the department or program that offers the major. Similarly, decision-making regarding certificates is also decentralized, but the smaller number of courses involved in a certificate suggested that there would be less room for using Independent Study credits in Certificates than in majors.

## 4. Multiple in-class midterms on the same day.

Both students and administrators were aware that midterms tend to be clustered into particular weeks of the semester and that having three in-class midterms scheduled for the same day was not uncommon. The possibility that with the option of offering evening midterms a student could face four in one day seemed real. Council members looked to the final exam policy for a model, one in which a student having 3 in-class final exams scheduled for the same day could request a makeup in the class with the exam occurring in the middle. Ways of implementing the policy without creating overly burdensome routines were discussed.

There were briefer discussions of three other topics. The first was ensuing that the Y grades given for the first semester of theses and project courses get converted to letter grades when second semester grades are submitted to the Registrar. The second was the

sufficiency of TBL classroom space after one of the TBL rooms in the Library had been converted to other uses, in which it was noted that renovations elsewhere that include TBL rooms were expected to redress the situation. The last was exploration of differing views on the question of whether there should be an understanding regarding the maximum number of credits that could be required in a major, inspired by a proposal for significant expansion of the requirements for the BFA major in Dance. The fourth was collaboration among the UMass campuses.