

SPECIAL REPORT
of the
ACADEMIC MATTERS COUNCIL
concerning
INTERDEPARTMENTAL TEACHING

Presented at the
462nd Regular Meeting of the Faculty Senate
May 16, 1991

COUNCIL MEMBERSHIP

Anthony Gawienowski, Chair
Norm Aitken
Allen Barker
Brian Crawford
Nancy Fitzpatrick
Nina Galvin
Nancy Hellman
Wendy Hickey
Keith King
Erik Kjeldsen
William Lauroesch
Linda Lockwood
Surinder Mehta
Robert Murray
Brice Paul
Ann Quinley
Kandula Sastry
Sidharth Sinha
James M. Smith
Howard Ziff

INTERDEPARTMENTAL TEACHING

The purpose of this report is to review existing practices relative to scheduling and crediting enrollment in undergraduate interdepartmental courses (and/or departmental courses team taught by faculty from more than one department) and to recommend policies designed to realize more equitable credit distribution for contributions to the teaching of those courses.

The Academic Matters Council believes that interdepartmental teaching has an important and vital role to play in the institution and should be encouraged to the extent possible given the normal disciplinary needs for teaching resources. In a favorable fiscal environment, the institution should consider ways of supporting such effort with additional resources. In the present environment, we should at least make sure that there are no needless bureaucratic barriers that deter such efforts. Two such barriers that now exist are the rigid use of departmental rubrics in the scheduling of courses, and use of departmental enrollment numbers to measure departmental teaching productivity – the latter creating the need for the former.

As are most similar institutions, the University is administratively organized along disciplinary lines. The majority of individual courses on this campus are offered by one academic department, and taught by faculty from the same department. There are, however, situations in which faculty have an interest in teaching across departmental boundaries, for reasons pedagogical and practical, and there are several ways in which such endeavors are currently managed.

Some interdepartmental teaching is stimulated by scholarly interests of faculty, which cross traditional disciplinary boundaries. Such courses may be taught by faculty members from more than one department, or by only one faculty member. In both cases, the course may either be “cross-listed,” or be offered by only one department. A more practical reason for interdepartmental teaching is the need to make more effective use of instructional resources, which frequently arises when two departments have the expertise to teach one or more courses which are common to the curricula of both departments. In this case as well, the teaching responsibilities may be shared by faculty assigned by two different departments even if the courses are offered under the rubric of one department.

Probably the most frequently used method to schedule an interdepartmental course is to “cross-list” it jointly under all departments whose faculty are associated with the course. The advantages of this approach are that each department captures some of the FTE’s in the enrollment reports (although not necessarily in proportion to the resources it commits), and the course is “publicized” under each department. This approach has several disadvantages as well: (1) since the course is listed in the schedule book under different departments, it is frequently confusing to students who may perceive that there are actually two or three different courses when in fact only one exists; (2) it provides misleading information on the number of courses offered by the institution; (3) it may lead to an unfair allocation in enrollment reports of the FTE’s of participating departments, as a disproportionate number of students will frequently sign up for the section offered by the most popular or visible department; and (4) it creates the possibility for students to receive credit for a course twice by taking it a second time under a different department’s rubric. (This can easily occur if a department changes its course number in a subsequent semester).

The Council believes that an alternative to cross-listing should be developed, and has concluded that the best approach to solving this problem is for the Registrar's Office to work with individual academic departments to find alternative undergraduate course listing procedures that are compatible with departmental needs. This is preferable to an attempt to legislate a solution that requires all departments to follow a particular policy.

Teaching effort on the Amherst campus has been traditionally measured by departmental enrollment. It is the understanding of this Council that departmental enrollment data were used in the recent administrative proposals concerning program reduction and elimination. Departmental enrollment data do not accurately reflect teaching effort if faculty are teaching courses in departments other than their own, or are assisted by faculty from other departments. Such data will respectively understate or overstate the teaching effort of the department under scrutiny. Teaching effort can be more accurately measured by the enrollment in courses taught by faculty or TA's of departmental units, regardless of the department under which courses are scheduled, rather than by enrollment in courses scheduled by each department. It is our understanding that such information is already collected for the Office of Institutional Research and Planning. If such data were consistently published by OIRP, a major disincentive for interdepartmental teaching would be removed. Departments would then receive adequate credit for the teaching that they are doing, and the departmental enrollment numbers could be appropriately referred to for the demand by students for specific courses.

Recommendations

Based on the above assessment, the Academic Matters Council makes the following recommendations for removing barriers to undergraduate interdepartmental teaching on campus:

- (1) In cases of courses which are team taught by instructors from different departments, FTE credits should be proportionately divided (according to the teaching contributions) between or among the departments with which the involved faculty are affiliated. In addition to enrollment data, the Office of Institutional Research and Planning should also consistently publish measurements of FTE teaching effort by department units to show the total teaching effort of faculty and TA's from each department regardless of the rubric under which the course is offered.
- (2) It is recommended that the cross-listing of courses (i.e., offering the same course under two different departmental designations) be used only as necessary. The Registrar's Office should work with individual academic departments to find alternative undergraduate course listing procedures that are compatible with departmental needs. The cross-listing of courses may continue, however, for valid academic reasons if effective alternatives cannot be developed.

MOVED: That the Faculty Senate approve recommendations (1) and (2) as stated in Senate
46-91 Document No. 91-046 to facilitate interdepartmental teaching on this campus.