The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Undergraduate Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee

**Minutes**

Thursday, February 8, 2018

Attending: Helena Dettmer (Chair); Andrew Forbes; Kathryn Hall (staff); Meena Khandelwal; Cornelia Lang; Jerald Moon; Mary Noonan; Ana Rodríguez-Rodríguez; Rachel Williams

Absent: Steve Duck

1. The minutes from February 1, 2018 were approved as written.
2. Mirra Anson, Director, Academic Support and Retention, and Stephanie Preschel, Assistant Director, Academic Support and Retention discussed the Supplemental Instruction (SI) Program with the Committee. The office of Academic Support and Retention administers campus-wide student success initiatives, including the Academic Resource Center (ARC) which oversees supplemental instruction. SI offers peer-led study sessions using an active learning model, with students working together to learn new concepts. Session leaders are selected based on their grades, with the grade of A required in the related course; leaders are trained in facilitation to make sure learning is engaged and based on peer collaboration. The leader also attends each lecture of the course and meets with the SI supervisor every other week. This semester, 22 courses are part of SI; courses chosen to participate generally are large gateway courses with higher DFW rates, an indication that students need additional support. This year, courses include lower- level courses in biology, chemistry, health and human physiology, mathematics, and psychology. In Fall 2017, there were a total of 10,460 visits made by 1,961 unique students. Assessment of the program suggests that students who attend earn significantly higher grades and are retained at UI at higher rates, with even stronger results for certain populations, such as underrepresented minorities. Not just struggling students attend SI but also those earning strong grades and who enjoy learning with and from peers find SI helpful. The discussion next focused how students discover SI and the role of faculty in this process. At the start of the semester, the SI peer leader presents a very short video to the class and answers questions about SI; the video shows students where to go and how SI works, helping students to overcome any hesitations. SI sessions are now very popular and can be crowded. Most peer institutions offer more than 20 SI-affiliated courses per semester; the UI SI program certainly could expand because of student demand, but resources currently hinder that expansion. More sessions would be very beneficial since students’ schedules are complex. UEPCC members also wondered how faculty worked with SI and whether or not that participation was required. Some faculty do become involved and meet with the SI leader frequently. Others are less involved. Often the peer leaders know the faculty teaching the course because the SI facilitator is required to have previously taken the course and to have earned an A in it. These students sometimes have done research with the faculty member or might be doing an honors project. Those kinds of student/teacher relationships carry over to SI. It is important to remember, too, that the SI leader does not compete with or replace the TA or the instructor. The leader is there not to teach but to facilitate so students teach each other and become more engaged by helping each other. Homework or lab work is never done during a session, for example. Instead, large concepts that students may have trouble with are the focus of a sessions, with students challenged to work through these and to teach each other. Similarly, faculty and TAs do not know who attends these sessions and it is important for this attendance not to influence the in-class relationship. SI leaders, however, always support the classroom learning, by handling a concept or skill according to the way it is taught in class. SI leaders are not allowed to introduce other strategies, such as “short cuts.” Sometimes this means leaders need to relearn the way they may have been taught the material. Students also report in their evaluations of the SI sessions that they use difference resources for different reasons. That is, they may meet with the TA to discuss quizzes or homework problems or with the faculty member to discuss course topics or personal issues, but they come to SI to learn and brainstorm with peers in a facilitated environment. The committee next discussed how to best assess SI since there are so many intangible factors that make up the experience, including students’ backgrounds and abilities; consequently, it can be difficult to know with certainty that SI is having the impact suggested by the data. In particular, members of the committee wondered whether the correlation between better grades and engagements with SI was a cause-and-effect relationship or whether instead the students more likely to sign up for SI were also more likely to perform slightly better in the class than students less willing to sign up. There did not seem to be a way to answer this question without a controlled study, and the visitors did not know of studies that had been conducted by other, similar programs. Nevertheless, it may be that not just grades are affected by SI, for example; students’ transferable skills and their ability to work in groups are additional improvements that are hard to measure. SI helps students, too, by giving them a “mini community” to belong to, one based on academic interests and goals. This engagement could also affect a student’s retention at UI and the student’s grades. After the guests left, the conversation continued on the role of faculty in SI and how faculty might be encouraged to become involved.
3. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully submitted,

Andrew Forbes   
Associate Professor, Department of Biology  
Secretary for UEPCC