The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Undergraduate Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee

Minutes

Thursday, February 9, 2017

Attending: James Cremer; Helena Dettmer; Steve Duck; Elena Gavruseva; Meena Khandelwal; Jerald Moon; Roland Racevskis; Jacob Simpson; Rachel Williams

Absent: Kathryn Hall (staff); Lena Hill; Cornelia Lang

1. Nick Yablon, Associate Professor, Department of American Studies, presented proposed changes to the American Studies major. The Department of American Studies made changes to the major partly in response to the departmental review by the College, but there were modifications in the planning stages independently of the review as well. The largest proposed change is eliminating the focus areas which served to guide students in the choice of electives, with many of these courses offered by other departments. Now the program is moving toward requiring all courses to be taken in American Studies. This is in part because the focus areas have become cumbersome, growing from three to five areas, and thus confusing and potentially discouraging students from majoring in American Studies. The new requirements include four required and seven elective courses. Two of the latter must be at the 2000 level or above. Instead of the focus area, a new, looser category called the emphasis area provides suggestions for grouping courses rather than a requirement. The other proposed changes to the program involve renumbering courses and opening the capstone to graduate students.

The question was raised whether the proposal addresses recommendations in the departmental review related to diversity, both in curriculum and in recruiting of majors. Recent efforts to improve recruiting have included the redesign of the program website, planning for departmental events, and the use of social media to boost student involvement. The review also recommended more connections to other departments, but American Studies seems to be moving in the opposite direction by requiring more courses to be taken in the home department. The new requirement is motivated by concern for enrollments. Whereas there used to be two required courses to be taken in the History Department, that requirement has been eliminated based on the rationale that courses in American Studies are historical in nature. The question then arose about whether the pedagogical goal of a program that was originally intended to be interdisciplinary is now in contradiction with the practical need to fill classes. Students in the program need to be prepared for broader graduate work across disciplines; the faculty in American Studies address this need by holding joint appointments with other units and thus cultivating interdisciplinary interactions, both in teaching and research.

There was also discussion of the requirement of two courses above the 2000 level, with students allowed to take the rest of the electives at any level, including at the 1000 level. Too many courses at the 1000 level, however, would suggest a lack of rigor in the major. The simplified curriculum is intended to avert confusion among students and allow them to move through the major efficiently. Still, giving students more options for what might count toward program requirements would increase interdisciplinarity. Unlike History, American Studies does not have distribution requirements: with fewer hoops to jump through, the major may thus be more likely to attract students. Nonetheless, from the student perspective, distribution requirements give direction and thus promote student success. The emphasis area might provide this kind of structure.

There may be possibilities to frame the American Studies major in international contexts, similarly to how the ISBA has worked. American Studies faculty have worked with the advising center to develop a new course focused on international perspectives on America throughout modern history.

After the guest's departure, the committee discussed the departmental review's comment that the American Studies program was driven by faculty interest rather than by student interest. Whereas faculty research can and does shape course offerings, this dynamic can be problematic for core courses. The proposal might be more specific in indicating that students must take electives at a level higher than 1000. Most CLAS departments have a combination of courses at 1000, 2000, and 3000 levels. If one of the few 3000 level-classes is the seminar, this may water down the major. More specificity would also improve the proposal. The reviewers suggested two or three broad themes to guide students, and yet the proposal has five. In order not to appear random, there needs to be a justification for why these areas are specific to faculty expertise at the UI and/or reflect national trends in the discipline. The proposal does not go into great detail, and it was not always clear how the 2014 departmental review's recommendations informed the proposal.

1. The minutes from February 2, 2017 were approved as amended.
2. Maggie Jessie and Jean Florman presented the new Learning Design Collaboratory initiative. This is a new initiative with staff support and funding for support of faculty development. It is a follow-up on the large lecture project and TILE and is being developed in parallel to a number of initiatives in peer institutions (e.g. Impact at Purdue, Reach at Wisconsin). The idea is to revamp high-impact courses by creating teams that support the faculty teaching those courses as they redesign them. The redesign is complemented by assessment and research and the plan is customized to suit the particular course or sequence. The goal is to improve the student experience and lower costs to students and to the institution. For example, a transition from an expensive textbook to an open source can save students money; more efficient use of classroom spaces can save the University money. In a handout, the support structure and governance for the initiative were presented: Executive Sponsor, Leadership Team, Project Team. A learning assessment and analytics specialist has recently been hired. An additional staff member is joining the team in March to work on faculty development. This is not intended to be a short-term project but instead to provide support to faculty in the future by creating a faculty learning community. The leadership for the initiative is meeting with DEOs from Chemistry, Biology, and Mathematics initially to have these departments identify high-impact courses. There was discussion of what is meant by "high-impact." Sometimes these are challenging courses for students, courses where there is room for improvement, or courses with large enrollments that thus impact many students. There is, however, no specific quota for a course to be considered high-impact, and smaller courses could fall into the category as well. The initiative focuses on courses rather than on individual faculty. The leadership for the initiative met with administrators, faculty, and staff in December 2016 and now is preparing for broader discussions across campus, starting in March. The capacity for the new program is initially projected at 10 courses per semester. Faculty can receive a course release in exchange for being a mentor in the faculty cohort and facilitating faculty interaction. While it can be expensive to revamp a course, the Collaboratory does not have the kinds of funds that the large lecture project disbursed. Efficiencies realized with new technologies have facilitated funding of this new initiative. There is the possibility for interdisciplinary cohorts of faculty and for connecting faculty whose students flow from one course in one program to another. CLAS will help support this new program, and the new website that UEPCC recently discussed in the context of grading will foreground excellence in the classroom. Undergraduate students can be involved in the Collaboratory. There will also be new staff in the Center for Teaching who will specialize in TA training. Junior versus senior faculty in the cohorts will have different objectives and time constraints, given the demands of their research. The intent of the project is to change the culture and conversation across campus about teaching.
3. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Roland Racevskis   
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Secretary for UEPCC