The College of Liberal Arts and Sciences

Undergraduate Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee

Minutes

Thursday, February 2, 2017

Attending: James Cremer; Helena Dettmer; Steve Duck; Elena Gavruseva Kathryn Hall (staff); Lena Hill; Meena Khandelwal; Cornelia Lang; Roland Racevskis; Jacob Simpson

Absent: Jerald Moon; Rachel Williams

1. Helena Dettmer, Chair, announced the formation of a new committee named the CLAS Online Advisory Committee that will report to UPECC and will focus on the quality of online courses and will help create a vision for online education in CLAS. More information will be shared with UEPCC as it becomes available.
2. The minutes from January 26, 2017 were approved.
3. Renee Cole, Associate Professor, the Department of Chemistry; and Cornelia Lange, Associate Professor, Department of Physics and Astronomy, discussed the relation of grading practices to student motivation and success in the classroom. Norm-based grading, also referred to as the use of “the curve,” can result in a lack of grading transparency, leaving students confused and surprised by their final grades. Research shows that curve-based grading can disenfranchise students, with many underrepresented minorities (URMs), first-generation students, and women leaving STEM majors and then the University as a result. An alternative strategy for assessing student learning is to decide on key learning objectives and to then to grade based on the achievement by students of these objectives. This allows students to be graded based on what they learn and not on the failure of other students while also removing competition and rather encouraging collaborative learning. These changes can result in better student engagement in the course. Research has also shown that engaged students are retained and graduate.

During the ensuring discussion, a number of issues were raised, including rather midterm grades should be required for all students or at least for first-year students in order to make grading more transparent, thus removing some of the confusion for students about grades. Additionally, the use of the ICON gradebook could be mandated, allowing students to see grades earned more swiftly after their entry into the gradebook. Still, members noted that these possible solutions do not solve the underlying issue that norm-based grading creates competition, with students quickly learning that more effort will not move their grades upward in the course but only downward unless others fail. STEM courses traditionally use the curve more than courses in some other disciplines, such as, for example, in the humanities; additionally, norm-based grading is sometimes seen as more traditional and appropriate in STEM disciplines. Some departments unfortunately adhere very strictly to the CLAS recommended grading guidelines, using the curve to achieve the recommended percentages of each grade as stated on the CLAS web site. Some students originally in the 89-90% range thus receive a B or B- rather than a B+ or A- because of the overall achievement of other students in the class. Students may know the materials but because the instructor “could not” assign more A’s than indicated by the CLAS grading guidelines, the student received a B or B-. These CLAS guidelines are not meant to function as a strict rule but are often interpreted in that manner; likewise, the guidelines have not be revised in recent memory. What is crucial is that grading be thoughtful and appropriate to the learning goals of the course. Courses must be challenging, inspiring student to achieve excellence, with stated learning objectives that uphold this challenge, while also allowing students to understand what should be learned. Grades should be based on clear evidence of each student learning the needed material. Designing fair and useful assessment tools can be very difficult and does take some expertise; some instructors in fact may be more comfortable with the traditional curve as a way of mitigating any errors in assessment. Offering workshops to support instructors might be very helpful in creating learning outcomes and related rubrics. The group discussed possible next steps and thought that revising the CLAS grade distribution guidelines and discussing those revisions in UEPCC would help to craft a policy that might be more helpful for instructors and more clearly flexible. It might also be possible to encourage GE courses to use criterion based grading rather than normative curving as part of the goal to make GE courses engaged learning experiences. UPECC will return to this topic in the future.

1. A proposal for a Certificate in Music Theatre was presented by Alan MacVey, Professor, Director of the Division of Performing Arts and Chair of the Department of Theatre Arts; and by John Muriello, Professor, Voice, School of Music. The certificate has been proposed in order to encourage interdisciplinary learning theatre, dance, and music for students wanting to pursue careers in music theatre, which includes “not only Broadway musicals but opera, light opera, plays with music, and experimental or interdisciplinary works.” The certificate would be open to students majoring in theatre, dance, or music because of the skill-level need to do well in this area. Students must have an excellence in at least one of these three areas to do well in music theatre and majoring in one of these assures that level of competence. UEPCC wondered if it was appropriate for a CLAS certificate to be open to only certain majors since most certificates are open to all students. Additionally, members considered whether or not tracks might be more appropriate than a certificate. The discussion about the certificate will continue at a future meeting.
2. The meeting was adjourned.

Respectfully Submitted,

Roland Racevskis   
Professor, Department of French and Italian  
Secretary for UEPCC