Summary of Recommendations
EPPC Subcommittee on Class Size and Education
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1. Following the recommendations of the 2014 Classroom Committee report to reduce problems induced by fluctuations in enrollments during registration periods and the first few weeks of a semester, the registrar no longer allows course enrollments to be uncapped. Yet there is widespread uncertainty regarding how to set enrollment caps. The only general guidance that has been provided to departments is that caps should be set in accordance with historical enrollments. As detailed in our report, departments currently use a wide variety of criteria for setting caps, raising concerns about the coherence and effectiveness of capping policies across the Arts & Sciences. A&S should provide departments with explicit and transparent guidelines for setting course caps that enable us to meet our educational mission while working within current space and resource constraints. While many students and faculty do not have a favorable view regarding enrollment caps, it is important to keep in mind that research has produced overwhelming evidence that smaller class sizes are associated with more positive student experiences and outcomes.

2. One of the driving factors behind capping is the availability of TAs. Tying class size to TA availability compromises our ability to achieve our educational mission. A&S should consider how class sizes are currently influenced by student-to-TA ratios, and by the limits of available TAs in certain departments. This committee therefore endorses the deployment of non-PhD students for TA positions, particularly qualified undergraduates, terminal MA students, post-baccalaureate, and part-time students. In times of extreme need, we should consider, as our peers do, drawing from talented ABD students in doctoral programs outside of Columbia. While some departments already regularly use undergraduate and terminal MA students as TAs and graders, we should explore how to expand their use and better prepare them to perform well in such positions, possibly with training programs at the Center for Teaching and Learning. The sections of the faculty handbook that govern student eligibility for TA assignments should be revised to facilitate the use of non-PhD students and even non-Columbia students to help alleviate the tension between enrollments and TA availability.

3. The university should consider how classroom infrastructure, technology, and condition dictate class size. Departments have specific instructional needs and can meet them only by teaching certain courses in appropriate rooms that may place (perhaps suboptimal) constraints on class size. The university should consider how more rooms might be made more suitable such that the paucity of appropriate rooms (black boards, white boards, smart classrooms) do not force departments to limit class sizes in arbitrary ways. When existing classrooms are renovated and new classrooms are built, faculty committees should be consulted to advise on best usage of the space and specific instructional needs (such as in-class experiments and group exercises), in order to produce more appropriate matches of classrooms to enrollments.

4. Departments should review small class sizes taught by adjuncts and lecturers and decide whether these course should continue to be offered. A&S should have in place general policies that enable courses to be canceled should they draw insufficient enrollments or place restrictions on offering
such courses on a regular basis. One possible suggestion for undergraduate elective courses is as follows: a faculty member can teach a given course with an enrollment with fewer than 5 students twice, but if the enrollment is below 5 when offered in any future semester, he/she should not receive credit toward teaching load requirements if he/she proceeds to teach the course rather than cancelling it. Exceptions should be allowed for classes that are required for students to meet program requirements and for language courses. This policy would not apply to PhD courses.

5. A&S should impose stricter limits on the the number of waitlist spots that undergraduates can occupy, making sure that students stay within credit caps when ultimately admitted to courses from waitlists. Being admitted from the waitlist overrides credit limits for individual students. When students thus exceed credit caps when they are automatically admitted to courses from waitlists, students should be required to reconcile—within a specified time limit—the higher number of credits registered for with the number of overall credits permitted by policy. We believe that doing so is in the best interest of faculty, administrators, and students, and will contribute to the general effort to improve students’ mental health and well-being by reducing academic stress and anxiety. The committee lacks the expertise to recommend more specific solutions, but we wish to emphasize that this is a high priority problem that requires immediate attention. While the introduction of electronic waitlists has helped departments manage enrollments, especially in seminars, they have also created urgent problems that need to be addressed. Some students appear to be using the waitlists to sign up for more courses than they could conceivably take (in part because waitlists currently override established credit caps) and reserve spots in classes that they have little intention of taking. This activity potentially freezes out students who have a stronger desire or need to take a given course (creating a “tragedy of the commons” problem), potentially raises stress levels for students, and makes it difficult for departments to plan for actual, final enrollments.

6. We should improve registration procedures to avoid suppression of enrollments in language courses and to help ensure that these courses are assigned to rooms that are appropriate for language instruction. Initial enrollments at the beginning of a semester for language classes can be misleading because (1) registration periods do not necessarily coincide with the scheduling of placement tests and (2) there are delays in processing registration of students from other institutions for courses that are taught through consortia. Enrollments for courses that require placement tests or are taught through consortia may appear lower than they actually are, which can lead to failure to assign rooms for these courses or assigning them rooms that are too small or lack necessary infrastructure. Better coordination with respect to placement tests and other institutions will help to avoid this problem. Generally, the committee wishes to emphasize the importance of assigning appropriate rooms for language courses, even those with low enrollments. Offering instruction in a broad range of languages will inevitably lead to courses with relatively low enrollments. Yet maintaining an extensive menu of language offerings is essential if Columbia is to continue to be a leader in global education and research. That effort is undercut if we cannot meet basic needs like finding appropriate space for language instruction.