

Minutes of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences Meeting

NOVEMBER 20, 2013

A DISCUSSION OF COURSE POINT VALUES IN A&S ACADEMIC PROGRAMS

Susan Pedersen, chair of the Educational Policy and Planning Committee, began the meeting shortly after 2 pm in 555 Lerner. About 50 people were present.

A set of charts and reports, prepared for EPPC and shared at the faculty meeting, offered recent and historical data on subjects ranging from student course loads and types of majors to Masters Only programs in the Arts and Sciences.

Introduction. Prof. Pedersen (History) said several issues had prompted the EPPC to take up the question of course weightings: widespread concern about student workloads, the increasing number of students enrolled in double majors, and the large number of courses that Columbia requires its undergraduates to take. Master's programs have also expanded, challenging departments to find ways to fit those students into existing course structures and to develop new ones. In addition, courses are not weighted consistently across A&S, with both seminars and lectures varying in value between 3 and 4 points. Is it time to bring some internal consistency to these decisions, perhaps by adopting a 4-point norm for most seminars and lectures, and by considering a new cap on the number of points students are allowed to take?

But in tackling this project, the EPPC has faced a number of dilemmas. One is that despite faculty reservations, double majors continue to grow, and departments that try to restrict them may suffer consequences. Another is that curricular decision-making is decentralized at Columbia, but instruction is closely integrated; decisions made in one part of A&S have consequences for other parts (such as Continuing Education) and also for other Columbia schools (SEAS, Barnard). Finally, Columbia's framework for setting course credits is based on federal standards that are applied in the accreditation process. Any attempt to revise course weightings must account for the requirements and timing of the next Middle States reaccreditation review, due in 2015-16.

Prof. Pedersen said these complexities don't mean the EPPC should abandon its initiative to rationalize the system, but any changes must be consensual and based on an understanding of their possible impact on all academic units. The EPPC set up a working group, made up of Cathy Popkin (Slavic), Richard Clarida (Econ.), Bob Friedman (Math), Matt Jones (History and the Core), Adam Cannon (representing school of Engineering and Applied Science) and Prof. Pedersen. That group received help from Kathryn Yatrakis (Columbia College), Andrea Solomon (GSAS) and Rose Razaghian, Director of Planning and Analysis for Arts and Sciences. It began by gathering data on weighting practices for all graduate and undergraduate courses, on current course loads for undergraduate and graduate students, and on trends in programs over time.

Prof. Pedersen said the working group met with Vice Provost Stephen Rittenberg about the Middle States review, with deans, and with Barnard provost Linda Bell. The EPPC also heard from its student members.

Prof. Pedersen said that before prescribing reforms, the committee had to describe what A&S schools and departments actually do in weighting their courses, and what choices students actually make in courses and programs. Her own attempts to generalize from the experience of the History Dept. were appropriately ruled out of order in committee discussions.

Prof. Pedersen introduced Rose Razaghian, and asked her to present data that she had collected for the project. Prof. Pedersen mentioned three groups that had helped in this effort: the provost's Office of Planning and Institutional Research, the Office of Academic Affairs in A&S, and the Undergraduate Data Group in Columbia College.

Ms. Razaghian presented a series of graphic displays on screen, with the following kinds of data:

- the number of three-plus-point courses Columbia College and General Studies students took last year;

- the variance in course-taking patterns last year among Columbia College students at each standing level;

- the number of credits earned by Columbia College students at graduation in 2001, 2007, and 2012;

- the choices CC and GS students made among types of programs—single majors, multiple majors, and majors with concentration—last year and in 2000;

- the choices CC students have made among types of programs each year since 2000;

- program choices by disciplinary division made by CC and GS students in each year since 2000.

Ms. Razaghian also presented tables on the distribution of all undergraduate and graduate lectures, seminars, and colloquia by meeting length and points, as well as a report summarizing key characteristics of Masters Only programs offered in the Arts and Sciences.

Prof. Pedersen said MAO programs are not all the same size, but all require a minimum of 30 points. Should that be in the form of 10 3-point courses? Or should it be 8 4-point courses? Should the program take no more than a year? One year plus a summer? A year and a half?

Prof. Pedersen said about two thirds of courses in the Arts and Sciences are weighted at 3 points. Course weightings, and the distribution between three and four point courses, provide the framework within which faculty establish and students construct their programs. So long as most undergraduate courses are weighted at three points, undergraduates *must* take five courses most terms. So long as most graduate courses are three points, most MAO programs *must* have a

minimum 10-course requirement. Course weightings set the minimum number of courses a student must take, and hence both the number of courses per term and (for MAOs especially) the number of terms a program will realistically take.

Prof. Pedersen thus asked colleagues to help the committee think about whether current course weightings conform to faculty assumptions about student work and programs and establish the best framework for our curriculum. She said the EPPC's goal is internal consistency and a sense that the structure promotes the faculty's intellectual aims and values

She mentioned the question of point values for 150-minutes-a-week courses. With discussion sections, such courses might logically go to 4 points. She said students say discussion sections mean significantly more work for them. If the solution is variable point values, then departments need to articulate what they do, so that the reasons for variations are clear.

Prof. Pedersen said the working group wants feedback before it determines its direction. It will write to departments, providing the data that had just been shown, and hopes to make a proposal in the spring.

Prof. Dorothea Von Mucke (German) said that when faculty put together their syllabi, they are responsible for estimating the amount of time that students can realistically devote to class preparation. Her impression was that faculty commonly assign much more reading than students can possibly do. This leads to a culture in which students barely prepare for class at all, which then leads them to take even more classes.

Prof. Matthew Jones (History), a member of the EPPC working group studying course point weightings, said one student concern is that credit points are not correctly calibrated to the amount of course work involved. There are also structural constraints: If an MAO program requires five courses per term, the workload may be excessive. The point allocation system should be designed in such a way as to help students succeed in achieving the goals we set for them, which might better involve fewer but more intense courses.

Prof. Pedersen said New York State generally expects two hours of student preparation for one hour of class. But for seminars, Columbia faculty assume a much higher prep ratio than 2:1.

Prof. Julie Crawford (English) asked for information on the number of credits or classes required for each major. Will Middle States want more conformity?

Prof. Pedersen said the EPPC study will consider variations, but doesn't handle accreditation. Her general sense was that majors with the heaviest requirements expect about double the course credits of the majors with the lightest requirements.

Vice Provost Stephen Rittenberg, who handles many accreditation reviews for the university, said Middle States won't worry about variations in the number of points required for majors.

Prof. Crawford said the EPPC review will need to consider this information, in order to develop a rationale for its recommendations on course weightings.

Prof. Pedersen said departments will be asked to account for requirements for their majors.

Prof. Martha Howell (History) said some departments with heavier major requirements effectively require students to accumulate extra points in order to graduate.

Prof. Pedersen said no single departmental major has so many requirements that it cannot allow some electives. But she added that students sometimes bundle these electives into a “program.”

Carlos Alonso, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, asked if there was information that would allow for comparisons with peers on credits required for graduation.

Prof. Pedersen said the working group wants to know what Columbia does before considering peers’ policies. In general, she said, the norm for our peers has been 4 courses per student per term, with a fifth course allowed. Columbia is now above that norm. Cornell has 3- and 4-point lectures, and 4-point seminars. At NYU most classes are 4 points.

Prof. Molly Murray (English) asked why so many graduate courses are 3 points, and undergrad courses 4 points.

Prof. Pedersen said again that the working group’s goal is to find out what we do, not to provide a rationale for it. The common understanding is that in the mists of the past, every course was worth 3 points. For Ph.D. students points don’t matter. With the expectation of fixed terms for MAO programs, by contrast, points do matter.

Prof. Richard Clarida (Economics), another member of the working group, said MAO programs are required by New York State to be 30 points.

Dean Alonso said that difficulties arise when departments, in their advertisements for a program, guarantee a fixed span of time—one year, say—for finishing. They shouldn’t make such claims.

Prof. Clarida said the committee had not discussed that issue.

Prof. Jones said there is concern about counting credits for students in courses open to both MAO and Ph.D. students, where there clearly are asymmetries.

Prof. Gregory Wawro (Political Science) worried that the proposal to change three-point courses with mandatory discussion sections to four-point courses would increase pressure to add discussion sections to all lecture courses (since four-point courses would presumably be more attractive to students than three-point courses). This could create a serious problem, since classroom space is already at a premium.

Prof. Robert Jervis (Political Science) recalled the issue of breadth vs. depth that was raised in the 1993 report of the Committee on Undergraduate Education, which recommended awarding 4 points for most courses. He asked how students nowadays are able to take 5 courses per semester. His answer was that they are so smart that they can find ways to get by without doing

all the work. Another key question today is how students actually budget their time. He said students won't tell, but the information is crucial.

Prof. Pedersen said students are working with EPPC to devise a survey on the questions of how much time they plan to spend on their courses and how much time they actually spend. She said faculty will understand the disparity.

Prof. Jones said a fair number of students say they can only do a fraction of the work assigned.

Prof. Daniel Rabinowitz (Statistics) asked if students perceive the main differences to be between departments, between courses, or between instructors. Prof. Clarida said the committee didn't know.

Prof. Pedersen said there are two students on the EPPC, hardly a representative sample. But their strong sense is that the distinction between 3- and 4-point courses is not robust.

Prof. Clarida said most students base decisions on course loads on the number of courses they are taking, not the number of points.

Prof. Pedersen said the committee needs feedback from departments on this question, particularly on the impact of course loads on students' schedules.

Kathryn Yatrakis said students who believe their instructors don't expect them to do all their class assignments might be right—if trends in grade inflation are any guide.

There being no further discussion, Prof. Pedersen adjourned the meeting shortly after 3 pm.

Respectfully submitted,

Tom Mathewson