

*Committee on Academic Priorities  
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# B R Y N M A W R

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## **What is a Course?**

As the committee charged with advising the President and Provost about the allocation of our academic resources, CAP this year took on the task of assessing our practices around "what is a course?" This project grows naturally out of our efforts of the past years to staff departments and programs in ways that allow them to meet their disciplinary needs, the needs of the College's curriculum, and the *Plan for a New Century*. It also responds to concerns of the Provost and the Board of Trustees about effective use of College resources. Not surprisingly, there are as many answers to this question as there are courses. The culture at the College encourages pedagogical exploration, and the courses that result do not always fit into the mold of a standard seminar or lecture. As one very experienced colleague noted in her advice to us, "A course is a protean thing, that changes its shape according to department or program, the level of difficulty, the interest of the students involved, and the interests of the faculty member involved...[A]lmost every course is malleable -- that is, its shape and nature can be changed almost instantaneously as these other factors change." Indeed, the diversity of pedagogical and scholarly approaches at the College is one of our key strengths. There cannot be a "one-size fits all" formula for measuring one course against another.

CAP began by exploring the breadth of departmental practices around staffing. We reviewed enrollment data provided by the Registrar's office as well as the written and oral responses of departments, programs, and individual faculty to our questions in early November about the factors departments and programs consider as they distribute courses and related work among their members. We also asked them what guiding principles they thought should be used. Additional information on staffing practices and principles came from conversations between department chairs and the Provost, summaries of which were provided to CAP. The data gleaned from these sources were summarized and shared, first with department chairs and then the faculty as a whole. The summary can be found on the web at <http://www.brynmawr.edu/provost/CAPinfo.pdf>. CAP sought the advice of our colleagues around the current practices, asking them in particular to consider what might be sound normative practices for the College. We met with the department chairs in early February. Following that meeting, we invited the entire faculty to reflect on the information we had gathered and respond to us in writing and to join us for conversations held in early March. In all, more than three quarters of the continuing faculty shared their thoughts with us in one form or another, either at meetings, in conversation with members of CAP or through written responses.

As a result of these conversations, CAP offers here a set of guidelines, built on shared principles we heard expressed by the faculty, toward which both departments and the Provost can look as they craft staffing plans. CAP's overarching concern in this process is to acknowledge that, as one colleague put it, "the guiding principles that should be used to keep the workload equitably distributed among faculty [are] respect for everyone's integrity; the expectation that one's colleagues are making good and sensible choices about their commitments, and open communication." CAP

appreciates our colleagues' openness and willingness to engage in dialogue around these difficult issues. Directed by our conversations with the faculty, CAP focussed on two fundamental principles as we developed our guidelines. First, we recognize that in many ways, the definition of what constitutes a course is strongly connected to our curricular structure. The faculty were clear that these choices need to be made strategically and be informed by the voice of the faculty. Thus strategic planning around the curriculum emerges as a critical need. Second, the choices we make must be sustainable by the institution, departments and individuals. We need to be alert to choices that could inadvertently affect our goal of building a strong undergraduate college, and be certain that departmental curriculum and staff match in such a way that programs are able to thrive over the long term. As always, CAP's efforts are directed toward balancing the needs of the departments and their curricula with the demands of the institution as a whole.

Both principles are succinctly underscored by the tongue in cheek, but apt, comment shared by a colleague: "If I didn't know better, I'd say the new sabbatical policy combined with the expansion of interdisciplinary programs was a clever plan to set up a structural deficit (in courses offered) designed to force a reduction of courses within the disciplines." The tension between the breadth of our curricular innovations and the rich and challenging experiences we pride ourselves on providing within our disciplines, in fact, does contribute to our structural deficit. It is not a new phenomenon, as the Middle States review team of 1999 noted "They [the faculty] offer a significant array of courses and curricula.... However...it is clear that the institution cannot do everything in these domains that faculty might wish. It is vital, then, that the faculty continue to involve themselves, take leadership in, and claim ownership of the ongoing discussions that will determine the academic direction of the institution in the years to come. The important planning process, which will lead to a focus in academic priorities for the institution, can only be successful with the complete intellectual perspective and contributions of the faculty."

Some pedagogical experiences are more demanding of faculty resources than others. Since our faculty size is essentially fixed, a resource-intensive activity in one area of the institution requires that another area scale back. The books cannot always be balanced within a single department or program. Many faculty noted that while we can often sustain new efforts in the short term, the effort required eventually takes its toll on faculty research, morale and sleep. Colleagues stressed to us that priorities for new and continuing initiatives must be assessed planfully across the institution in consultation with the faculty and not simply on an *ad hoc* basis between the Provost and departments or programs.

CAP identified seven strategic areas in which departmental practices varied substantially, which require in some way the investment of substantial resources by the College and/or are closely connected to our institutional identity: very small courses, large courses, team teaching, laboratory teaching, the "senior experience," chairing departments or major committees, graduate teaching and research supervision. We here survey the current practices at the institution in six of these broad domains and recommend strategies and guidelines for addressing the key questions. The seventh of these, graduate and research supervision, will be explored as the evaluation of the graduate programs proceeds.

#### *Very small courses*

CAP found itself particularly concerned about practices around very small courses, that is courses that enroll *fewer* than 5 students. On average about 6% of the College's courses have fewer than 5 students, the faculty effort devoted to teaching these courses is about 8 FTE (full time equivalents) per year. It is important to note that this count of extraordinarily small courses does not include senior research units, independent study courses, senior seminars, senior conference or graduate courses. Very small courses are found throughout the curriculum and in direct proportion to the total number of course offered by each division. This is not an issue solely restricted to one division or to a few departments or programs.

The information CAP and the Provost presented to the faculty earlier this spring, showed the growth over the last ten years in the number of courses taught at the College and the concomitant growth in the number of faculty teaching FTEs, while the expansion of the student body has not kept pace. As a result we have an increasing number of smaller courses. As we observe above, this "structural deficit" is not a recent development; it was noted by the Middle States review committee in 1999. The College cannot sustain such a deficit, particularly in the current budgetary climate, and as the Middle States review team noted, the faculty must play a key role in closing the gap between the breadth of the curriculum and the size of the student body.

Some departments and programs plan strategically for smaller courses, as one chair reports, "Some faculty members have cancelled courses which had less than 6 students; this is not a firm policy, but rather something that the faculty member and the chair discuss in each case. Several times courses have been in a sense "redesigned" when pre-enrollment numbers came out, with new descriptions written and emailed to majors in an attempt to increase enrollment. When a faculty member has decided to run a course with fewer than 6 students, generally it is done so in order to build a "market" for that course, in the hopes that the numbers will rise when the course is offered again." Other departments have no history of canceling small courses, though in some cases courses enrolling one or two will become independent study units. In other cases, when no students materialize, the faculty member realizes a *de facto* course release.

CAP is aware of the practical barriers to canceling or reworking courses at the last minute. As a colleague notes, "The timing of decisions to cut courses must be given very careful consideration. My department chair referred to basing such decisions upon pre-registration figures. This is clearly unworkable. In the Fall semester we enroll a large percentage of our students from the freshman class and also from among students returning from JYA." Departments and programs which historically have small numbers of majors, or those having an unusually small number of majors in their program in a particular year, may have classes required for the major which, as a result, have very small enrollments.

We also recognize that the definition of "small" varies across programs and departments. One colleague observed that every time he heard the issue of small courses raised, he felt as if he had to defend his smallest classes, regardless of their actual enrollment. As one department chair told us, "[D]on't take away the flexibility at the department level to vary the reality of these loads in our efforts to be fair to everyone and to create the best program for our students." Faculty and departments should offer a range of course sizes, so that over the course of their careers at the College, both students and faculty can enjoy the intimacy a small class can bring as well as the energy and richness of experience that arise in larger courses.

CAP does not recommend that the College mandate a standard class size. However, CAP does recommend that departments not offer courses which over time have attracted very low enrollments (5 or less). In instances where such courses are required for the major, departments should consider whether these courses could be offered in alternate years or alternately with their Haverford counterpart. We also recognize that courses offered by interim and new faculty members may have low enrollments, especially when they are late additions to the curriculum. In these circumstances, we encourage departments to advertise these courses as broadly as possible on both campuses, and to work with new faculty to optimize their enrollments. CAP recommends that courses with no enrollments at the end of the shopping period be cancelled. If these courses are offered by a continuing member of the faculty, the faculty member is expected to "make-up" the course in a subsequent term. When previous history and/or low pre-registration suggest that a course will be seriously underenrolled (5 or less), CAP recommends that the department have a plan in place for mounting an alternative offering. We encourage departments and programs to think well ahead of time about how these situations may best be dealt with in the context of their particular curriculum and staffing.

### *Senior Experience*

The experiences departments and programs craft for their seniors at the College are a rich and varied lot. Our faculty affirm this richness: "With the new leave policy (which, by the way, I think is great!) and the budget shortfall, I recognize that we must all adapt to the reality of constraints. But in doing so, we should also recognize the value of the intellectual benefits students derive from seminars and independent studies, intellectual benefits that distinguish Bryn Mawr from most other colleges."

As the *Plan for a New Century* notes, "One of the hallmarks of a Bryn Mawr education has been the opportunity for students to "get their hands dirty" by doing research, whether in the laboratory, the field, or the archive." The "senior experience" is also a resource intensive one for us and faculty feel strongly about the need for the College to acknowledge this. As a senior colleague expresses it: "In my view, the only reasonable approach to giving credit for supervision is to recognize it as teaching (which it clearly is) and give credit for it explicitly (rather than through the various schemes now in place in some departments). If the College is ever to move in the direction of explicit recognition of supervision as part of the teaching load, by the way, I strongly believe that credit must be based on student contact hours (not all that hard to document) rather than on the number of student advisees, since, as I indicated above, there are wide disciplinary (and individual and stage of research) differences in the frequency with which students and faculty need to meet for supervision."

The College commits substantial resources to the senior experience. Some departments recognize faculty involvement in the senior experience as part of their teaching load, either explicitly through senior seminars, theses or conferences, or implicitly through various schemes to recognize the very real work of mentoring young colleagues in research. Other programs and departments, while participating wholeheartedly in these ventures, do not or can not recognize the work done by their faculty to supervise senior projects.

What constitutes an appropriate senior experience in a department or program is as unique as the disciplines themselves and is best shaped by departments and programs in consultation with the appropriate faculty committees, e.g. the Curriculum Committee. CAP urges departments and programs to consider their investment in senior experiences beyond 300-level courses in the context of their overall teaching load and the number of majors. One rough estimate of the number of courses reasonably devoted to the senior experience is 1/7 the number of majors. (This gives a student:faculty ratio that is less than half that in the average course at the College.) An alternative estimate would be 15% of the teaching effort of the department (taken to be 15% of the teaching FTE). CAP recommends that the resources departments and programs devote to their senior experience should fall somewhere between these two estimates. For departments or programs where it is not possible, for whatever reason, to assign teaching credit for the supervision of senior research, CAP recommends that the College offer alternative forms of support, such as small pools of research funds, particularly for junior colleagues or support of departmental instrumentation.

### *Large Courses*

On the whole, the College has few very large courses and this is as it should be, given our institutional identity. Fewer than 5% of our courses have more than 50 students in them and courses with enrollments that exceed 100 are rare. This is an area in which the practices vary widely. Some departments offer additional credit when enrollments in a course exceed some pre-set limit. The limit varies from 25 (applying in this case to 300-level courses only) to 50 and once the limit is surpassed, the course counts for between 1.5 and 2 times a normal course, depending on the department.

When enrollment ranges between 60 and 80 students in a course (or section of a course), CAP recommends the course count as 2. Courses between 40 and 60 students count as 1.5. If

enrollment grows significantly beyond what is expected historically and/or what presents at pre-enrollment, CAP recommends that the Provost consider alternative compensations for the faculty members involved. Similarly, the department and the Provost can negotiate those rare cases when a course, or section of a course, exceeds 80.

Occasionally large courses may have graduate TAs assisting in the running of discussions, meeting students for office hours and writing advice, and/or offering substantial aid in grading. Here, the TA support substitutes for the extra credit otherwise attached to teaching a large class. The participation of graduate TAs and laboratory coordinators in the laboratory teaching associated with a course generally does not provide any relief to the lecturer in a large course relative to that found in a large lecture with no supervised laboratory sections. CAP recommends that we continue our current practice in which these classes count as more than the standard course for the instructor.

### *Team-Teaching*

Many collaborative teaching opportunities exist at the College. Faculty are often guests in each other's classes for the pleasure and richness it brings to both their academic lives and their students'. CAP's survey of current College practices around team taught classes revealed a plethora of schemes for assigning teaching credit. For example, in some instances a course taught by  $n$  faculty counts as  $\frac{1}{n}$  course for each participating faculty member, at other times each participating faculty member has been credited with a full course for participating. Minimal participation in a course (2-4 lectures in a term) is generally considered to be for the pleasure of the students and faculty involved. The weight given to teaching a team-taught course depends to some extent on how faculty construct the meaning of a team-taught course. Faculty describe the value of team-teaching: "Faculty broaden their perspectives, and students become familiar with more than one 'voice.' A great deal more, and more diverse, subject matter can be covered in such a course than by one instructor." They also describe the demands, "[T]eam-teaching is hard, and takes a lot of extra work. Full teaching credit should always be given to the faculty, if they participate as they ought (always present at each other's presentations, share in all discussions and grading)." Others have a diametrically opposed view: "Team-teaching should be encouraged. Partial credit seems reasonable in all cases."

CAP recommends that a course team-taught by  $n$  faculty accrues  $1/n$  course to each of the faculty involved. If such a course is highly enrolled and would therefore count double, each faculty member gets  $2/n$  credits. We recognize that there are benefits for faculty and students in team-teaching in such a way that both faculty members are fully participating in the course at all times and that this level of participation may indeed warrant crediting each faculty member with a full course. However, such a resource intensive activity must be balanced against other institutional and departmental needs, and CAP recommends the normative practice to be that faculty receive partial credit for team teaching. Other forms of recompense might be considered when faculty are lending a substantial amount of expertise to a course, but it does not amount to a partial teaching credit.

### *Laboratory Teaching*

We consider here only courses in which lab coordinators are not principally responsible for the laboratory teaching associated with a course, for example as in general chemistry or organic chemistry. Lab coordinators generally teach 200 or more students per year (median load/FTE for the whole faculty is between 70 and 75 students). The labs meet at least 3 hours per week per section, there are multiple sections per week (typically 4 or more), and coordinators themselves are present during these times. Coordinators develop and implement the laboratory curriculum for these courses, including writing grants for needed major equipment for new laboratory exercises. Coordinators also supervise TAs, order supplies, monitor and troubleshoot equipment. These positions are full-time in and of themselves.

CAP focussed its concerns on the effort involved in running one or more laboratory sections associated with a course. Current practices vary and include: counting a course with an associated laboratory section as 'slightly more' than one course; 1.5 courses; 2 courses; lecture counts as 1 course; each lab section counts as a course. Moreover, courses that are primarily lab courses may count for 1, 1.5 or 2 courses. In disciplines where laboratory work is an essential part of a student's training, a substantial portion of a department's teaching resources may be directed toward laboratory teaching. As our colleagues have reminded us, this laboratory work done by students and supervised by faculty does not typically conflate with the research work of either students or faculty. In some departments undergraduate TAs assist in the teaching of laboratory sections; in others a mix of graduate and undergraduate TAs is used. The level of engagement of these TAs varies greatly from course to course and department to department. Some share in the preparation of materials for the laboratory, others in the development of laboratory curriculum. Some TAs participate significantly in grading students' written work, still others serve principally as another set of eyes for the instructor. Finally, departmental resources do not always stretch to providing a TA for a laboratory associated with an junior or senior level course.

CAP recommends that only laboratory sections in which the faculty member must be present in the laboratory for the entire period and in which substantive student writing is required count as a course. If enrollments in the associated courses require that more than one laboratory section be offered, each section should be counted as a course. CAP further recommends that laboratory sections in which substantial responsibility (including supervision of the laboratory time and grading) is given to a graduate student count as 1/4 of a course.

#### *Course Reduction for Chairs of Departments, Programs and Major Committees*

“Let me begin by saying that any inquiry into "workload" that doesn't take into account committee work is extremely unrealistic in its premises, as we are a most committee-ridden school. For better or for worse, committee work is indeed work, requiring time, thought, and effort -- and for most of us, it is a significant part of our 'workload.'”

It has become routine for chairs of large departments and programs at the College to expect a course release; chairs of smaller departments in general have not had such relief. Recently, chairs of the Committee on Appointments and the Committee on Academic Priorities have also been granted a course release. As one senior colleague noted above, service obligations contribute significantly to the institution, and must be weighed in the context of all our work, including both teaching and research. CAP recommends that the College continue to offer a course release to chairs of larger departments and programs and that support of other sorts, such as stipends or research funds, be provided to chairs of smaller departments and programs in lieu of a course release. Chairing the Committee on Appointments, the Committee on Academic Priorities and the Institutional Review Board requires substantial investments of faculty time, above what participation in other service obligations requires. CAP recommends that these chairs should receive a course release.

CAP encourages departments and the Provost to consider carefully the guidelines we present here as they work to develop both short-term and long-term staffing plans. We suggest that in cases where departments and the Provost cannot agree that the advice of the faculty be sought through its appropriate committees, CAP and the Curriculum Committee. Above all negotiations for staffing and curricular plans should take as their starting points the principles we began with: curriculum requires strategic planning and the choices we make must be sustainable. In all curricular planning and negotiations the faculty as a whole remains the best source of advice to their peers and vision for the College.