

Factors that Influence Course Enrollment / Majors in Small Departments Like Ours

In a small department like ours that exists on the curricular margins of the university (regardless of the rhetoric from the Administration), ensuring healthy course enrollments, as defined at the minimum by CAS mandates, is really important, for a number of reasons, including: (a) maintaining a healthy departmental budget; (b) assist with recruitment of majors; (c) fulfilling faculty teaching obligations; and (d) advancing the departmental mission. (One may further add here that really large enrolments can also lead to new faculty/staff hires.)

On the basis of years of experience, both as an instructor and as a DUS (with many, many hours of informal interviews of students, during office hours, under my belt), I have identified the factors described below as having an appreciable impact—*for good or ill*—on course enrollments in departments like ours.

As you go through the report, please note that, one, these factors are not listed in any particular order; two, some of them are connected (meaning two or more factors working in tandem simultaneously); three, not all factors have the same impact value; four, this is a predominantly working class university (as the majority of faculty in this school who send their kids elsewhere to private universities will attest); and four, by definition, this report is primarily relevant to courses that are *not* directly required for a major or minor—that is, courses where a student has a choice in taking or not taking it (with rare exception). Given that we have so few majors/minors, *in practice*, all our courses fall into this category.

Finish-in-4

The University has a program that encourages first-year students to pledge to finish their degrees in four years; and if they do so and go on to do all that they are required to do in fulfilling this pledge (correct number of credit hours per semester, etc.), the university would guarantee them tuition-free assistance, beyond the four years, should a legitimate need arise in terms of a hiccup in the university's own obligations—such as failure to provide timely course offerings.

While this program was launched for wholly legitimate reasons, about ten years ago, to cut down the *time-to-graduation* of students who were averaging anywhere from six to seven years to get their degrees, it has had a very negative impact on our department in two fundamental ways: it discouraged students from taking our courses as electives—beyond the ones needed to meet Gen Ed requirements—and it discouraged students from switching majors in our direction. One must be reminded here that it is the rare student who arrives on campus with the intention of majoring in our department, for obvious reasons. As a result, the numbers of majors and course enrollments simultaneously plummeted (compared to the past) and, in fact, the numbers have never recovered.

Finish-in-4 is here to stay. However, if the University were to allow students to switch their majors upon appeal, on a case-by-case basis, on the legitimate grounds that their original majors were ill-suited to their capabilities and/or career goals, by allowing them an extra year without nullifying the university's pledge of support, then that would be a boon to both the students and departments like ours. (For these students, in effect, it would be "Finish-in 5.") The university would benefit too from a reduction in dropouts or transfers. One should note that students (given their age—that is, through no fault of their own), often come with unrealistic educational goals in terms of the majors they want to pursue. Will such a change in policy take place? I would say it is highly doubtful, given the long and illustrious tradition within the university, of enlightened thinking.

Excelsior Scholarship Program

A few years ago, the State launched a tuition-free scholarship program for students attending universities / colleges in the state, which it dubbed the Excelsior Scholarship Program. Among the requirements of the program, of relevance to us, is that the program is aimed at lower income students (125,000 dollars or less family income), and the student should be, quote, "enrolled in at least 12 credits per term and complete at least 30 credits each year (successively), applicable toward his or her degree program through continuous study with no break in enrollment except for certain reasons that can be documented."

The good thing about this program is that it expanded opportunities for higher education for those who may not have been able to afford college or university without this program. (The median household income in the state is about \$72,000; while per capita income is about \$42,000.) On the other hand, the strict requirement about credit hours (it should have been 24 credit hours, not 30, I would argue) has had the same negative impact on enrollment in our courses as the *Finish-in-4* program by leaving students little wiggle room to take courses outside of their mandatory "course plan" for their majors. Moreover, the

program is limited in that it does not deal with other costs beyond tuition; thereby encouraging students to seek paid employment while enrolled in college (with negative consequences for their academic performance, let alone the pursuit of learning for the sake of learning).

Mode of Instructional Delivery

For courses like ours, many students prefer remote instructional delivery because of their belief that online Gen Ed courses are less demanding and, therefore, they can carry a heavier course load. I have had students register for 18 credit hours, while holding down a full-time job, because, *in their view*, two of the courses were not “real” courses since they were online courses. Therefore, their argument was that they were only carrying 12 credit hours. (The undergraduate mind, as we should be able to remember from our own days, works in wonderfully illogical ways.) Yes, it is true that what the pandemic has revealed is that the majority of students, going by the University’s survey, prefer to be on campus rather than at home for their studies, but that does not mean that they are entirely averse to all online courses.

Cross-Listing

Cross-listing of courses can help with enrollments, depending upon how many seats we are given by the other department. However, please note that the general consensus we have arrived at in our department, on the basis of past discouraging experiences, is that cross-listing is *not* a viable option for at least three reasons: (a) unfairness because of lack of reciprocity where the other department will want us to cross-list their courses while being reluctant to cross-list ours; (b) we can lose our courses to the other department who not only gains new courses, but it does so without having to go through the normal but involved administrative channels of proposing their own courses and having them approved by the University—which includes, by the way, submitting them to a “duplicate check” across departments; and (c) the cross-listing procedure, from an administrative perspective, is unnecessarily cumbersome.

Publicity

Flyers posted around the campus can draw in some students; as well as mailing the course descriptions/schedule booklet to CAS, Athletics, and EOP advisors. However, it would require knowing which appropriate areas should be posted (not to mention leg work).

Class Schedule

Enrollments can be impacted by the time of day, and days of the week, that the course is scheduled. Anecdotal evidence suggests students prefer 3-hour block classes on Tuesdays or Thursdays; and if that is not available, then the next preference is two-day classes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. Preferred time of day, is usually between the hours of 12:00 pm to 5:00 pm.

Another impacting factor, related to course scheduling, is internal scheduling conflict where departmental courses are scheduled—albeit inadvertently—to compete with each other for enrollments because they are scheduled on the same day, and at the same time.

Gen Ed Curriculum

A few years ago, under the leadership of a faculty member from the English Department, aided and abetted by an *unrepresentative* planning committee (what's new?), the old Gen Ed curriculum was replaced by a new one, with much public-relations fanfare (that in itself should be telling), which, in practice, has turned out to be confusing, unwieldy, and superficial in its purported logic and comprehensiveness. Consider, for example, that it got rid of the world history classes of the previous Gen Ed curriculum, so that today it is quite likely that a student will graduate from a research university like ours completely lacking in not only such basic knowledge as the geographic outlay of the planet, or the broad outline of the historical contributions of the societies from which their ancestors originally came from to the evolution of the cultural, socio-economic, and political dimensions of the human species considered as a whole, but lacking even the elementary knowledge of the outlines of the significant roles played by United States in world history in the post-Columbian era (not only in terms of the *Columbian Exchange*, but also in terms of the evolution of the global world order, for good or ill, over the past 100 years or so, up through the present). Undoubtedly, one can grant that perhaps some revisions were necessary to the old Gen Ed curriculum, but often the approach taken with the new one was to throw the baby out with the bathwater.

From our perspective, the new Gen Ed curriculum, and the way it has been implemented, has not been good for us relative to the old curriculum. In the past, the rule

was that *all* of our courses (repeat: *all* of our courses) were considered to fulfill the diversity requirements of the old Gen Ed curriculum; now, however, only select vetted courses are eligible for inclusion in the current curriculum. And as if this is not enough, the new curriculum has farmed out the teaching of some Gen Ed diversity courses to departments that had never taught such courses before because they are not competent to teach them (such as Engineering)—thereby shrinking the overall pool of students who can take our Gen Ed eligible courses.

In sum, the new Gen Ed curriculum greatly reduced enrollments in our courses. There was a time when some of our courses used to attract as many as 200 students or more each, on a regular basis!

Undergraduate Advisement

Undergraduate advisement in this university is highly decentralized. Leaving aside advisement within individual departments—provided by the DUS and committed faculty—we have advisement provided by such entities as CAS, Student Support Services, EOP, Honors College, Athletics, Engineering, Health Professions, and so on. Now, depending upon who the individual advisor may be, students can be steered toward our courses or away from our courses (that is, courses that are eligible to fulfill their Gen Ed requirements). Despite vigorous protestations to the contrary, we have enough anecdotal evidence to show that many advisors tell students that their transcripts will have less value if they have courses on them that are from our department. I have also been told by students that they were even discouraged to major in our department. Can anything be done about this? No.

Degree Requirements (major versus elective)

This is an obvious self-explanatory factor. If the course is a requirement for a major then enrolment numbers will depend on how many students are majors in the department. Large numbers of majors will automatically mean healthy course enrollments, and vice versa. In our department, because of several factors working in tandem and mentioned above, we have very few majors—usually averaging less than ten in any given year.

Course Level

For obvious reasons, 100-level courses draw more students than 200-level courses, while 200-level courses draw more students than 300-level courses, and so on.

Course Title (subject matter)

Yes, course titles do matter, since after all a title is supposed to be a succinct summary of content. In general, students will shy away from courses with titles that include words like “philosophy,” “economy,” and “theory” on the assumption that these courses will demand a higher level of academic rigor—which may or may not be true. Additionally, students will tend to ignore courses that do not have substantive titles or subtitles listed simply as “Special Topic” or something similar.

Course Evaluations (Rate My Professors)

If not all of you, most of you know of the existence of this college-level teacher review site. This site, which used to be owned by the behemoth media corporation Viacom, but is now owned by a financial media company that calls itself Cheddar, allows any student (regardless of whether the student is a real human being or an avatar and regardless of whether the student has ever taken the relevant course)—because of lack of integrity controls (to encourage traffic at the site for monetary reasons)—to rate the teacher anonymously on the basis of a few simple parameters, such as: would you recommend this teacher to others; is the teacher an easy grader; is the teacher likeable; etc.

Because this is the largest site of its kind, there is enough research now available on the reviews that reside on the site to show that, not only are the reviews biased against female faculty, but are heavily biased toward teachers that are perceived as “likeable” or in the site’s jargon “hot” and/or are easy graders—meaning the courses lack academic rigor. In fact, the site is structured toward encouraging this kind of shallow teacher reviews. Be that as it may, there is no doubt that the site does have an influence on course enrollments for Gen Ed type courses (meaning electives) in the direction of courses deemed “easy-A.” I have had students tell me that even their parents consult the site when they are helping them pick courses!

Word of Mouth

Teachers can acquire a reputation on campus, after a number of semesters of teaching the same classes, as either easy graders or hard graders. The campus grapevine, as our own undergraduate days will attest, can be quite powerful in swaying student opinion. Students appear to prefer courses where the assessment is based on only *one* requirement: a group

project or a simple term paper (and especially when the paper is not subject to strict integrity controls, such as subjecting it to a plagiarism software on Blackboard, or subjecting the author to a verbal test to ascertain that the paper was not written by someone else—usually for a fee), and where class participation is liberal enough to allow two or three students to dominate class discussions the entire semester, but without the need to engage with the required reading assignments.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that getting warm bodies into our classes, while not an entirely hopeless endeavor, presents today very special challenges given our curricular marginality in this university. There are no easy solutions, except for one: get the University Administration to tweak the Gen Ed curriculum so that, *as in the past*, ALL of our courses can be considered as eligible to fulfill the diversity requirement. The issue, here, to my mind is not only the matter of FTEs for our department but it also speaks to the department's larger mission: to encourage ALL students to graduate with at least a smidgen of *accurate* knowledge of the African American historical and current experiences, and the immense contributions made by African Americans to the development of this country in almost every facet of its existence. This is the only place, for most of them, where they will have this kind of formal “educational” opportunity to acquire this knowledge, because once they graduate, it is highly, highly unlikely that they will ever avail themselves of a similar opportunity.

The current obsession by white supremacists and right-wing ideologues with rewriting, in purely mythological terms (what's new?), the history of what is periodized by Western historians as the “Middle Ages”—against the backdrop of ignorance on the subject among the masses—to suit their antidemocratic diabolical agendas, is a good example of what happens when the education of undergraduates is weakened by an obsession with concentrating only on knowledge concerned with building a better mouse trap, which is what most of the hard sciences is all about, *in the final analysis*. (Here, my point above about world history, is also apropos.)

YGML / 2022 (revised 2024)