

MEMORANDUM

TO: Steering
FROM: CAP
RE: Special Topics Courses
DATE: May 27, 2020

Background & Charge

On March 26, 2019, The Committee on Academic Programs (CAP) was asked by Steering to formulate a policy on both undergraduate and graduate special topics courses. We were asked to consider whether one policy can apply to both the undergraduate level classes and the graduate-level courses. Moreover, we were asked to consider: a) whether to cap the number of times a special topics course may be offered before it needs to go through curricular approval or be discontinued and why, and b) how high the caps should be and why.

Methods

The review by the CAP Subcommittee outlined a plan to make one policy for both graduate and undergraduate courses that can be included in our existing course approval procedures. Specifically, we recommended the following guidelines for Special Topics Courses, to be worked into the existing Course Approval Policy:

- 1) A definition of “Special Topics,” which was drawn from Steering’s memo:

Special Topics Course - New courses being developed by faculty members that will go through the curricular approval process or those that are highly specialized and may be taught for a limited time.

- 2) And a policy change to section 4 of the existing Course Approval Policy, by adding:

Special Topics

- i. Once the class is scheduled for the third time, it should be brought to the school curriculum committee and be in the process of review before it can be scheduled for the fourth time.
- ii. Going forward, it is recommended that Special Topic courses should be numbered 270, 370, and 470.
- iii. Special Topics will encompass topics courses but does not include FSP offerings.

Our rationale for these preliminary recommendations began with the informal policy in several departments of a special topic course running three times before seeking to formalize its college-

wide curriculum committee. The Committee felt following the existing informal policy would allow for consistency across campus for faculty and students, address the need for transcripts to be consistent and specific, and still allow for flexibility for visiting faculty to teach courses of interest without confines. Therefore, the Committee recommends that after running a course the third time, it should be taken to the school's curriculum committee. It will allow new courses to show a consistent track record of student interest in the course before it is made a permanent part of the curriculum. The time period will also allow consideration for whether the course can have a liberal learning designation and to determine its fit into the curricular needs of the program by testing the course material.

In Spring 2020, CAP first conferred with the GSC. Once they responded supporting our recommendation, we solicited online testimony on our preliminary recommendation from department chairs and graduate program coordinators, Deans and Assistant Deans, and Faculty. A Qualtrics survey generated 40 responses, 24 of those indicating that they reviewed the recommendation and had no comments. A total of 16 individuals left comments, some agreeing but asking clarification questions (including whether “mini” courses were part of this Special Topics category). Some comments asked for a rationale that was provided by CAP, but in a separate document and might have been missed by participants. The most detailed comments included concern over courses that were only offered once every few years and that this policy might challenge their ability to be adaptive to changing trends and create extra work for faculty. CAP considered various ways that the policy would allow such courses to run and still be innovative. We also discussed incorporating a time limit for how many times a course had to be offered within a certain number of years, but ultimately voted against that as a group. With regard to this point, we recommended that if courses were being offered with any regularity, even a few years apart, it should have oversight by curriculum committees.

Final Recommendation:

After collaborating with GSC and soliciting testimony from the campus community, CAP's final recommendation is that there can be one policy for undergraduate and graduate Special Topics courses, and the guidelines can be incorporated into the existing Course Approval Policy. We recommend that a special topic course obtain approvals from curriculum committees as outlined in that policy once it has been offered three times. In addition, the committee recommends that, going forward, new Special Topics have a course designation of X70 to have clarity and consistency across campus and to allow for data collection and reporting.