

CFA’s Final Assessment on Informed Course Choices

Date: April 17, 2023

Background: On October 19, 2022, the Steering Committee issued a charge to CFA to consider a resolution from Student Government asking for greater access to information when making decisions on course selection. The Student Government resolution (Appendix A) requests access to several specific sources of information (outlined below). Student Government articulated that students express a strong desire to view course information beyond what is currently available in the PAWS course description, and noted that students often rely on public websites (e.g., Rate My Professor) when making course choices.

CFA discussed the resolution, its implications, and potential implementation extensively. In February 2023, CFA sought clarification from Steering, including from Steering’s student representatives. CFA consulted with Assistant Deans and representatives from Records and Registration, Instructional Technology Services, the Gitenstein Library, and the Office of Communications, Marketing, and Brand Management as it drafted its preliminary recommendation. The charge was sent to CFA as Tier I (minimal testimony from the campus community). Given the potential implications of providing students access to additional course information for students, faculty, and staff, CFA felt it necessary to seek feedback from the campus community on this charge.

A survey was distributed to the campus community (students, staff, and faculty) on March 21, 2023. The survey remained open for three full weeks (through April 11, 2023). CFA received a very large number of responses (176 total), with the vast majority, 87%, expressing support for the preliminary recommendation. An accounting of responses from each role at TCNJ (students, staff, and faculty) can be found below.

	Students	Staff	Faculty	Total
Total responses	107	18	51	176
<i>Strongly support</i>	80 (74.8%)	7 (38.9%)	17 (33.3%)	104 (59.1%)
<i>Mostly support</i>	23 (21.5%)	5 (27.8%)	21 (41.2%)	49 (27.8%)
<i>Neither support nor reject</i>	4 (3.7%)	1 (5.6%)	3 (5.9%)	8 (4.5%)
<i>Mostly reject</i>	0	5 (27.8%)	4 (7.8%)	9 (5.1%)
<i>Strongly reject</i>	0	0	6 (11.8%)	6 (3.4%)

Qualitative comments echoed the general support for the recommendation, but with several important considerations brought to CFA’s attention. Faculty and staff respondents commented on the balanced recommendation provided and voiced appreciation for accommodating student requests for increased access to information. Students commented that viewing past syllabi would allow them to be more confident in their course decisions and would enable them to make decisions that would better balance the course workload. Major critiques of the preliminary recommendation are summarized as follows:

- Increased workload for some faculty (if completing an opt-out page is necessary); potential increase in workload for staff
- A sense of potential “false advertising” or misleading information if syllabi change substantially from semester to semester, if a course is only offered once every few years and the syllabus changes to a great extent between offerings, or if syllabi vary among course sections
- Potential to inadvertently create an environment where faculty feel they cannot (or should not) change a course, since students would come in expecting consistency with the previous semester syllabus. As a correlate, this may increase numbers of complaints to faculty, chairs, and deans if course content differs substantially from what students expected going into the course
- Enabling students to choose “easier” courses or those with a lighter workload, which may inflate grades for certain students
- Enabling students to choose course formats with which they are more comfortable, reducing the potential for growth through exposure to adversity
- Potential negative impact on course enrollment for faculty who use the opt-out cover page or those teaching a new course where there is no past syllabus available
- Possible enrollment complications if students choose a certain section of the course based on perceived differences in past syllabi
- Encouraging an environment in which students are given resources rather than one in which student are taught to ask for the resources they need
- Confusion about intellectual property associated with who “owns” the syllabus and if an additional disclaimer should be added when students access syllabus indicating copyright status and appropriate use of syllabi

As CFA evaluated the responses received, the committee gauged potential impacts on each group of constituents (students, staff, and faculty) to further assess the pros and cons of this recommendation. The committee’s perceptions are summarized in the table and explanation below:

Group	Impact (Positive or Negative)	Extent (Low, Moderate or High)
Students	Positive	Moderate

Staff	Negative	Unclear
Faculty	Negative	Low

- Students: Overall, students are likely to benefit from the proposal. It is clear that not all students will take the time to access past syllabi, but those who do will be able to make course selections based on the perspective provided. A portion of students may be negatively impacted if they enroll in a course due to a past syllabus, but the actual syllabus changes substantially when the course is offered. Further, a portion of students will miss opportunities for growth by selecting only courses that fit their personal preferences.
- Staff: The recommendation will undoubtedly increase the workload for staff, particularly departmental program assistants. The extent to which workload will be increased will depend on implementation.
- Faculty: The recommendation would have a negligible impact on most faculty. Workload would increase for faculty who choose to use the opt-out cover page—a small task, but one among many that faculty are asked to do. A portion of faculty would be negatively impacted if enrollment in their courses declined due to lack of past syllabi or student perceptions of their course based on information provided in the syllabus.

Overall Assessment: Given the broad support for the preliminary recommendation and the considerations described above, CFA stands by its initial recommendation of providing students access to past syllabi under the conditions described in the preliminary recommendation. CFA further stands by its response to each of SGA’s other resolutions, as detailed in the preliminary recommendation. *At present, however, CFA cannot comment on implementation of this recommendation and suggests the creation of a task force in coming semesters to further assess feasibility.* This is due to a number of issues that are currently unresolved. CFA is aware of plans to update or add onto PAWS, but is unclear on capabilities of the user interface. For example, could syllabi be added to this system or could information on learning goals or assessment be added in a more streamlined manner? In addition, as the campus was recently made aware, rules and usage of Google Drives is changing in coming months, which would make sharing of syllabi through Google Drives impractical. These uncertainties make it difficult to discern how much workload would increase for faculty and staff if the recommendation was implemented.

Recommendation and a detailed response to each of the Student Government resolution requests (distributed to the campus community March 21, 2023).

Recommendation:

CFA recommends providing students access to past syllabi under the controlled conditions

listed below.

Rationale: Syllabi from each course are already collected every semester by Departmental Program Assistants, as required in the [Syllabus Policy](#). Access to these *past* syllabi will provide most of the information requested by Student Government, including *assessments* used in courses. Importantly, syllabi provide information on course learning goals, performance goals, and, where applicable, alignment with accreditation standards. As noted in the Student Government resolution, access to syllabi will allow students to “make empowered course choices.”

Conditions and Implementation: Sharing of past syllabi must meet the following conditions:

- Only *past* syllabi will be available to students. Faculty will not be expected to provide syllabi prior to the start of the semester.
- As an extension of their role in collecting syllabi (as required by the Syllabus Policy), Departmental Program Assistants would enable student access to syllabi. The faculty would not be responsible for sharing or distributing past syllabi on their own.
- Syllabi will only be accessible to current TCNJ students. A TCNJ username and password would be required for access, and syllabi would not be searchable in external web searches.
- An opt-out process will be available for faculty who prefer that their syllabi not be available to students. In such cases, faculty will complete and submit a syllabus cover page (Appendix B), which will provide information on course assessments and be accessible to students in place of the syllabus.
- There is a disclaimer where syllabi are accessed stating “*Syllabi are subject to change each semester*” to ensure that students understand that a syllabus from a past semester does not guarantee course assessment strategies, logistics, or goals for the next semester.
- The syllabi would not be easily downloadable. One-click downloads and printing would be disabled. Although it is impossible to fully prevent screen captures of digital documents, automatic methods of downloading will be disabled.
- The site where the students find the syllabi is accessible. Students would not need to request access to each individual syllabus.

CFA’s Response to Requests within Student Government Resolution:

Request 1: “...the Student Government of The College of New Jersey has researched the amount of information from student feedback forms that other institutions such as Stony Brook

University has released to their students, where students have access to the ratings of the questions as well as the grade distributions with no access to the comments protecting the reputation of the faculty”

CFA Response: CFA strongly opposes the release of Student Feedback or grade distributions. There are a number of logistical and ethical reasons for this stance:

- Faculty participation in formal Student Feedback surveys is governed by a faculty/staff union (AFT) memorandum of agreement, which would need to be renegotiated if Student Feedback procedures were to change.
- Quantitative and qualitative results from Student Feedback are already used extensively by the faculty member who taught the course, as well as within formal reappointment, tenure, promotion, and 5-year review processes. During these formal evaluations, faculty are required to reflect on past student feedback results and articulate how they have modified their teaching in response to feedback.
- Biases, particularly against women and members of minoritized groups, within student feedback on teaching processes are [well documented](#).
- Release of student feedback data and grade distributions would exacerbate already existing disparities in course enrollment options for students. Students who are privileged to arrive at TCNJ with extensive AP or other college equivalencies will have earlier access to the courses with higher rated instructors and preferable grade distributions. Selectivity of classes based on perceived benefits of one class or instructor over another would also have major logistical implications for Department chairs as they schedule and manage courses.
- Release of student feedback data and grade distributions could lead to slander and misrepresentation, and open faculty to potential litigation.

Request 2: “...implement a school-wide course description registration newsletter and integrating it on Primary Academic Web Services (PAWS) for a more accessible and equitable platform for students”

CFA Response: CFA appreciates the Student Government request for access to a registration newsletter. While we support students being provided information at the time of registration, CFA believes that how this information is distributed to students is best left to the individual department/program. Many departments/programs already compile a newsletter, which they distribute to students via email and/or post on their webpage. Given the diversity in departments across campus, and the differences in number of students served, if those students are majors or non-majors, and other logistical complications, a one-size-fits-all model for a registration newsletter is unlikely to be effective. Requiring this may also lead to duplication of information, or conflicting information if information is posted in multiple formats. Lastly,

consultation with Records and Registration confirmed that PAWS is not capable of posting additional documents beyond its current capacities.

Request 3: “...requests faculty to disclose their methods of assessment and integrate it on Primary Academic Web Services (PAWS) in the course descriptions tab”

CFA Response: CFA appreciates the Student Government request for access to assessment methods. CFA’s determination (following consultation with Records and Registration and Assistant Deans) is that adding assessment details is not logistically feasible. While adding this to the “course description” field is possible, this would be an enormous undertaking for Department Chairs, Assistant Deans, and Records and Registration. Each faculty member would need to submit a formal request for the changes to be made, these requests would need to be processed by Chairs and/or Assistant Deans, and then Records and Registration would need to manually enter a new course description for each course from every department. Further, course descriptions in PAWS are course-specific (not section-specific), so PAWS could not capture differences in assessment methods between sections of a course. Lastly, given that faculty cannot directly edit their course descriptions (it must go through the process described above), faculty are unlikely to update course descriptions in future semesters if changes in assessment strategies are made. At present, PAWS cannot support additional fields beyond what is currently available. Hence, adding a field separate from the course description for assessment is not possible. In summary, CFA determined that addition of assessment details directly into PAWS is not logistically feasible; assessment information, however, would be found in past syllabi as recommended.

Request 4: “...allow access to course syllabi prior to registration in academic courses every semester in order to enable students to make empowered course choices.”

CFA Response: CFA agrees that access to syllabi would be beneficial to students as they make their course selections. Syllabi provide information on course assessments, as well as course learning and performance goals. Importantly, we note that CFA can only support release of past syllabi. Providing syllabi in advance of a course is not feasible or in the best interest of students. Faculty often modify and adjust courses up until the beginning of the semester, for example to include the most recent examples and strategies possible or to coordinate with new faculty. Further, depending on the department/program, a specific instructor may not have been identified for each course, which would make providing a syllabus impossible.

Request 5: “...consider creating more transparency with the information regarding courses and professors by considering more alternative solutions.”

CFA Response: CFA believes that access to past syllabi will provide the increased level of access to information sought by students, while being cognizant of concerns expressed by faculty and staff. CFA also notes that students do have the option to drop, add, and swap courses at least through the first week of the semester. While swapping courses may not be

ideal, if students attend a class and realize that the course is not what they anticipated, they are not required to remain enrolled in that course.



THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
STUDENT GOVERNMENT

TO: Sharon Blanton, Vice President for Operations
Jeffrey M. Osborn, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs

CC: Kathryn Foster, President
Matthew Bender, Faculty Senate President
Joe O’Brian, Staff Senate President
Peter Corso, Vice President for Academic Affairs, Student Government

FROM: Dylan Chidick, Executive President
Samhita Narendrula, Vice President for Governmental Affairs (2021-2022)
Lakshmi Gurram, Chief of Staff (2021-2022)

SUBJECT: Allowing Students to Make More Informed Course Choices

DATE: September 28, 2022

The Student Government of The College of New Jersey voted in favor and passed R-S2022-02 on April 6, 2022. This resolution urges The College of New Jersey’s Academic Affairs department to allow all students to access course syllabi prior to registration in academic courses every semester along with other methods in order to enable students to make empowered course choices.

Further, in an effort to ensure the primary sponsor of this Resolution is able to provide any additional information and/or clarification on the proposed initiative in a timely manner, we are requesting a response from the listed recipients, in regard to next steps and future discussions, by Friday, October 28, 2022.



R-S2022-02: Urging The College of New Jersey’s Academic Affairs department to allow all students to access course syllabi prior to registration in academic courses every semester along with other methods in order to enable students to make empowered course choices.

Primary Sponsor(s):

Samhita Narendrula, Vice President for Governmental Affairs (2021-2022)
Lakshmi Gurram, Chief of Staff (2021-2022)

Sponsor(s):

Alisha Srivastava, Vice President for Advancement (2021-2022)
Trish Le, Freshman Class Vice President of Operations (2021-2022)
Jared Williams, Freshman Class President (2021-2022)
Tiffany Rojas, Senator of Business (2021-2022)
Yuliia Sul, Senator of Humanities and Social Sciences (2021-2022)
Devarshi Patel, Senator of Science (2021-2022)
Vincent Meglio, Freshman Class Treasurer (2021-2022)
Dylan Chidick, Executive Vice President (2021-2022)

Date: March 6th, 2022

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey promotes and advocates for its constituents’ best interests; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey wants to ensure that students have a well-rounded academic experience with the ability to make informed course choices; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey recognizes that students heavily rely on public websites such as “Rate My Professor” when making course choices; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey has collected extensive feedback from the student body, where 90% of those surveyed have expressed significant preference in having the ability to view more logistics regarding the course to make informed course decisions; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey understands that students face difficulty in choosing courses without knowing what to expect from the course and professor as required by their learning styles;



THE COLLEGE OF NEW JERSEY
STUDENT GOVERNMENT

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey has researched the amount of information from student feedback forms that other institutions such as Stony Brook University has released to their students, where students have access to the ratings of the questions as well as the grade distributions with no access to the comments protecting the reputation of the faculty; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey implores Academic Affairs to implement a school-wide course description registration newsletter and integrating it on Primary Academic Web Services (PAWS) for a more accessible and equitable platform for students; and

WHEREAS, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey requests faculty to disclose their methods of assessment and integrate it on Primary Academic Web Services (PAWS) in the course descriptions tab;

BE IT RESOLVED, the Student Government of The College of New Jersey urges The College of New Jersey's Academic Affairs department to allow access to course syllabi prior to registration in academic courses every semester in order to enable students to make empowered course choices.

BE IT FURTHER RESOLVED, the Student Government of the College of New Jersey urges the College of New Jersey's Academic Affairs department to consider creating more transparency with the information regarding courses and professors by considering more alternative solutions.

ADOPTED: April 6, 2022

Signature of Executive President:

Appendix B

Informed Course Choices: Opt-out Cover Page

**leaeiipae epaen a
pallaacce en*

ian nli lli e p

_____ lli e p pallaacce

en ic e

Course Number: _____

Course Name: _____

Semester and Year: _____

Assessment methods used in this course:**

ic epaillageacceile en

in place lla

*aple eleanaeenin ai nc lincleaecipi n eieaciiie
eiecae ieipecenaeanapp iaene ainenainen
ecipi n ec epeciice a lp ieeniaene
eiinalaeinec eieeine*