

*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*



### *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



