

Report of the Faculty Senate Working Group on Cross-Unit Collaboration and Interdisciplinarity

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Role:

The role of the working group was to investigate the current processes in place for reviewing and approving curricular items, especially those with an interdisciplinary focus, and make recommendations for any needed changes. Although the group acknowledged that this work was partially prompted by the review processes used for curricular proposals put forth by the Hamilton Center, we took a broader perspective on the overall system for curricular proposal review across UF.

Charge:

Faculty Senate Chair Danaya Wright charged the group with the following:

I would like for you to study the current policies and procedures (department level, college-level, and university-level) for approval of courses, degrees, certificates, and other academic programs to see if there are barriers to cross-unit collaboration and interdisciplinarity. Understanding that duplication of programs and course content may have academic merit in some instances and not in other instances, I ask you to explore whether there are policies or procedures here or at other institutions that can facilitate optimization of our academic offerings. To the extent the budget model or budget constraints inadvertently chill collaborative efforts in our academic programs, please suggest ways that new policies or procedures can help remove such barriers. I would like a 2-5 page report by June 1, 2024, describing the current situation and any headwinds that you believe impair efforts to create robust and attractive course and program offerings, and making recommendations for policy or procedure changes to better align our practice with the President's strategic emphasis on crossdisciplinarity.

Activities:

The working group initially met with then-Faculty Senate Chair Danaya Wright to clarify the purpose and goals of the group, propose possible avenues for completing the work necessary to achieve those goals, and create a proposed timeline. After receiving the charge from Chair Wright, the working group determined that it would be helpful to gather information from a variety of sources in order to understand the current curricular review system and make appropriate recommendations. These sources included conversations with stakeholders from across the University, including many of those directly involved with the current process, as well as consultations with colleagues at peer institutions to determine how UF's system can be viewed in comparison with systems in place elsewhere.

After all of these conversations and consultations were complete, the working group met again to discuss the outcomes of our data-gathering and form preliminary conclusions. Finally, working group members were given an opportunity to provide comments on a draft version of this report during its development, which were incorporated into the final report now being presented.

Findings:

The primary finding of the working group is that the current system for vetting new curricular proposals is well-designed, efficient, and effective in most respects. Although one concern raised in the initial charge for the working group was related to potential delays or roadblocks in the current approval

process, our data-gathering indicated that most delays in the curricular approval process are caused by unit-level non-response to edits or procedural steps needed to advance curricular proposals, not by response times from university review committees or oversight staff.

The working group did conclude that one element of the current system that is in need of revision is the process of consultation with other units who may have an interest in a given proposal. This part of the process is not clearly understood by many stakeholders, and differing expectations regarding the consultation process may lead to frustration on all sides. Some common challenges with the current system are:

- There is no clear rule or explanation for when a consultation is required for a new curricular proposal.
- Many stakeholders who submit curricular proposals are not aware of the potential need for a consultation (or other parts of the curricular approval process).
- Some stakeholders may incorrectly believe that units “own” particular terms or topics related to their disciplines, and may push back on other units who wish to use those terms or topics in new proposals.
- Related to the last point, many stakeholders may not understand the specific mandate of the review committees: to avoid overlap between course offerings (not to protect disciplinary boundaries).

The Working Group believes that action in this area is needed to create more clarity and provide a smoother process for interdisciplinary and innovative curricular proposals.

Recommendations:

As noted above, our findings suggest that the current curricular review and approval process is largely effective, and we do not recommend substantial restructuring at this time. However, to address concerns regarding the specific process of consultation with other units, the working group recommends the following steps be taken:

1. An Associate Provost or someone holding equivalent faculty status should be assigned to chair the curriculum review committees. This has been historical practice, and the Working Group observes that this leadership role can effectively manage inter-unit tensions that may arise during the curricular approvals process, especially as a result of the consultation phase.
2. The Office of the Provost, in consultation with the Faculty Senate and other appropriate bodies, should adopt, clarify, and publicize foundational principles for consideration of interdisciplinary curricular proposals or proposals put forward by one unit that may relate to the disciplinary focus of another unit.
 - a. Suggested principles include:
 - i. The primary focus of the curricular review process is to avoid duplication in course offerings, not to protect disciplinary boundaries or prohibit interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary curricular elements.
 - ii. The ultimate determination of whether a particular curricular proposal represents unacceptable duplication is made by the appropriate curricular review committee, not by an academic unit.

- iii. While input from units with disciplinary expertise that may bear on new curricular proposals is helpful and appreciated, no unit has the right to prohibit another unit from putting a curricular proposal forward to the review committees or from implementing curricular elements that have been approved by the appropriate committee(s).
3. As a part of clarifying these principles, we suggest that the Office of the Provost and the relevant review committees define the process of consulting with other units who may have input on new curricular proposals as “notification with the opportunity to provide feedback.” This reframing may help to reduce the (incorrect) impression that a unit being consulted has the authority to approve or disapprove of the proposal.
 4. The Office of the Provost, in consultation with the Faculty Senate and other appropriate bodies, should create a curriculum development guide document to help stakeholders better understand the steps and necessary components in the curricular approval process.
 - a. This guide should include information about the role of the review committees in the curricular approval process, as well as the foundational principles discussed above.
 - b. The guide should also include clear guidelines for when other units should be notified of a given curricular proposal, as well as guidelines for how those other units should provide feedback if needed.
 - i. Such notification should take place early in the curricular development process, to ensure that needed information about potential overlaps is taken into account as the proposal is created.
 - ii. Stakeholders creating curricular proposals should be encouraged to think carefully about which students will be served by the new curricular element and what it will contribute to those students’ knowledge or experience, in order to identify potential overlaps.
 - c. It may be helpful to identify several potential levels of overlap, with separate procedures for each. For example:
 - i. Incidental overlap only – a term or topic related to coursework currently being provided by another unit is mentioned in the curricular proposal but is not material to the content or structure.
 - ii. Minor potential overlap – a curricular proposal includes content that is currently being provided by another unit, but with a substantially different approach or focus.
 - iii. Major potential overlap – a curricular proposal appears to be substantially similar to content currently being provided by another unit.
 - d. The guide should include examples of common errors and challenges with curricular proposals and suggestions for proactively addressing these, to streamline the process of faculty creation and revision of proposals.
 - e. Finally, the Working Group recommends that colleges consider the creation of similar guides for their faculty, if none currently exist.