Oversight of courses

In order to make transparent the process of approval of courses to the University Faculty, this set of guidelines and principles was created by the Faculty Council on Academic Standards (FCAS) in consultation with the Registrar’s office. We aim to document current practice, sit that practice within the existing Faculty governance structure, and provide a structure of approval on which University departments/programs can depend.

The University of Washington Curriculum Committee (UWCC) is a semi-independent committee composed of individuals whose primary missions are to represent the Seattle, Tacoma and Bothell faculties; the Graduate School; Undergraduate Affairs; FCAS; and the Office of the University Registrar. In terms of faculty governance, UWCC reports to FCAS, as FCAS is charged with “...inter-institutional academic standards.” In terms of administrative oversight, it is housed within the Office of the Provost. It is (semi-) independent in that most of the business of UWCC can be conducted without consultation with either the Provost’s office or FCAS. These matters include routine approvals for course creations and changes. It is only semi-independent in that the FCAS members of UWCC (with support from the Registrar’s office) will provide a monthly summary to FCAS for notification purposes and will bring any courses about which questions arise to FCAS for review. This semi-independence allows the committee to maintain its largely administrative function, but also clearly to establish faculty governance over curricular matters. As with all issues of concern to academic standards, FCAS will consult other councils, committees, offices and department/units on an as needed basis.

Guiding principles:

1. Curricular content, i.e., what is included in a course and how that course is taught, is best established by the department/unit that “owns” the course (i.e., “owns” the prefix, course number, and title). Ownership here refers to the department/unit that originally proposed the course and can usually be established by the prefix, e.g., ANTH belongs to the Department of Anthropology and ENGL belongs to the Department of English (but see below for more information). The Faculty in a unit are the subject matter experts and are best able to assess the appropriateness of the materials and methods associated with the course, especially given that pedagogy and content need to be aligned with trends particular to disciplines.

2. Just as departmental/unit Faculty members are knowledgeable about course content and pedagogical concerns, so too are the Registrars subject matter experts on curriculum management (e.g. registration, transcripts, etc.). While the Faculty member’s relationship with a course often ends when the course grade is submitted, the Registrar’s office maintains records indefinitely. The Registrar’s office interacts with students, some of whom are currently enrolled while others were enrolled decades ago. Transcripts are the record of a student’s University work and are often read and assessed by agencies with no affiliation to the University of Washington, such as potential employers or graduate schools. Frequently, course prefixes, numbers and titles are all these outside entities have available when attempting to establish the educational attainment of our students, because the instructor of record is not available or no longer can provide a relevant syllabus. Consequently,
course prefixes, numbers and titles are critical curriculum management elements and the Registrar’s view is, of necessity, long, with an emphasis on stability and clarity. While faculty may have insight into transcript elements, it must be recognized that transcript/student record elements are not inherently pedagogical and thus the Registrar’s long view is of great benefit and is not an attempt to determine pedagogical content.

3. In the past, disciplinary boundaries were more entrenched, but more recent trends have focused on the value of inter/transdisciplinarity in approaching academic content. While offering much insight into the academic content and delivery side of the University, such intersection can cause questions of ownership to arise among departments/units on the curriculum management side. For instance, does the Department of Statistics “own” all introductory course(s) in statistical analysis?

4. Ownership: the department that initially proposes a course and gets it approved owns the course. Ownership implies rights to change all aspects of it, including credit hours, course description, and delivery methods, via the course change process. Owners can also eliminate courses. With the rights of ownership come the responsibility of notifying departments that depend on the course for such things as prerequisites and requirements of admission to and graduation from the major. In some cases, these dependent departments/units may be obvious, while in other cases, the course might be so broadly used that a general announcement to the University is appropriate.

5. Initial approval of a course requires the careful examination of its place in the curriculum of the initiating department/unit and the other departments/units which teach similar content. The initiating department/unit is responsible for identifying other departments that might be interested and consulting with them regarding the proposed course. Generally, departments should not offer the same content under a different course number and name, but rather should seek joint status. The Registrar’s office, because they are experienced in managing the curriculum of the University, can be an invaluable source of advice about potential other units with similar curricular interests, but the responsibility for contact and negotiation rests with the initiating department. Course creation paperwork without concurrence of other departments will be returned to the initiating department. If departments cannot agree on which department should own a course, FCAS, in consultation with the Provost’s office, will examine the situation and determine ownership.

6. Beyond ownership of courses, other issues have arisen more recently that can be sorted into 2 basic issues: equivalency and overlap.

   a. Equivalency: University of Washington courses are deemed “equivalent” when the content is sufficiently alike that one course can substitute for another in all instances (e.g., as prerequisites, as transfer articulated courses, or as major/degree requirements). Equivalency is established at the discretion of the departments/units which own the courses. A department/unit is not required to accept an equivalency proposal from another unit. If one course is changed, equivalency is broken, although it can be restored if all affected departments/units agree. Equivalency needs to be established in the curriculum management system, but is encoded into the Degree Audit
(DARS) and, therefore, equivalent courses automatically count as prerequisites and admission or graduation requirements throughout the University. Departments/units which use, but do not own, courses cannot refuse to accept the judgment of equivalency made by the courses’ owners.

b. Overlap: courses which share some content, but are not sufficiently alike to be equivalent, can have overlap. Like equivalency, overlap is determined by the departments/units which own the courses. Courses with overlap can be established, so that students do not receive “double-credit” for the same content, by discounting the credit hours for the overlapped course taken later. For instance, the courses ESS 101 (Introduction to Geological Sciences) and ESS 105 (The Earth: Its Processes and Hazards) are not equivalent, but the content therein overlaps to the degree that students may not receive credit for one if the other has been completed. It is also possible to have partial overlap between courses. In such cases, students can be limited to a maximum number of credits between the two courses. Overlap and credit discounting allows for acknowledgement that courses can be substantially similar without being equivalent.

c. While FCAS and Registrar’s office can facilitate conversations among affected departments regarding equivalency or overlap, the decision rests with departments/units. In the situation where departments/units cannot agree on equivalency or overlap, the courses are deemed to be different (not equivalent and with no overlap) and coded appropriately. These different courses, then, do not automatically count as prerequisites or for admission or graduation requirements. Even if courses are deemed non-equivalent by the departments/units which own them, other departments/units can establish courses as satisfying their own prerequisites and requirements. The credit hours for different courses are not discounted.

7. In order to facilitate communication among departments/units regarding courses, the Registrar’s office will maintain a database of courses that are currently in the approval pipeline. (In the future this may be accomplished by Curriculum Management software.) The initiating department/unit will enter the course into the database after approval by the department/unit and other departments/units will be able to review the proposed courses. If a department encounters a newly proposed course with which they believe an existing course overlaps substantially, then the overlapped department should contact the initiating department. If conflict over ownership cannot be worked out among affected departments, as a last resort FCAS in consultation with the Provost’s office will determine ownership.

8. In addition to the elements of approval described above, the University has established basic standards for courses for which the UWCC checks as part of its review. These are generally University level requirements and so are germane to all departments/units on all campuses. These include:

   a. Required credits (also called General Education requirements): Established by the University in the Student Regulations (Chapter 114.2.B), the requirement to earn credits in these courses is applicable to all UW students seeking baccalaureate degrees. Consequently, maintaining accurate designations is a critical function of the Registrar’s office.
b. Course numbering: Because course numbers may be the only clue to the level of academic content of a course long after it is taught and because some departments/units have admission and graduation requirements that specify the number of credits students may or must have at certain levels, consistency across the University is necessary. In other words, a 100-level course (1xx) indicates introductory material described in the course title, while a 400-level designation with the same title indicates advanced undergraduate content. What content is characterized by “introductory” or “advanced” is often discipline specific, but general consistency across the university is important.

c. Learning goals and learning assessments: University policy requires learning goals and learning assessments to be clear, appropriate to the course level, and provided to students who are registered for the course.

d. Attendance/participation: Unless required for accreditation purposes, University policy does not allow attendance to count toward or against the final grade. Participation may count in the calculation of the course grade, but if faculty intend for it to contribute >15% of the total course grade, the method of assessing participation needs to be clearly delineated.

e. Although how instructors interact with students and students with other students may vary substantively among disciplines, interaction among students and between instructors and students is a key component of course design. Originally raised in the context of distance learning, the issue of assuring that the framework for appropriate interactions exists has become a relevant University requirement for all courses.

9. The questions and wording on the forms used for course creation and change are managed by UWCC in consultation with FCAS, FCTL, and the Registrar’s office. Changes to those forms must be approved by FCAS.