Course Enrollment Management

August 15, 2013

Issues

For the past several semesters, Kenyon College has offered less than 10 courses with enrollments below 5 students, not including senior seminars, individual studies, Physical Education courses, and music lessons. Under-enrolled courses pose several dilemmas. For students enrolled in such courses, the promise of close interaction with a faculty member is often offset by classroom dynamics that make significant interaction with peers difficult or impossible to achieve. If students in very small classes (four or fewer) had expected a course with normal classroom dynamics, they typically find themselves in what become independent-study type situations. For faculty members teaching courses with small enrollments, planned teaching approaches may have to be altered significantly because some instructional techniques require more than a handful of students to undertake. Simulation exercises and group projects, for example, typically require some critical mass of student numbers for their success. For departments, programs, and the College, if significant faculty resources are used to sustain small courses, those same resources cannot be deployed to alleviate pressure in other contexts, most notably, highly enrolled introductory courses.

Over-enrolled courses at the introductory level pose challenges to Kenyon too. Students enrolled in large sections often cannot gain the access to faculty that they had been led to expect as prospectives. Students in such sections may be less likely to develop the habit or even the expectation of participating in classroom discussion, a capacity that will be essential to them in any major they undertake at the College. In addition, faculty members in large sections may fail to identify students who are finding the transition to college to be difficult or who are simply failing to master the course material in a course that may be central to their preferred major. Of course, faculty members in large sections face mountains of grading and long lines during their office hours, distracting them from their other courses and other duties.

While Kenyon often has been able to avoid the extremes of many classes with enrollments below five and many with large enrollments, our means of avoiding these excesses has relied on last minute juggling, crisis management, and the seemingly inevitable scramble during the drop/add period in which many first-year students seek seats in classes that are still open, often begging faculty members to give them a seat despite the fact that an enrollment limit has already been met.   In the past several semesters, more courses than we would like were at or above their limits. In terms of optimal resource of Kenyon's

faculty resources, a situation where several classes are clearly larger than they should be and several others enroll only a handful of students does not meet the optimality norm.

A plan to manage course offerings and enrollment to more evenly spread enrollments across our many faculty members and courses requires that we carefully identify the goals we are striving to achieve and a set of principles from which we should operate so that we can effectively design a process that will yield more equal course enrollments and less need to cancel courses or add them late.

Goals

The following goals (in no priority order) should orient our enrollment management process:

- Introductory lecture courses of 25-30 students in most departments and programs
- Introductory seminar-type courses of 12-18
- Advanced elective courses of at least 8 students
- Modest-sized (15-25) intermediate courses
- Relatively little difficulty for first-year students to register for a full course load on the first attempt
- Enough intermediate and advanced elective courses to ensure that majors are able to complete the major requirements without having to resort to individual studies
- Some opportunity for faculty to teach their research interests
- As little need as possible to cancel courses after enrollment has begun

Principles

The following principles should constrain our design of an enrollment management process:

- Each department or program must offer enough intro-level courses to satisfy demand by first- and second-year students.
  - Departments and programs need not accept juniors and seniors into 100-level courses if there has been clear notification that junior and seniors are not allowed into a course.
- Departments and programs should be allowed to offer sufficient intermediate and advanced courses to sustain a major.
- Individual departments or programs should not have to shoulder undue burdens of teaching introductory courses.

Process

1. When planning course offerings for the next year, departments and programs should expect to offer enough introductory course sections to provide the number of seats equal to a three-year running average of past enrollments.
2. The Registrar and the Associate Provost will review proposed course schedules in January and February to evaluate whether each department or program has met the expectation in #1 above. In the event that a department or program fails to meet that expectation, the Associate Provost will discuss the issue with the department chair or program director.
3. The Registrar and the Associate Provost will review the proposed course schedule to determine whether courses with past records of low enrollment are being offered again. The Associate Provost will explore with the chair the reasons for such a course being offered and review departmental plans to promote enrollment in it.
    - Faculty members should be encouraged to schedule courses that typically under enroll in the fall semester and in the semester that they teach three courses so that if a course must be postponed or cancelled, an alternative can be arranged for the spring semester.
    - Courses that historically under enroll may need to be reconceptualized (broadened or described in more appealing ways) to discourage the emergence of under enrollment situations.
4. For any course intended primarily for upperclass students that fails to enroll at least five students in April or November pre-enrollment, the Associate Provost will request that the department or program cancel or postpone the course, to be replaced by a course more likely to enroll at least 8-10 students.
    - Most courses with small enrollments play some role in completing major requirements. Courses to satisfy major requirements come in three types, however: (1) courses that must be satisfied to complete the major;
    (2) courses that can be taken to satisfy a particular requirement of the major; and
    (3) courses that will contribute to the total number of units in a discipline needed to complete a major.
    - Few courses with small enrollments fall into the first category; most fall in the latter two.
    - The Provost, in consultation with department chairs and program directors, reserves the right to cancel under enrolled courses that fall into category 3 and to insist on the postponement of those that fall into category 2.

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