



May 4, 2015

**TO: Alison Schmitke, Undergraduate Council Chair  
Joe Lowndes, Graduate Council Chair**  
**FROM: Ian F. McNeely, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Education and  
CAS Curriculum Committee Chair (ex officio)**  
**RE: Recommendation to rescind new curriculum policy**

The CAS Curriculum Committee urges the Undergraduate and Graduate Councils to work with the Senate to rescind or modify the recently passed policy on “Faculty-Student Engagement in UO Courses” (attached). While we welcome its original intent, which was to provide clearer guidance to faculty committees evaluating online courses, applying the new standard of “bilateral student-instructor engagement” to all courses that meet for less than one hour per credit per week raises a number of significant concerns.

- *It affects a very large number of conventional seated courses, including this year in CAS:*
  - 789 upper-division 4-credit courses that meet for 3 contact hours a week (58% of all upper-division CAS courses)
  - 453 lower-division 4-credit courses that meet for 3 contact hours a week, of which 300 are writing composition sections (WR 121-122)
  - 96 regularly numbered (non-experimental) 600-level catalog courses that meet for fewer than one hour per credit per week.
- *No evidence suggests that students are not well served by these conventional courses, particularly at the upper-division and graduate levels.*

With an average enrollment of 31 students, 3-hour 4-credit upper-division courses arguably *already* feature more student engagement with the primary instructor of record than, for example, 4-hour 4-credit *lower-division* courses with discussion or lab sections led by GTFs. In those courses—which are unaffected by the new policy—the average enrollment is 134 students, more than four times as many. Upper-division and graduate courses are typically taught by tenure-track faculty in their fields of specialized expertise, and generally earn high praise from students.

- *It replaces concrete, well-understood policies with vague language that is difficult for committees to implement consistently.*

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Recognizing their pedagogical quality, UO curriculum committees have long made systematic exceptions for certain courses that meet for less than one weekly contact hour per credit. Under a UOCC policy reaffirmed as recently as March 2015, courses may compensate for missing contact hours by increasing the “actual time a typical student would be actively engaged in learning.” Typically, the CASCC recommends—and the UOCC approves—such courses when they feature heavier reading, additional writing, in-class presentations, additional homework, or other forms of student engagement, all tabulated in Student Engagement Inventories. These are specific, widely understood forms of student engagement that both faculty proposers and faculty reviewers rely upon in communicating with each other about the rigor of courses across a wide spectrum of disciplines. The new concept of bilateral student-instructor engagement is far less clear, and has already led to some confusion and consternation among faculty.

- *It will increase faculty workloads.*

Requiring an additional weekly hour of bilateral student-instructor engagement, either in class or some alternate form of interaction, plainly increases the amount of time faculty must devote to instruction. Faculty who believe their courses already serve students well will resist both the assumptions of the policy and the increase in their workload. The latter may not be allowable under the terms of the Collective Bargaining Agreement.

- *If applied only to new or revised courses, it will create a perverse incentive for faculty to avoid the course approval process—and confuse students.*

Faculty wishing to teach new courses may simply decide to offer them under experimental numbers. They may also shy away from revising existing catalog courses for fear of inviting scrutiny under unclear new standards. Avoidance of the curriculum committees is a longstanding problem but has been significantly improved in recent years by greater transparency and clarity in committee policies, particularly through the Student Engagement Inventory (SEI), which is now widely understood and accepted. The new policy reintroduces confusion into the concept of student engagement.

Students, meanwhile, are unlikely to understand why courses earning the same number of credits—even in the same field, offered at the same level, with the same pedagogy, or taught by the same person—fail to require the same level of engagement with their instructors.

Again, we would welcome a policy on online courses developed after empirical consideration of current UO online courses and discussion of best practices in online education nationwide. There surely remain areas for policy improvement around conventional seated courses as well. But we are distressed and confused by this new policy and would like to see it withdrawn.

## FACULTY-STUDENT ENGAGEMENT IN UO COURSES

Passed by Undergraduate Council – Jan. 21, 2015

Passed by Graduate Council - Feb. 18, 2015

Passed by UOCC - Feb 20, 2015

### Rationale

Historically, the student credit hour (SCH), derived from the Carnegie Unit, has meant, in broad terms, 1 hour per week of engagement with the instructor in a classroom setting and 2 hours per week of student work outside the classroom for each academic credit. From that model emerged our understanding of the standard 4-credit UO class, with its 120 hours per term of “student engagement”: 40 “hours” of contact with instructor + 80 “hours” of student-driven activity for undergraduates and 160 “hours” for graduate students. That model has worked well for courses where the instructor and the students are in a classroom, involved in bilateral engagement, for 4 hours per week over a 10-week term. Bilateral engagement in this sense refers to the iterative, responsive nature of a classroom experience. Furthermore, some well-established deviations from this general guideline nonetheless follow the principles behind the model; for example, grad courses provide rich occasions for bilateral engagement through the exchange of student work and formative instructor feedback. We assume in this model that bilateral engagement between instructor and student in the classroom has educational value. This kind of engagement characterizes effective pedagogy, whether in a large lecture hall, small seminar, discussion section or an online environment.

As other teaching and learning methods have become more popular, this model no longer completely meets our needs for evaluating academic courses. In fact, strict adherence to this model carries with it two dangers: 1) inflexible adherence to SCH’s built on the instructor-led, students-in-seat principle; 2) abandonment of direct instruction in favor of an entirely self-paced, or self-generated focus on learning outcomes. The first danger ties us to potentially outmoded and “unscalable” pedagogies; the second danger obliterates the kind of residential, liberal arts education that is central to our academic mission.

Exceptions to the standard SCH model mostly apply to online/hybrid courses in which some or all of the bilateral engagement is not in the classroom but rather conducted online, but they also apply to other types of learning activities where bilateral engagement between instructor and student is less than it is under the traditional SCH model. In either case, these courses may need to be evaluated differently. This policy seeks to provide clearer guidance on how to evaluate such courses.

### Policy

As a rule of thumb, roughly one-third of an undergraduate and one-quarter of a graduate student’s engagement in any given UO course - regardless of format - shall entail bilateral engagement with the instructor. For traditional, synchronous, classroom-based courses, bilateral engagement is typically achieved through face-to-face interaction between instructor and student. For courses which have less than the standard one-third bilateral engagement (i.e. less than 40 hours per term for most 4-credit courses), course proposals will need to describe how classroom-based bilateral engagement is being replaced by other activities.

Bilateral engagement shall be defined at the UO in the explicit terms of instructor engagement with students. This engagement may take asynchronous forms, and may or may not entail individualized feedback or one-on-one rapport, but is in any event to be distinguished from the mere assessment of learning outcomes or passive and static assignment of work. The expectation with such mutual engagement is that it involves instructors actively shaping and reshaping the learning experience in response to student work and feedback as the course progresses.

A strict definition of bilateral engagement will not work here. Instead, course approvals that depart from the standard SCH model will rely on the collective judgment of faculty on the appropriate committees. That judgment should be based on

the idea that replacing the traditional bilateral engagement attained in the classroom cannot be done by merely reducing the instructor role and increasing the work of the student.

### **Implementation**

Proposed courses which fall below the standard bilateral engagement between instructor and student, as outlined above, will require a response to the prompt below:

*“It is generally assumed that in most traditional classroom courses students engage with instructors 1 hour per week per credit in a classroom setting, and complete 2 hours per credit per week of work outside the classroom (3 hours for graduate students). If the proposed course calls for less student-instructor classroom engagement than 1 hour per credit per week, describe how bilateral instructor-student engagement will be achieved in this course to replace what would have happened in the classroom.”*

This prompt will be located in the appropriate field in the Courseleaf system used for course proposals.