Report on Academic Review Board Activities
Academic Year 2016-7

A) The Academic Review Board (ARB) is charged with evaluating appropriateness of previously unlisted courses to fulfill Tufts’ requirement for World Civilization, or part of Tufts’ requirement for Culture or for Distribution. The role of ARB is to implement policy, not to make it.
-For World Civ, 64 petitions were reviewed; of these, 16 were denied.
-For Culture credit, 55 petitions were reviewed; of these, three were denied.
-For Distribution credit, 43 petitions were reviewed. In addition, 26 courses approved by A&S faculty were evaluated for Distribution attributes, as were 4 courses from SMFA and 5 courses from School of Engineering (which has its own Curriculum Committee).

B) Interpreting Tufts policy about what constitutes a ‘World Civilization” course continues to be challenging. The original intent was to expose students to a course in non-Western culture, and for anyone in the position of reviewing petitions for the World Civ. Requirement, there can be considerable ambiguity these days about what is and is not a course in a non-Western culture. For example, for some non-Western might mean outside of the Judeo-Christian tradition. However, committee members note that within group differences in, say, the “Christian” tradition can be far more striking than between group differences – with differences often reflecting differences between Western and non-Western cultures. Discussions of this sort arise when evaluating about 10% of the petitions for World Civ attribution. We continue to suggest that the University re-visit the World Civ. requirement to better determine whether it may need to be dropped or re-worked to be something quite different than it is right now.

C) In November 2016, Deans Carmen Lowe and Sheila Bayne met with ARB to discuss the following:

1) Tufts Programs Abroad: proposal to streamline the process for determining the distribution/culture/world civ attributes for Tufts Program Abroad courses

2) Transfer of Credit (including transfer of credit from non-Tufts programs abroad): We are trying to streamline the Transfer of Credit process overall, and would like ARB input.

3) School of Engineering Curriculum Committee: The chair of this curriculum committee seeks ARB support in determining Liberal Arts distribution attributes for new Engineering and Computer Science courses open to Liberal Arts undergrads.

4) Ex-College courses: the new Ex-College administrative staff are not sure how or when to apply for distribution or other attribution for their courses; as a result, this semester, there are no distribution attributions for any Ex-College courses, which is a departure
from the recent past. This has had a big impact on SMFA students, who take many Ex-College courses toward their BFA degree requirements, which include distribution in areas that diverge slightly from those for the Liberal Arts bachelor degree. This also made it challenging for Liberal Arts pre-major advisors helping first-year students select a balanced course load, especially for the students who had late registration times and were locked out of many typical intro level courses. We want to check in and see if the Ex-College issues have been resolved for spring semester – and if the old system of having an Ex-College representative shepherding petitions (to department chairs as well as to the ARB) has been reinstated.

In all, we would like to speak with the ARB committee (or a sub-group, perhaps committee chair and sub-committee chairs) to figure out ways we can make less bureaucracy for students (and less work for faculty) while preserving faculty discretion and decision-making for the less-routine, more complex questions that arise when students seek to fulfill our degree requirements.

D) In February, David Proctor sent the following proposal to ARB:

“Curricula is going to begin discussions on the idea of proposing that the ARB be re-absorbed back into the Curricula Committee. My thoughts are, at least, that this would improve overall efficiency and also provide a greater level of cohesion to our overall curriculum.

I remember the justification for splitting ARB off, and I was actually on Curricula when those discussions were taking place. At that point Curricula was also responsible for Plan of Study, which is now under CIS, and I recall that being one of the many arguments aimed at trying to take some work off Curricula. However, in practice, I am not sure if that those initial goals for ARB have been fully realized and I do feel that ARB’s effectiveness is very much predicated on who the subcommittee chairs are and how much institutional memory they have. If ARB was folded back into Curricula, decisions on new courses in terms of distribution and foundation would take place in the same meeting and conversation in which the courses are discussed and approved, and moreover, Curricula would have a working knowledge of how various requirements are being interpreted on the ground, which I think would make the committee more effective in advising and working with faculty on new courses.”

In response, Members of the Academic Review Board (ARB) are not sure about some of David Proctor’s arguments. Why should members of the Committee on Curricula have any more institutional memory than members of ARB? New courses vetted by the Curr Comm. (to be Chaired by David Proctor) make up the minority of the petitions that ARB deals with. The vast majority of the courses handled by ARB for Distribution petitions are transfer courses, Ex College courses, or special topics courses that the Committee on Curricula never see.

Normally, ARB, deals with about 150 yearly petitions (mostly from students and a handful from faculty for new courses) quickly and efficiently. Many require numerous email exchanges with students, yet ARB turn-around rate is typically within 24 hours of a petition. This is one of the advantages of small sub-committees of the ARB. Another is distribution of workload to a manageable level and specialization of expertise.
ARB has proven to be an efficient way to handle the duties it is charged with handling – in short, if one accepts the present system of requirements (Distribution, Culture, World Civilization) put on students, then ARB is a good mechanism for implementing that system. The upside for folding ARB into the University’s Curriculum Committee isn’t about efficiency, but about reform. Over the years, those on the ARB have raised questions that come from having direct experience with petitions around requirements – questions about designated social science courses not clearly aligning with traditional notions of science being about methods, measurement, etc., questions about culture and what constitutes 50% of a course being about culture and how do we measure culture given the way culture has become unmoored from geography, and finally, questions about world civilization which raises the same kinds of questions as are raised when evaluating for culture but the additional question of whether having the requirement really does suffice as an important means to insure students make significant progress in overcoming natural ethno-centrism. Having ARB be a part of the Curr Comm might foster enlightened policies (current ARB duties are to implement, not create, university graduation requirements) and reforms in our sets of requirement – again, a different reason for combining than the reason of “efficiency”.

The current system of two separate committees, each with clearly specific roles and duties (Curriculum Committee and EPC to formulate enlightened policies, with ARB to implement them) seems effective in service to the students while remaining faithful to the spirit, rules and robust standards of Tufts graduation requirements.

E) Only 3 members of ARB are scheduled to serving beyond AY 2016-7. Unless others choose to extend their terms on ARB, seven members will see their term expire. Nancy Levy-Konesky (Chair of World Civ. Subcommittee) has kindly offered to renew her term.

A face-to-face meeting of the entire ARB to discuss policy and procedures is being scheduled before the end of this academic year.

Respectfully submitted by
Prof. George Ellmore, Chair
Academic Review Board
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