

Highlights from The Academic Senate for California Community College's Spring 2012 paper, "Setting Course Enrollment Maximums: Process, Roles, and Principles"

(ASCCC Paper posted on BC Enrollment Management Committee webpage, under Resources)

Fall 2009 State Academic Senate Resolution 13.09:

Whereas, Class caps are maximum student enrollment limits specified for each class, and class cap determinations have sometimes been made inconsistently on the basis of classroom size and other arbitrary factors;

Whereas, The enrollment management plans on many campuses have been responding to FTES enrollment funding caps by arbitrarily increasing class caps in order to increase perceived efficiency;

Whereas, Non-pedagogically based class caps have a serious impact on effective instructional delivery and student success, and raising class caps in many classes such as Career Technical Education and science laboratory classes not only impacts effective instruction but can also negatively impact safety conditions for students;

and Whereas, A number of professional organizations such as the American Chemical Society, Red Cross, Basic Skills Initiative, and the National Council of Teachers of English have conducted studies justifying the establishment of class caps based on pedagogical concerns;

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges recommend that discipline faculty at local colleges determine class caps for each of their courses based on pedagogical and health and safety factors, such as but not limited to the methods of instruction, course modality, objectives and outcomes of the course, the assessment methods as established on the Course Outline of Record (COR), and fire codes;

and Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges develop a position paper with guidelines for local academic senates to work jointly with collective bargaining agents to assist discipline faculty in the determination of class caps based primarily on pedagogical and health and safety factors. (Introduction, pp. 3-4)

Paper Abstract:

Appropriate course enrollment maximums are an essential aspect of guaranteeing the quality of instructional programs. Colleges must consider many factors in establishing these enrollment limits, including legal codes, student and instructor safety, instructor workload, and the fiscal viability of the institution. However, the primary basis of any determination regarding enrollment maximums should be the pedagogical factors that influence the success of the students in the course. Many different college constituencies have roles to play in establishing appropriate enrollment limits, including discipline faculty, curriculum committees, academic senates, bargaining units, and administration. This paper outlines the proper roles for each of these constituencies and offers suggestions for establishing clear processes through which decisions regarding enrollment maximums may be made. (Abstract, p. 1)

Importance of focusing on student success when determining class sizes:

In spite of the many clear benefits of limiting class sizes to established maximums that are based on pedagogical factors, various influences may encourage both faculty and administration to increase the number of students enrolled in a course beyond their ideal limits. California community colleges are funded based on student time in real or virtual seats in courses: the greater the enrollment, the greater the reported full-time equivalent students (FTES), which usually results in greater funding at the local level. Because of this funding method, colleges are sometimes motivated to find ways to increase the number of seats available in a class and subsequently fill them. Faculty may also be tempted to enroll more students in a course due to the simple desire to serve and educate more students, especially when the number of section offerings for a high-demand course is limited due to lack of facilities or for economic reasons. In both cases, enrollment productivity is enhanced as the ratio of students to teacher increases.

Additional factors, such as physical space or other logistic and legal limitations, can influence the maximum number of students that should be allowed to enroll in a class. Union leaders and administrators may also have valid reasons for requesting adjustment of course enrollment maximums either upward or downward. However, these factors should not carry the primary weight in making decisions about learning. Instead, decisions regarding how large or small a class should be must begin with considering the factors that create the best environment for student learning from an instructional standpoint. In the end, the goal is to find the right balance between maximizing learning opportunities for students and assuring program and college viability. While these two perspectives are not always in conflict, when they do conflict finding the right ratio should be based first on the pedagogical factors that facilitate student success. (Introduction, pp. 2-3)

Academic Senate's role in determining maximum class sizes:

- A. As the primary oversight body for curricular decisions and recommendations, the academic senate should ensure that clear and logical processes for the setting of course enrollment maximums are established.
- B. Once processes and policies for setting class enrollment maximums are established, the academic senate is responsible for ensuring that these policies and processes are respected. (pp. 12-13)

Role of discipline faculty in determining maximum class sizes:

Processes for determining course enrollment maximums should always include significant input from the faculty in the discipline in which the course will be taught, as discipline faculty know best the demands and requirements of their own courses. Any recommendations made by discipline faculty must move forward through established college structures, allowing for appropriate input from administrators and bargaining units and approval by the curriculum committee and oversight by the academic senate. However, because the faculty who teach the course in question will have the most complete understanding of the relevant pedagogical factors involved in teaching the course, the discipline level is perhaps the most logical starting point for a process of determining course limits.

- A. The course enrollment limit should not exceed the greatest number of students to whom the instructor can reasonably offer the attention necessary for their success.
- B. The number of students in the class should be appropriate to the method of presentation used in the class (lecture, lab, online, etc.).

- C. The number of students enrolled in the class should be conducive to the use of a variety of effective grading processes (take-home writing assignments, essay exams, scantrons, presentations, etc.)
- D. Decisions on the setting of class enrollment maximums should, wherever possible, be supported by current and reliable data, both locally produced and from external statewide and national organizations. (pp. 5-9)

Role of Curriculum Committee in determining maximum class sizes:

- A. Curriculum committees must ensure that discipline faculty have appropriately considered all relevant factors in establishing the class enrollment maximum.
- B. Curriculum committees should review the data upon which the recommendations of discipline faculty are based to ensure that the data are appropriate and have been given proper consideration.
- C. Special population classes (such as those for honors programs) may have valid claims to smaller class sizes.
- D. Determinations of enrollment maximums for different disciplines and courses should be rooted in balanced and fair considerations of workload for different disciplines, including factors such methods of evaluation (essays vs. tests), delivery methods (lecture vs. lab), etc.
- E. While pedagogical factors and student success should be the basis for establishing class caps, student safety and compliance with legal codes must always be ensured.
- F. Course enrollment maximums should be published in the Course Outline of Record or in some other official location which faculty can monitor. (pp. 10-12)

Role of Bargaining Unit in setting maximum class sizes:

- A. Bargaining units should rely on input from the curriculum process and the academic senate to bargain course enrollment limits that are pedagogically sound.
- B. Once class enrollment maximums are determined for curricular reasons, bargaining units should then ensure that faculty are properly compensated for their workloads.
- C. Contract language should both protect faculty rights and instructional quality regarding enrollment maximums and ensure that faculty act responsibly in observing those limits. (pp. 13-15)

Role of BC Administration in setting maximum class sizes:

- A. Administration must work within the process for establishing course enrollment maximums to ensure the fiscal viability of all courses while still ensuring that academic quality is not diminished.
- B. Administration must work with discipline faculty and curriculum committees to ensure that any necessary spatial or physical accommodations for a course are observed when scheduling and that all safety factors and legal codes relevant to establishing course enrollment maximums are properly considered.
- C. Administrators at all levels must make certain that all properly established class enrollment maximums are understood by all interested parties and respected by both administration and faculty. (pp. 15-17)

Distance Education:

Distance education courses present a unique set of issues in terms of determining appropriate class sizes. When online delivery was first adopted, many faculty and administrators thought it would be the ultimate solution to enhancing productivity because in absence of any physical space limitations, class sizes could theoretically be almost unlimited. As faculty have gained more experience with online teaching, and as they are required to maintain regular effective contact with each and every student, they have come to realize that a significant negative correlation seems to exist between increased class size and student learning. Certainly considerable evidence suggests that just like in face-to-face classes, student success in online classes is greatly dependent on regular, effective interaction between students and teachers as required in Title 5 §55208. (p. 7)

Distance education is a specific area that sometimes raises an issue of perceived inequity among faculty. Since the same COR applies regardless of whether the course is delivered online or face-to-face, many faculty assert that class size should remain the same no matter what delivery method is used. In contrast, other faculty contend that the different obligations and time demands involved in distance education merit special consideration in terms of class size. Add to this the fact that some administrators and even some faculty have seen the absence of physical space limitations in online courses as an avenue to accommodate more students, and the issues regarding distance education can become particularly controversial. Faculty and administrators must therefore come to an agreement regarding whether or not online courses will have different caps than those for face-to-face courses and must develop documented policy congruent with this agreement. (p. 11)

In addition, many faculty believe that their workload increases dramatically in an online environment because significant amounts of time may be needed to correctly apply the appropriate technology and develop new approaches to presenting content and assessing student learning in a fully online environment. Bargaining units should work with their local curriculum committees to determine the relationship between online and in-person workload and set clear criteria for any differences or allowances that they determine to be appropriate. (p. 14)

Legal Compliance and Safety:

Resolved, That the Academic Senate for California Community Colleges recommend that discipline faculty at local colleges determine class caps for each of their courses based on pedagogical and health and safety factors, such as but not limited to the methods of instruction, course modality, objectives and outcomes of the course, the assessment methods as established on the Course Outline of Record (COR), and fire codes; (p. 4)

Although the first issues raised in most discussions of class size will involve the integrity of the instruction and student success, curriculum committees must also observe the twin considerations of complying with all legal codes and mandates and guaranteeing the safety of the students in their learning environment. Indeed, these concerns often go together: a college must observe fire codes and avoid overfilling rooms for legal reasons, but the intent behind the code is to ensure safety in the learning environment. While discipline faculty should consider these factors in making the initial recommendation regarding the course enrollment maximum, the curriculum committee's broader oversight role requires that it review the discipline faculty's determination to ensure that all legal and safety requirements have been met. (p. 11)

All parties involved in setting course enrollment maximums must consider safety concerns and legal codes throughout the process. However, because administrators have a heightened responsibility to protect both the students from harm and the college from legal action, they must be especially diligent in ensuring compliance with all established codes and procedures. Administrators may have additional expertise or knowledge in such matters that should be considered by faculty in determining appropriate class sizes. As with the consideration of physical and scheduling realities, faculty and administration must engage in dialogue to ensure both legal compliance and student safety in all areas. (p. 16)

Conclusion:

Many factors may contribute to the determination of an appropriate enrollment maximum for any given course. Relevant considerations in making such a decision include the teacher-student and student-student relationships in the class, the number and length of papers and other written work to grade, the amount of individual time that should be given to each student's work, the types of assignments, the expectation for students to regularly participate in class discussions, and other factors in how the class is taught. The primary reason, however, for setting any limitation on class size is to enhance the learning environment and experience for students. Administrators must ask for a reasonable class maximum so as to allow the college to be fiscally responsible. Bargaining units may have negotiated course maximums which are in the contract and the degree of freedom allowed to individual faculty in making exceptions to those maximums. Facilities and physical space available also contribute to decisions about the number of students to allow enrollment into a specific instance of a class. Distance education courses may place additional demands on faculty and therefore may require separate consideration regarding class size when courses are submitted to the curriculum committee. Each aspect of the course design and delivery plays a critical role in appropriately setting course maximums. Discipline faculty, curriculum committees, academic senates, bargaining units, and administration all have roles to play in determining and enforcing course enrollment maximums, and all must work together according to clearly established processes in order to ensure that the primary factor in all decisions about enrollment limits is the attainment of student success in the course. (p. 17)