

Guidelines for Low-Enrolled Undergraduate Courses

November 2017

Introduction

These guidelines serve as the basis for decisions regarding undergraduate, academic-year courses that are low-enrolled following the initial registration period. Ultimately the decision as to whether a low-enrolled course is offered in load (i.e., for full teaching-load credit) rests with the provost, who may choose to delegate the decision to an associate provost and/or the academic deans.

It is expected that deans will act with awareness of both curricular and budgetary needs in working with faculty and department chairs to reach a decision, and that faculty development, areas of expertise, and workload will be considered when enrollments indicate that modifications to the course schedule may be necessary.

Assumptions

The university is improved, and its financial stability protected, when care is taken to be both efficient and equitable in considering course enrollments, including average section size in an academic unit or program.

Faculty in a department or school are the best decision-makers for what is required in their programs, including which courses must be offered so that students can succeed in their field.

However, while the PLU faculty has control over the curriculum, neither academic units nor individual faculty have unilateral control over what courses are offered in a given term. Best practices proactively reduce or avoid the unplanned occurrence of low-enrolled courses, rather than having to react to insufficient enrollment. Prior to finalizing a term's course schedule, academic units and programs are responsible for using both historical data (supplied by the provost's and registrar's offices) and ongoing program review to help identify courses at risk for low enrollment. Academic units are also advised to consider curricular design, including changes in course prerequisites and how courses are delivered, in order to minimize the need to consider the options spelled out below. Such strategic planning lessens the need to reach difficult decisions about low-enrolled courses – difficult both for our students and for faculty. Given this careful planning, however, the case can be made that because of necessary requirements in the curricular offerings of particular programs, some courses will have low enrollments.

Principles

1. It is preferable that all courses taught in load during the academic year have at least six (6) students. Those with fewer than six students two weeks after the initial registration period are in jeopardy of either being canceled or else not taught with full teaching-load credit. A convincing case needs to be made for those courses to be taught in load (see #5 below). Upcoming registration of transfer and first-year students may make it reasonable to anticipate that the course will end up above this threshold.

2. Courses between six and nine (6-9) students should also be looked at carefully and may be cancelled. Such courses with a track record of low enrollments are especially vulnerable.
3. The decision about canceling a course should, whenever possible, be made within one month of the conclusion of the initial registration period. The associate provost will initiate the conversation with deans and department or program chairs to determine appropriate action.
4. If a course is cancelled, academic units will find an appropriate pathway for affected students' degree completion. Waivers should be rarely used as they create a tension with the principle that the PLU faculty as a whole determine graduation and major requirements, not individual units or deans.
5. Good reasons may exist for continuing to offer a low-enrolled course in load (i.e., for full teaching-load credit), especially (but not only) when all of the following conditions exist:
 - a. The academic unit or program has had an average section size in the previous two academic years close to the recent median for academic units.
 - b. The course has not been low-enrolled in the current or past two academic years.
6. Whenever a scheduled course is canceled or not able to be taught in load, decisions can be made by individual units, but deans are to "sign off on" proposed resolutions. The course instructor should be part of these conversations.
 - a. The basic choice is whether the course is to be cancelled or taught for partial teaching-load credit.
 - b. Because of expectations for faculty teaching loads as delineated in the Faculty Handbook, when a course is canceled or taught out of load the resulting reduction in teaching-load credit needs to be remedied. This may be with a different course in the same academic term, or the same or different course in a different term.
 - c. While it is not preferable to move the teaching-load obligation to the next academic year, this may be done if it fits the needs of the academic unit and the university (and especially when it is a spring course that needs to be replaced).
 - d. No tenure-track faculty member will be required to move to a reduced load for reduced pay (a reconfigured contract) in response to having a course cancelled or taught out of load. But faculty may choose this resolution in preference to other options. (The reduction for a four-credit course will typically be at the rate of 16.7% of FTE salary.)