Dear Colleagues,

There has been some confusion among faculty and students about our new guidelines for optimizing small course pedagogy, including best matching faculty course design and student demand, and classroom usage through enrollment caps. Of course, Rice has always had caps but it has been difficult to administer them without the new waitlist software recently implemented and tested last semester. We write to clarify our goals and processes for these new guidelines.

Our primary goal is to increase the number of small classes at Rice. While our student-faculty ratio is 6:1, only 69% of our courses are small by the conventional definition used by most of our peers (fewer than 20 students). The simple fact is that we need to offer our undergraduates more small classes. The definition of “small” is always arbitrary. We have chosen to adhere to the size used by most peers (and USNews) for several reasons. First and most importantly, a class with a cap of 19 is, by any standard, small. Second, we better compare with our peers, as externally measured and reported. We should not shape our policies to fit the criteria of ranking systems without compelling reason to do so. In this case, however, there is a compelling reason. Having more small courses that are truly small (fewer than 20) clearly improves the educational experience of our students. Third, a significant number of our small classes are already capped at 20, for which we receive no comparative credit. This is accidental of course, but harmful to our externally measured reputation. Finally, we offer over 2000 courses/sections a year for our students. A few are marginally oversubscribed, but many are underutilized to the detriment of the community. On balance, the benefits to the student body as a whole outweigh the inconvenience to a small number of individuals.

Guidelines

The new guidelines are simple:

1. We propose a default cap for small classes of 19. As a test this default cap has been applied automatically to Spring 2012 courses that currently are capped at 20. In some cases we learned that courses with caps of 20 were typically enrolling 25 or 30 students. We have, therefore, raised the cap on those courses. This is quite important in helping the registrar match classrooms to instructor pedagogy.

2. Already many classes are capped below 19 (e.g., seminars, studios, writing-intensive courses).

3. Faculty may of course override the 19-student cap in exigent circumstances by notifying the Office of the Registrar to increase the enrollment cap for their section.

4. With the exception of courses which are necessarily smaller (e.g., introductory language courses, student taught college courses, freshman seminars) faculty members may request a larger cap (e.g., 25) rather than 19. Beyond this, faculty members may choose any course cap as long as it does not exceed the classroom capacity. For safety reasons we have instituted a university-wide cap of 250.

Implementation

Students will generally be admitted to oversubscribed classes by means of the new electronic waitlist. After the first day of class, waitlisted students who can demonstrate an absolute need for a particular course (e.g., in order to graduate on time, or as a path-critical prerequisite) may be able to gain admission through a petition process signed by the instructor, in which they must demonstrate why that course section must be taken in that current semester. These petitions will be reviewed administratively. We know that many faculty prefer not to admit students beyond the cap, but find it difficult to say no to individual requests. A consistent cap for small courses, and an electronic waitlist, will relieve faculty of this burden. However, faculty who wish to consider special requests themselves and/or list their courses as instructor permission required may do so by opting out of the waitlist for their course. These faculty will continue to meet with students individually and use Special Registration Forms to admit students to their class.

We are still working through processes for these changes for full implementation in Fall 2012. In the meantime, we want to assure faculty and students that we will be flexible in our approach to exceptions. We apologize for our delay in sending out this message, which should have been available before registration began. We thank all of you for your patience and welcome your feedback.

Best wishes,

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