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Composition Seating Cap Proposal

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Proposal:

Decrease the composition courses enrollment cap from 23 to 20 or, ideally, 19.

Rationale:

1) *College Rankings*

*U. S. News & World Report* explains that 8% of its rankings are based on class size: “**Faculty resources** (20 percent): Research shows that the more satisfied students are about their contact with professors, the more they will learn and the more likely it is they will graduate. We use six factors from the 2010-2011 academic year to assess a school's commitment to instruction. Class size has two components, the proportion of classes with fewer than 20 students (30 percent of the faculty resources score) and the proportion with 50 or more students (10 percent of the score)” (<http://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/2011/09/12/how-us-news-calculates-the-college-rankings-2012?page=3>). GCSU is ranked #36 in Regional Universities of the South and has a score of 53, in part because of its “low” percentage of classes with under 20 students (35.7%), its “high” percentage of classes with 50 or more students (7%) and its high percentage of classes 20-49 students (57.0%) (<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/georgia-college--state-university-1602/rankings> and <http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/georgia-college--state-university-1602>). By contrast, Murray State University, a university well-known to our Provost, is ranked #25 in part because 54.0% of its classes have less than 20 students while 42.1% have 20-49 students (<http://colleges.usnews.rankingsandreviews.com/best-colleges/murray-state-1977/rankings>). In Fall 2011, only 18 of our department’s 90 regular undergraduate class sections (not including thesis, independent study, and honors options) had less than 20 students, or 20%, while 72 of 90 sections had more than 20, or 80%. If we had decreased the composition enrollment cap to 19 by adding ten additional sections to the 50 composition sections, then approximately 73 of our 100 sections, or 73% of ENGL courses would have less than 20 students.

2) *Professional Pedagogy and Institutional Values*

In 1989, the Conference on College Composition and Communication, the professional organization that guides standards for composition instruction resolved, "No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing class. Ideally, classes should be limited to 15" (<http://www.ncte.org/cccc/resources/positions/postsecondarywriting>). Similarly, the Association of Writers & Writing Programs, the professional body that articulates best practices in creative writing courses, asserts in its *Official Guide to Writing Programs*, “Introductory creative writing courses have class size restrictions equal to or less than an institution’s restriction for composition classes (but no greater than 20 students). Intermediate and advanced courses have class size restrictions of 12–18 students, with a maximum of 15 students in advanced workshop classes (optimum workshop class size: 12 students)” (<http://guide.awpwriter.org/hallmarks/hallmarksundergrad.php>). If we value challenging, innovative teaching as we claim (“Georgia College is committed to teaching excellence in and beyond the classroom. Using a balance of evidence-based, innovative teaching, high-impact pedagogies along with meaningful student-faculty interaction, Georgia College develops students equipped to clearly, critically, and creatively address societal challenges” [http://gcsu.edu/about/index.htm]), then we should afford instructors a smaller class size in order for them to lead significant class discussions and offer effective feedback on drafts and revisions.

Attempts to meaningfully compare an instructor’s grade distribution statistics in a regular section of 20 students or less with a section of more than 20 is difficult because we offered only five regular sections of composition (neither Honors, Bridge, nor Chemistry) since 2008 with 20 or less students. Of those five, three were taught by instructors with multiple sections that cannot be separated out by GCSU Reports term totals; and the instructors (Ashleigh Eisinger, Charles Lewis, and Marie Elliot) no longer teach here. Instructor One’s Fall 2008 1101 course of 20 students had the following distribution: A: 4 (20%), B: 11 (55%), C: 5 (25%). By contrast, her Fall 2009 1101 course of 24 students yielded the following grades: A: 6 (25%), B: 8 (33.3%), C: 7 (29.2%), D: 1 (4.2%), F: 1 (4.2%), W: 1 (4.2%). Although her percentage of A’s did increase, so did the C’s, D’s, F’s, and W’s; and the B’s decreased. In Fall 2010, she assigned 8 A’s (34.8%), 12 B’s (52.2%), and 3 C’s (13%) in a 23-student class. Without more data, one might guess that this instructor, like many, probably assigns grades according to a bell curve: approximately 25% of the class receives A’s, approximately 50% B’s, approximately 25% C’s or below. Data from the other instructor who had a 20 student regular composition course, Instructor Two, has been requested and will be forwarded upon receipt. A general flattening of the bell curve among all instructors results from revision being a core requirement of our composition courses, as seen by the grade distribution for all 1101 students in the Fall of 2009: 462 A’s (42.5%), 484 B’s (44.5%), 87 C’s (8%), 18 D’s (1.7%) 21 F’s (1.9%), 14 W’s (1.3%), and 1 I (.1%). Preliminary analysis suggests that composition grades have less to do with seats than with instructor grading style and course revision requirements; therefore, we should defer to the guiding principles of the disciplines professional organization constituted by composition specialists studying and assessing writing performance (as opposed to course grades) in small, medium, and large classrooms.

3) *Workload*

At GCSU, undergraduate creative writing courses are thankfully capped at 15 students, well within the professional ideal, while composition courses are capped at 23 students, well outside the professional ideal. Moreover, composition sections are regularly overloaded beyond the limit; currently (17 January 2012), there are two open seats and 35 seat overrides across 41 1102 sections not including Honors, Bridge, or Chemistry sections). Finally, institutional documents like the Aim & Scope of English 1101 and 1102 mandate that 12,000 words (approximately 40 pages) be assigned in 1101 and 9,000 words (approximately 30 pages) be assigned in 1102 while literature and creative writing courses have no such requirements. The effect of this word count policy is a noticeable workload equity issue involving grading: an 1101 instructor grades approximately 920 paper pages per course with the cap respected (23 students X 12,000 words / 300 words/page = 920 paper pages) up to 1040 paper pages when the cap is overridden to 26 students; and an 1102 instructor grades about 690 paper pages per course while a literature instructor grades about 600 paper pages per course (assuming 20 students with 4 assignments totaling 30 pages). Update: As of 8 August 2012, the Fall 2012 seating cap in 1101 is now 24 students, meaning an 1101 instructor now grades 960 pages per section.

4) *Service to the Core*

The further effect of these enrollment cap and word count policies is that very few tenure-line faculty serve the composition core and introduce freshman to our program; this year 92 of the 97 compositions sections were taught by graduate students, part-time faculty, and limited-term faculty while five of the 97 were taught by two tenure-line faculty. What literature faculty member wants to teach composition since it means grading anywhere from 100 to 500 more paper pages than a literature course? What creative writing faculty member with an undergraduate course cap of 14 would want to teach a course capped at 23?

Staffing

1) *20 students per course*

Approximately 6-8 sections per semester (12-16 per academic year) would need to be added in order to reduce composition class sizes from 23 to 20 (excluding Honors, Bridge, and Chemistry sections: 90 regular sections X 23 students = 2070 / 20 students = 104 sections – 90 sections = 14 additional sections). Assuming these sections were staffed with non-tenure line faculty in the beginning (tenure-line faculty would want to become core stakeholders when they realized the change was permanent), and assuming $2000 per course for graduate student and part-time faculty instructors, this would cost $24,000-$36,000. Given that English 1102 is the *only* core course that every student must take and given that our composition program serves approximately 2,000 students per year, this is an increase of $12-18 per *composition* student that could and should be found in the departmental, college, and/or university budgets. This is an educational bargain compared to the $125 Wellness fee charged to *every* student every term for the $28,000,000 recreational gym.

2) *19 students per course*

Approximately 9-10 sections per semester (18-20 per academic year) would need to be added in order to reduce composition class sizes from 23 to 19 for a cost of $36,000-$40,000, or $17-$19 per composition student.

Summary

Decreasing the composition enrollment caps from 23 to 20 students will align GCSU composition courses with the pedagogical guidelines of both our professional organization and institutional mission; address workload inequity among creative writing, literature, and composition instructors; and encourage tenure-line faculty to serve the core. Decreasing the course cap to 19 will do all of the above *and* positively affect our college ranking.

The Future

Looking ahead beyond the emergent enrollment cap and override crises, two changes could be considered. Given that 90-100 composition sections are currently offered each year, almost twice the number of regular literature and creative writing sections combined, a Composition Coordinator position (responsible for composition instructor supervision, evaluation, and development) could and should be created to replace or work with the Coordinator of the Teaching Fellows, for the graduate students are only responsible for about 30-45 composition sections per year. Moreover, the MA Program could raise both its enrollment as well as its quality of student in order to supply new graduate student instructors to complement the tenure-line faculty teaching composition (as well as join the MFA Program in truly fulfilling our university’s graduate mission). Given that our Aim & Scope document guiding 1101 and 1102 instructional policy was created around 1999, tenure-line faculty members teaching composition (because the cap was lowered) could lead all composition instructors (graduate students, part-time faculty, and limited-term faculty) in thoroughly revising and updating our composition pedagogy for the twenty-first century. The high quality of composition courses cannot be sustained if only two tenure-line faculty teach composition and our caps not only remain outside the norm of professional guidelines but are routinely overridden.