"Consultation and Curriculum"
A Report from the Curriculum Consultation Subcommittee
of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee
The College of Staten Island/CUNY
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Over the past several years, issues regarding consultation among departments and programs have arisen during consideration of curricular items at meetings of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. In order to clarify what consultation means, to establish methods for documenting consultation, and to identify expedient and thorough practices of consultation, the Consultation Subcommittee of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (made up of Professors Catherine Lavender, Lihong (Connie) Li, Jonathan Peters, and Louis Petingi) submits the following report and recommendations. (Note: A four-point summary appears at the end of the report.)

It should be remembered that consultation, rather than being merely something which slows down curricular change, should also be recognized as a professional practice with several positive outcomes. Consultation allows departments and programs to address issues of enrollment and management of sections which arise as a result of curricular changes in related curricula; it prevents duplication of efforts and the waste of precious resources (faculty time, classroom space, etc.); and it works to build a consensus among faculty across disciplines and departments about the larger educational mission of the College as a whole. Proper consultation creates a spirit of collaboration and feeds communication among faculty in different disciplines; and for this very positive reason, it is worth pursuing with all earnestness.

It is important to differentiate here between instances where joint approval is required and instances where consultation is required. Joint approval by all affected programs and departments is required in circumstances of changes to existing cross-listed courses or proposals of new cross-listed courses and changes to existing joint degree programs or proposals of new joint degree programs. In these cases, all changes must be approved by a recorded vote by the curriculum committees of each involved department or program. This requirement for approval in fact constitutes a "veto power" which will prevent any unapproved course from being placed on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee agenda for a vote. Thus, this report will not further address issues of joint approval. Consultation, on the other hand, is not the same as approval; the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee has stated that consultation does not constitute veto power over a course, nor should it be used to delay changes which do not require explicit approval under those conditions stated above.

Consultation is required in two kinds of situation. The first of these occurs when departments or programs propose changes affecting other majors, because there is a change in an existing course which is either required by another major or that serves as a prerequisite for another major's required courses. The second kind of situation in which consultation must take place occurs when changes in an existing course or creation of a new course creates a significant degree of overlap of content with existing courses in another department or program.

In changes which affect other majors, consultation is essential in order to allow affected departments and programs sufficient time to assess the likely outcome of such changes. Affected programs may need to change major requirements to accommodate the changes being made, to create new courses to replace the changed courses, to identify replacement courses already extant, or make other sorts of adjustments. Consultation allows affected departments and programs to serve their majors and programs by responding to shifts in curriculum.

Cases of overlap are more complicated to address than changes which affect other majors, but consultation is no less essential in these instances. Overlap is wasteful because it duplicates faculty efforts; it also represents a missed opportunity for communication and cooperation across departmental and disciplinary divisions. In practical terms, however, it can also be a source for acrimony among departments and programs, as it represents a struggle over "turf," and for this reason, overlap should be avoided. In the end, much of the conflict which has arisen over overlap could be dealt with by adhering more closely to the spirit and practice of meaningful consultation, with sufficient time allowed for discussion and input from the parties involved.

Consultation should minimally consist of the following steps:

1. The proposing department should contact affected programs and departments via the appropriate Curriculum Committee representative (with the Department Chair or Program Coordinator carbon-copied); this should happen at a minimum thirty days before the item concerned would appear on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee agenda. The Undergraduate Curriculum Committee representatives should then undertake to coordinate and to ensure that the needed consultation takes place between the two faculties in a timely fashion, usually within two weeks of notification.

2. During that two-week period, discussion should take place between the parties involved, and the outcomes of these discussions should be briefly recorded in memos representing the position of the two departments or programs (for example, listing any changes that have been agreed upon, requesting further alterations, stating reasons for opposition to the proposed item, or making clear that the affected department or program believes that consultation has been sufficient).

3. If the affected department does not choose to take part in consultation after being contacted by the proposing department during that thirty-day period, this rejected attempt at consultation shall be accepted as sufficient consultation. This is meant to prevent "pocket vetoes" of courses through refusals to discuss curricular items.

4. When the proposal appears on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee agenda, under “consultation” should be listed a simple narrative of the consultation that took place, including the names of faculty consulted in affected departments and the date on which the affected program was contacted to initiate consultation. This initial contact should be documented by carbon-copying the Curriculum Coordinator on the notification sent in step one on this list. The Curriculum Coordinator should also be carbon-copied by the affected departments on the resolution of the consultation (for instance, to

document that consultation has been satisfied).

5. Not all consultations will result in complete (or indeed even partial) agreement. In these cases, proposing and affected departments should make every effort to understand the reasons for disagreement, but if the disagreement cannot be resolved within the consultation process, this must not be used to prevent timely consideration by the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee on the proposed curricular item.

6. In some instances, the need for consultation may not become apparent before the item appears on the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee agenda; indeed, there are times when the need for consultation only comes to the surface during discussions at the meeting of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee. In these instances, it is better to err on the side of requiring consultation than to allow courses to go forward to a vote where consultation has not taken place. In cases where a department or program has not been contacted about consultation prior to the proposal of the item but the department or program's representative feels that consultation is needed, such items should be tabled without prejudice to allow consultation to take place under the same procedures as in numbers two and three above. The tabled item will then automatically be eligible for a vote at the next meeting of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (and receive priority on the agenda).

These guidelines are intended to balance the need for serious consultation (which requires time to allow thought and discussion) and the need to keep the curriculum process from becoming too moribund and cumbersome.

A final recommendation came to light during the discussions of the Curriculum Consultation Subcommittee with regards to the flexibility of the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee's agenda. It has become a common occurrence that at most meetings some curricular items come forward to the committee as "New Business," rather than appearing on the regular agenda; in these instances, the proposals are circulated to be read at the meeting rather than beforehand. This practice presents problems with regards to consultation, because it is not always clear to the committee representatives at first glance whether there are consultation issues at play in the proposal. As curriculum has developed and become more intertwined and complicated, it is not always immediately evident when a proposed curricular change has an effect on other programs or departments. At a minimum, the circulation of the agenda with the proposed items gives representatives a chance to review the proposed changes and to consult with the faculty whom they represent beforehand, and in cases where there is a need for consultation, to make this request at the committee meeting before the vote is held on the item. When last-minute changes are passed along by the committee without overlaps or conflicts being identified, the oversight often comes to light at a later stage in the approval process, requiring the committee to revisit the item and often creating delay and unnecessary acrimony which further hinders the consultation process. No department or program wants to be chastised for failing to consult, and no committee representative wants to fail to diligently represent his or her constituency. Therefore, in order to ensure an orderly process of consultation, the Curriculum Consultation Subcommittee recommends that only minor changes should be allowed to appear for a vote without formally appearing on the agenda; these minor changes might be such as

revisiting previously tabled items which have previously appeared on the agenda, topics courses, or bureaucratic corrections which require committee approval. All other items should be held until they can appear on the formal agenda of the next meeting.

Summary:

1. Consultation is not the same as joint approval.
    a. Joint approval is needed in all curricular changes for cross-listed courses or courses which serve as major requirements for joint degree programs.
    b. Consultation is needed in two kinds of instance:
        i. first, when a curricular change will affect another major's requirements or pre-requisites for major requirements;
        ii. second, when a curricular change creates a significant degree of overlap of content with existing courses in another department or program.
2. Consultation is not a "veto power," but is necessary to allow affected departments to respond to changes which will affect their own majors or programs.
3. Consultation must be thorough but also timely. The burden of creating successful consultation falls on both the departments or programs proposing the item and the affected departments or programs. Proposers must contact affected departments or programs at least one month before putting forward the relevant items to the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee, and the affected departments or programs must respond in a timely fashion to the request for consultation.
4. In order to ensure proper consultation practices, only minor curricular changes (such as topics courses or previously tabled items) should be put forward for a vote at the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee as "New Business" without having appeared on the formal agenda.