Sustainable Course Descriptions

The 2000–2001 academic year was the first year that the Committee on Courses systematically deleted from the university catalog courses that have not been taught for three years or more.

In several cases, departments had not offered a specialized course under a course number and title specified in the catalog. Yet similar courses had been taught regularly in the department in various formats, under experimental numbers (410, 510, 610), or under the general designations for special topics seminars, workshops, or practicums (the 406/407/408/409, 506/507/508/509, 606/607/608/609 series). With time, departments had discovered that a course description in the catalog was too specialized to apply to any of their courses as actually being taught.

Unfortunately, removal of an overly specialized course, although untaught, still might have consequences for departments. Often that course had been the sole representative in the catalog of subjects that are taught by a department and are part of the regular curriculum. Dropping that course could make it appear that a department offered no courses in that course’s subject area.

The committee has noted another, companion problem. Over the years, the committee has observed that new courses tailored to the particular research interests and instructional style of an individual faculty member are likely to fall into disuse within a few years as the person’s teaching assignments and interests change, or if the instructor becomes unavailable for teaching that particular course.

The Committee on Courses recommends that departments and programs develop more sustainable course descriptions. A sustainable course description would identify a subject area and general approach, but would not be so restrictive as to exclude different perspectives or specializations also representative of that subject area.

The committee also recommends that departments and programs be selective when proposing permanent course status for specialized courses that can only be taught by one particular instructor.

For example, a department with several experts qualified to teach ceramics, but having only one instructor who specializes in Ming porcelain per se, might currently have a specialized course titled Ming Dynasty Porcelains in the catalog. A more sustainable course title could be Chinese Porcelains or even Porcelains, depending upon the range of expertise available to teach the course. Another approach would use the topics course Ceramics, possibly repeatable as the exact subject material—and transcript title—changes.

Departments following these recommendations could then represent the full range of their curricular offerings and could maintain a sustainable list of courses in the catalog.