The Course Challenge Procedure: A Fast but Not Furious Way to Update University Curriculums

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Universities want to encourage faculty to keep curricula up-to-date and innovative, yet faculty dread the prospect of arguing about course and program changes with college and university curriculum committees – which are overworked and overwhelmed with detail. The Course Challenge Procedure (CCP) at the University of Saskatchewan is a collegial yet autonomous way for peer review and approval of new courses, and pre-requisite and program changes. It encourages more faculty members to be informed about curricular changes in other units, yet also allows for faster approval. The CCP can be implemented as a web-based, email, or paper distribution system, and used as the basis for integrated curriculum approval processes at the department, college, and university level.

Introduction

> My method to overcome a difficulty is to go around it.
> - *George Pólya (1887–1985)*

Former US President Woodrow Wilson is reputed to have said "it is easier to change the location of a cemetery than to change the school curriculum." Many faculty would likely agree – in fact, they would rather tackle the cemetery, whose occupants cannot object.

Universities want to encourage faculty to keep curricula up-to-date and innovative, yet faculty dread the prospect of arguing about course and program changes with curriculum committees – which are themselves overworked and overwhelmed with detail. The result is that changes to university curriculums aren't done frequently enough, can take too long to approve, and may result in unproductive controversy and too much documentation along the way.

At the University of Saskatchewan, many curricular changes are now being approved by the Course Challenge Procedure (CCP). This paper ex-

plains the context of this procedure, how curricular changes are defined, the benefits of the procedure, how it works at the University and elsewhere, and faculty opinions.

The CCP is used for fast approval of new courses, course deletions, pre-requisite changes, and program changes (Fornssler, 2008). It incorporates peer review of these curricular changes, while respecting the authority of colleges and departments in managing their own curriculums. This university procedure encourages more faculty members to be informed about curricular changes in other units, yet also allows for faster approvals.

At the University of Saskatchewan, the CCP is a web-based procedure, but could be implemented at any university as a web-based, email, or paper distribution system. It also has the potential to be used as the basis for integrated curriculum approval processes at the department, college, and university levels.

Context

The University of Saskatchewan implemented the CCP following the changes in the University Act in 1995. Under the academic decision-making structure, which was followed from 1912 to 1995, every curriculum change, no matter how minor, had to be approved by a university committee. When this system was established, however, the university had only 50 faculty; by 1995, with 900 faculty, this course approval system was creating exhaustion and gridlock.

In 1995, the passage of the new University Act provided the impetus to change the way things were done in many places in the institution, and introducing the CCP was one of these changes. An ad-hoc Committee produced a report in 1996, which outlined criteria and principles for this new procedure:

Criteria

1. Increase the level of responsibility and accountability of Colleges for their curricula.

2. Encourage Colleges to keep calendar descriptions accurate with respect to what really happens with the courses they list.

3. Minimize the time delay in securing approvals for curricular changes.

4. Minimize the total effort required in the collegial decision making process.

Principles

1. A University is more than a loose federation of Colleges and Departments. Therefore, there is an onus on Colleges and Departments to consult widely both within and among units. Given the limited resources available, consultation among units must occur to ensure that unnecessary duplication is avoided and that students depending on courses from other units are not disadvantaged.

2. Although courses and programs are developed by individuals, Departments, and Colleges, when approved, they become part of the offerings for which the University of Saskatchewan is publicly accountable and for which the University may be legally held liable if incorrectly advertised.

3. The approval process should be clearly articulated and available to all faculty, departments, and colleges in print and electronic formats. Procedures need to be in place that encourage rather than inhibit departments/units from an ongoing review of courses.

4. Each incremental level of the approval process should have a clearly defined function and should add value to the approval process.

5. The *University Calendar* is the University's contract with its students. Therefore, the information contained in the *University Calendar* related to course and program listings should fully and fairly set out what the University can promise to its students.

Defining Curricular Changes and the CCP

At the outset, it is important to categorize and define the types of curricular changes that universities

must deal with, so that the appropriate level of review can be determined. At the University of Saskatchewan, the definition of a curricular change requiring university approval is any change which affects a student's academic program or transcript. For example, changing the textbooks for a course does not affect the transcript so such a change would not require university approval – though changing the text may well be something an instructor would discuss extensively with department colleagues. Introducing a new course, deleting a course, or changing the courses required for a degree would affect the transcript, and therefore, would be the type of curricular change that requires University approval. These are the types of curricular changes for which the CCP was implemented.

The term, 'course challenge,' can be a confusing one. Other universities will use similar terminology to describe giving a student credit for prior learning, or allow a student to 'challenge' a course by writing the exam without having to register in the course. Another common definition of 'course challenge' would be to describe the intellectual rigour of a course.

Benefits of the Course Challenge Procedure

For the University of Saskatchewan, the CCP is a curricular approval procedure. It begins with a document posted on a website, which describes all of the new courses and other curricular changes that colleges are proposing. Then for a defined period of time, any member of the university community – faculty, student, or staff – can 'challenge' a proposed change. If no challenge is received, then the curricular change proposal is approved. Only if a proposed change is challenged, and only if the challenge cannot be resolved, would the senior curriculum committee have to deal with the proposal.

It is a procedure which respects autonomy and collegiality, both of which are important values of universities. Autonomy is integral to the concept of a university, where individual faculty pursue research interests and create courses, and where college faculties define curricula, set standards, create programs and academic regulations, and prescribe graduation requirements. Collegiality is also integral to how universities function, expressed in the mutual respect that is accorded to all disciplines at a university and in the goal of universities to create a supportive environment that fosters lively debate and a spirit of enquiry.

Collegiality and autonomy can sometimes be in conflict, particularly when faculty members experience the frustration of having to justify their curricular decisions to a senior curriculum committee which does not appreciate the specific situation a department is dealing with. On the other hand, faculty committees identify errors, gaps, and conflicts often enough that universities are reluctant to dispense completely with a mechanism for collegial review of curricular decisions.

The CCP combines both collegiality and autonomy in making decisions about curricular changes. It gives colleges autonomy over their curriculum by dispensing with the usual university requirement that curricular changes be justified to and approved by a senior curriculum committee. But because curriculum changes are circulated so widely, any errors or deficiencies in consultation are identified quickly. In that sense, the CCP could be considered even more collegial than the usual committee approach.

Use at Other Universities

There are not many universities using this procedure for course approvals. In searching websites, there appear to be only two other universities in Canada have implemented a similar procedure – the University of Alberta (University of Alberta, n.d.), from which the University of Saskatchewan procedure was originally modeled); and Thompson Rivers University. In the United States, Illinois State University (Illinois State University, n.d.) and the University of Delaware (University of Delaware, n.d.) appear to have comparable course approval procedures.

There are also some interesting variations – the University of Wollongong in Australia has a procedure that allows Deans to approve courses pro-

visionally when there is a "market-driven" reason (Fornssler, 2008, p. 20). And the University of California Davis had a web-based submission procedure, though the approvals are still done by a committee (Fornssler, 2008). While some universities discuss curricular design strategies and best practices, there is limited discussion about curriculum approval processes (Course and curriculum, n.d.).

How the CCP Works

At the University of Saskatchewan, the CCP is used for minor program changes, new courses, deletions, prerequisites, and changes to service courses which would affect students in other programs or colleges (such as a new lab or other change of that type).

The Procedure works as follows:

- Colleges send their approved curricular changes to the Office of the University Secretary by email.

- The document is reviewed to make sure it is within the challenge policy.

- Deadline dates are set.

- The document is assembled and posted on the website.

- The university community is informed that the document has been posted along with the deadlines for review.

The review period is two weeks, with some flexibility over the Christmas break, and during the summer months. If no challenge is received, the curricular change is considered approved and is implemented.

Handling a Challenge

If a challenge is made, the Office of the University Secretary determines whether it can be resolved informally. Most challenges are resolved in this way, for example, a confusing course title or a request for an alternate prerequisite. Sometimes a curricular change is simply withdrawn or deferred by agree-

ment between departments.

When an informal resolution cannot be achieved, the challenger writes a memo describing grounds for objection and the department and/or college replies. The Vice-President, Academic then reviews the issue and tries to mediate. If the challenge is still not resolved, then the issue is referred to the University's senior curricular committee for a final decision.

One of the sources of anxiety around introducing a CCP is fear that such a system will produce dozens of frivolous challenges. The experience at the University of Saskatchewan has been the opposite. Challenges are few, perhaps because faculty are now very diligent about consulting widely before finalizing their proposals. However, when a challenge is made, it usually has merit, because it identifies a significant problem with a proposed curricular change.

Since the CCP was implemented in 1997, the University has approved hundreds of curricular initiatives and changes. In that time, there have been fewer than 20 challenges. Of those, only two or three could not be resolved and had to be referred to the senior curriculum committee.

It should be noted that when dealing with new programs or program deletions, the University of Saskatchewan still follows the traditional academic approval route – discussion by curricular committees and approval at faculty council. It would be expected that the number of challenges would increase if the CCP was also used for new programs and program deletions, so that in the end, it is likely that most of these more significant changes would be dealt with by the senior curriculum committee in any case.

Opinions about the Procedure

Surveying University of Saskatchewan faculty and staff about the procedure produced the following comments:

> "It is a very good process…it provides colleges with timely responses and is easy to understand."

> "It's all good. It is a fast, transparent, and

open process."

"…an excellent process. It balances the rights and interests of colleges with the rights and needs of the broader university community. Colleges need to be able to develop new courses in response to change and the challenge process acknowledges the role of colleges as subject matter experts. The challenge process notifies the university community of potential duplication of academic content and also communicates new course offerings."

Few suggestions for changes to the procedure have been received. Initially, the CCP was scheduled once a month, primarily due to the staff time involved in duplication and mailing. This caused some difficulty for colleges in terms of the scheduling of their faculty meetings for curricular approvals. When the procedure was changed so that Challenge documents were distributed by email, this allowed greater flexibility in the posting schedule.

Conclusion

After more than a decade of experience with the CCP, the University of Saskatchewan has found it to be an innovative process for fast approval of university curriculum changes, respecting academic autonomy, while also allowing for collegial input and review.

Now that a web-based procedure is being used for the CCP, consideration is being given to developing a web-based data input for curricular changes to allow easier production of various curricular approval documents, and could be linked directly to the updating and production of the University's course calendar.

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Biography

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