

Report from the Provost

December 2012

Online Teaching & Learning

At the request of the Curriculum Committee, last month I shared with them my guiding principles regarding online courses. One of my priorities as provost has been to provide guidance for our online teaching and learning efforts to ensure they are consistent with our mission. We need to offer quality online academic instruction that meets the needs of our resident students, as well as student populations interested in our courses and programs who are not resident to our campus. It's clear to me that we are behind the curve in this area.

Winter sessions have been discussed before on campus, and early last month following conversations with the president, I decided that the time was right to launch a pilot session. The SUNY Learning Network webpage lists **sixty-nine pages** of winter session online courses offered by almost every SUNY campus, from the university centers to the community colleges. SUNY Purchase, Lehman College and Ulster Community College have all advertised their campus winter sessions in *The New Paltz Oracle* recently. The fact is that our students are taking these courses elsewhere and to better serve our own students, we needed to put forward our own courses. Our turnaround time to set up a winter session was very short, with most schools having announced their class offering in September or early October. Four faculty members agreed to adapt their online courses to the winter session's three week format, and with the hard work of staff in Extended Learning, Financial Aid, Computer Services, Records & Registration and elsewhere, we were able to work out vital details needed to make this happen within a matter of days. I was very pleased to see that despite the lateness of our effort, our course offerings filled literally within hours of being posted for registration.

The best guarantor of academic quality is our own faculty. As we move forward in developing a required training program for our online coursework, I am committed to ensuring that our faculty be the best online instructors possible. This training will follow the rubrics developed by the Quality Matters Program, a nationally recognized standard geared to ensuring academic quality in the development of online teaching and learning. For more information please view:

http://www.qmprogram.org/files/QM_Standards_2011-2013.pdf

Graduate Programs

It is no secret that graduate enrollments on our campus have been declining, as have those at many other campuses. Our graduate enrollments in the last five years have declined 22.5 percent. This trend is unsustainable and it is time we assess the effectiveness of our current programs. I have asked Associate Provost and Dean of the Graduate School, Laurel M. Garrick Duhaney to put together a working group to carry out a program review of our current graduate school offerings, based on data and input from relevant constituents. This review will provide me with a comprehensive set of recommendations by the end of the spring semester. Programs that are identified as weak and no longer effectively serving the mission of the college should be phased out. Other programs that have encountered difficulties may need to be significantly restructured, possibly adopting an online delivery system, while those that remain strong with potential for further growth should receive additional resources. At the same time, we should be exploring areas where there are unmet academic and market needs to develop new graduate programming or to promote new delivery modes of existing programming. This effort will require that the Graduate School develop a cohesive and effective branding, development and marketing strategy for our programs.

Finally, I will be working with Dean Garrick Duhaney on improving the administrative structure and mission of the Graduate School. It is very important that the chain of decision-making, communication and responsibilities be clearly established between the Graduate School and the departments and schools which house graduate programs. This has not always been clear in the past, and we must address structural issues that inhibit the effectiveness of our graduate programs. Likewise we must clarify the mission of the school and link that with both the new strategic plan and the mission of the College.

Evaluating Teaching and the Proper Role of SEIs

The Academic Affairs Committee requested that I provide guidelines in interpreting SEIs. I do so in the spirit of shared governance, understanding that our common objective is the success of our faculty and students. The primary purpose of a Student Evaluation of Instruction is to provide individual instructors and the College information that can help assess teaching skills, identify problems and plan for improvements. SEIs inform decision-makers in the reappointment, tenure and promotion process about faculty teaching abilities and improvements over time. Ideally,

readers of SEIs should be looking for patterns across multiple semesters and not at information from a single semester, which may vary considerably.

A focus on simple numerical comparisons between courses or instructors is not recommended. Course size and a lack of statistical difference in the data that may not be self-evident can bias interpretations. In evaluating faculty teaching, SEIs should be part of a broader teaching portfolio that includes elements such as syllabi, examples of materials that illustrate innovative teaching, faculty teaching philosophy statements, peer evaluation reports, examples of graded student work with comments, and work in the area of the scholarship of teaching and learning, among others. I would urge departments and faculty governance to think seriously about how such a teaching portfolio can be developed and used.

Students can be a good source of some types of information, but there is research showing that students' assessments of instructors can be influenced by factors outside of their control. These can include class size (small classes tend to be rated higher than large classes), discipline, and students' reasons for enrolling in the course (elective courses tend to receive higher ratings than required courses). Readers should consider such influences on SEIs when data and comments are reviewed. In addition, biases may also come into play when the instructor comes from a group under-represented among the faculty. Biases may reflect stereotypes on race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexual orientation or gender. Students may be unaware of the biases that are affecting their assessments, or may be openly expressing them. Faculty who believe their SEIs are directly reflecting such biases should speak to their chairs and/or deans.

Evaluation forms on which low ratings are given without explanation, or where the student comment section includes complaints directed at the professor's beliefs, the harshness of the grading, or the professor's personal characteristics (such as physical appearance, clothing style, or personality) should be discounted. Negative comments can be disconcerting for faculty, particularly given the hard work and preparation that goes into putting together a class. Students can sometimes be sarcastic, or they may be motivated by events in their own lives unrelated to the course. It is important that faculty, and all of us who review SEIs, be able to maintain a dispassionate perspective when presented with such comments. At the same time, faculty should be alert to critiques related to class pedagogy or organization that appear repeatedly on SEIs, even if just by a handful of students. This may indicate that there is a need for some additional fine tuning in a particular area, and consulting with colleagues or the Center for Teaching and Learning may be in order.

I believe both numerical and open comments should be available for review by the faculty member and decision-makers involved in the reappointment, tenure and promotion processes, and hope to work with faculty governance on these guidelines and their timing. Comments can provide valuable context for interpreting SEI numbers and, if used as part of a formative approach to assessing teaching, be helpful to the continuous improvement of teaching on our campus. Information on faculty SEIs must be considered confidential and should not be shared beyond those who are authorized to review them. However, faculty should be aware that under both Federal and New York State law, individual SEIs are subject to FOIA and state public records law.

Campus-wide *Chronicle of Higher Education* Subscription

We are implementing a campus-wide electronic subscription to *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Even with a very conservative estimate of the number of current subscriptions on campus, this move will economize on institutional resources. Most importantly however, it will provide free access for our entire faculty and staff, allowing them to stay informed about current issues and trends in higher education. I view this as very much in line with our faculty and staff development efforts. A campus community alert to best practices and the latest thinking about the challenges and opportunities facing the Academy will help us make better decisions. I will update everyone when the subscription comes into effect and will provide the needed access and log-in instructions.

Finally, I want to take this opportunity to wish everyone a safe and restful winter break. I hope you are able take the time to celebrate the year gone by in the company of friends and family.

Best regards,

Philip Mauceri
Provost