

The Curriculum Committee was charged by Dean Washburn to: review and report “on the effectiveness of the new 1L electives, the drafting courses, and the changes to the research component of the ELA/LRW curriculum. Review the effectiveness of the upper-level writing seminar requirement.”

Summary: these elements of our curriculum are, on balance, effective. Our review of these things does not reveal any concerns that require immediate faculty attention. A few things should continue to be monitored, as indicated below, but the Curriculum Committee does not recommend any changes at this time.

I. The 1L Electives.

Faculty Perspectives.

To assess the effectiveness of the 1L elective from the perspective of faculty, two groups of faculty were asked to provide their impressions: faculty who teach required first-year courses, and faculty who have taught electives open to 1Ls.

Faculty who teach required first year courses were asked for their impressions of 1Ls taking electives in the following areas; these questions were intended to gauge any negative or positive effect of the 1L electives on the required first-year courses:

1. Have you noticed that 1Ls who are taking an elective have been less prepared for your required class, more prepared, or not noticeably different in their level of preparation?
2. Have you noticed that 1Ls who are taking an elective have brought useful insights into the class discussion that might have originated in their elective?
3. Have you noticed that 1Ls who are taking an elective have had trouble meeting deadlines in your required class?
4. Has a 1L elective interference with your course (for example, by scheduling events that conflict with your course or making it hard to schedule reviews or make-up classes)?

Ten faculty members responded.

As to questions 1, 3, and 4, the faculty who responded uniformly reported that they did not perceive any problems in those areas; indeed, most said they did not know which of their students were taking an elective and which weren't.

As to the second question, most faculty again reported that they did not see any noticeable difference, but a few faculty did say that 1Ls who were taking an elective brought insights into the required first-year courses that enriched the discussion in those courses.

While this isn't conclusive evidence that the elective "works" from the perspective of required first-year faculty, it does suggest that taking a 1L elective does not affect student work in required courses beyond normal variations in performance and effort.

Faculty who have taught electives open to 1Ls were asked the following questions, intended to gauge the impact of having 1Ls in upper-level classes:

1. Have the 1Ls been able to hold their own? Have they been prepared?
2. Were you able to go to sufficient depth in your courses even though there were 1Ls in them?
3. How have the 1Ls performed relative to the upper-class students?
4. Do you think that the 1Ls who have taken your classes as electives have benefited from having this option? If so, how?

Eight faculty members responded.

As to the first question, all eight responses indicated that the 1Ls (who stayed with the class) were as prepared, or better prepared and more motivated, than the second and third-year students in their classes. One said the 1Ls were "more apt to participate" than upper-class students, and another said their presence "enhanced" the class.

In response to the second question, all eight responding faculty members said that they were able to achieve the same level of depth that they would have had the first year students not been there. One commented that she did not teach the classes "any differently because there are 1Ls. I haven't found any 1Ls getting lost."

In response to the third question, all the faculty members who expressed an opinion said that the first year students performed well. One said their performance was comparable to upper-division students, while the remainder all felt that the first-year students performed better than their upper-division counterparts. One reported that the top student in one of her classes was a 1L.

And in response to the fourth question, the faculty members were uniform in their belief that 1L's benefited from taking their courses as electives. Some professors noted that they themselves, and other students, gained something from having first-years in their classes as a result of their contributions and enthusiasm.

Faculty also reported that they feel that 1Ls are better prepared to contribute in core first year courses as a result of elective, in part because first year courses are fresh in minds of students in electives and assist them and make connections in law. Also, because 1Ls have chosen to be in these classes, they are more committed to classes in intellectual terms. This allows students to start courses in their areas of concentrated interest earlier, and gives them a wider view of the law. Finally the opportunity to take an elective, gives students additional research, writing and legal analysis experience, with feedback.

These anecdotal data strongly suggest that the 1L elective is also effective from the perspective of faculty who teach upper-level courses open to 1Ls.

Student Perspectives.

Students who have taken an elective in their first year were asked which elective they had taken, and a few questions intended to gauge their perception of their ability to handle the elective and their required courses:

1. Have you felt that you know enough about the law or the specific subject matter to handle the material in your elective?
2. Is the material presented in a way that generally seems appropriate to your level as a 1L?
3. How, if at all, is your elective affecting your preparing for your required courses?

Twenty-one students responded.

As to the first question, all respondents reported that they were generally able to keep up with the material. Many students reported that their individual professors did a good job of explaining concepts that might not be familiar to 1Ls. A small number of students did report that they felt a lack of guidance with the more advanced concepts, but these appear to be idiosyncratic to that student and that course, not indicative of wider problems with 1Ls' ability to handle the material.

In response to the second question, students uniformly responded that the material is presented in a way that is appropriate for their level; if anything, students feel that the 1L electives could move through the material a little more quickly

As to the third question, students reported that they are generally able to handle the amount of work, but several students did describe the amount of reading in their electives "heavy," and a few students reported being unable to manage all the reading in all their classes. This is likely also true for some of the 1Ls who do not take an elective. Many students reported that the opportunity to explore their other interests and study topics outside the required first-year curriculum more than outweighed the burden of the extra work. And the opportunity to take an elective in the first year is attractive to potential applicants and admitted students.

Despite some issues about the amount of reading assigned in the electives, the 1L elective appears to be effective for 1Ls who take advantage of that opportunity because it enhances their first-year experience.

Overall Assessment.

The 1L elective is a successful curricular option for students. First-year students benefit from taking the course without disruption of their performance in their required courses or dilution of the upper-level courses they are taking as electives. The net effect of the first-year elective is positive.

II. The Drafting Courses & Upper-Level Seminar Requirement.

Faculty Perspectives.

Drafting Courses.

The drafting courses, which are primarily taught by adjunct faculty, receive overall ratings on student evaluations of almost entirely 5s and 6s (out of 6). Scores ranged from 2s to 6s, but the average rating for these courses in every category was nearly 5.5 out of 6.

Upper-Level Seminar Requirement.

Faculty who have taught upper-level seminar courses were asked the following questions in an attempt to gauge whether the seminars are creating the intellectual experience they are intended to provide without hindering students' progress towards degree completion or faculty members' ability to develop their teaching portfolio.

1. In your writing seminar(s), are your students engaging in the material and their assignments with the level of intellectual depth you expect?
2. Does this teaching obligation hinder other teaching interests?
3. Are students generally completing the requirements in a timely way?

Seven faculty members responded.

As to the first question, faculty generally reported that students were able to go to the level of intellectual depth that was expected. As with any upper-level course, the level of commitment will vary. Some faculty give students a group of topics from which to choose, while others allow students to choose their own topics. Both approaches have advantages and disadvantages, but there does not appear to be a significant problem with depth in these courses.

In response to the second question, faculty reported that teaching an upper-level seminar course mainly enhanced their other teaching and research interests. Faculty observed that students with major writing deficits will be more time-consuming to teach, but none of the faculty reported any significant difficulties.

As to meeting deadlines, faculty report that students are generally able to complete their work on time; as might be predicted, the key is to communicate deadlines early in the semester and enforce them. Clearly stated expectations of timeliness encourage compliance, and faculty report only a small number of students who miss interim deadlines and, less frequently, are unable to complete their final papers on time.

From the perspective of faculty, the upper-level seminar require is functioning adequately.

Student Perspectives.

As to the writing seminar requirement, some students expressed frustration with writing seminar classes: it was difficult to produce an academic piece of writing in one semester where the student was also expected to come to an understanding of an unfamiliar substantive body of law, or the work was disproportionate to the number of credits offered.

There do appear to be some concerns about the method of instruction in the seminars, as students expressed concerns that they did not receive adequate instruction in how to write an academic paper, the available topics didn't align with their interests (and independent student options were not available), and the seminars themselves vary in terms of the expectations. Other students expressed concern about the utility of the writing seminar in relation to the work of attorneys.

However, in general, the comments were positive regarding the writing seminar topics offered and the ability to look at a body of law on a "macro" level. But predominantly, the criticism from students was that the feeling that they would have benefited more from a practice oriented writing class (instead of an academic writing class). A large percentage of the students wanted the ability to substitute extra drafting classes instead of the writing seminar.

With regard to the upper-level drafting requirement, students had less feedback generally, but their response was positive: most students reported that the classes were useful and worthwhile. Students did express concern about how adjunct faculty grade their work, and had some concerns about the ability of adjunct faculty to teach exactly how to produce quality writing.

Overall Assessment.

The upper-level drafting and seminar writing requirements are effective. The faculty should continue to monitor this requirement to ensure that it satisfies the overall pedagogical aims of the curriculum and provides the kind of writing experience we expect our students to have. These requirements have the potential to serve as cornerstones of an upper-level curriculum that fully engages our students.

III. Changes to Research Instruction.

Faculty Perspectives.

Library faculty were interviewed about the required research course, its placement in the curriculum and its impact on the library's ability to staff it. The law library faculty report that what would be most beneficial at this time would be to teach the class as it is for a few more semesters, to gather ample data to find trends and come to useful conclusions

about the state of the required legal research course. However, the law library faculty did compile their current assessment and past observations on teaching Legal Research.

At this point, the law library faculty have sufficient staffing to teach six to seven sections (one Summer, three Fall, and two to three Spring sections) of the two credit hour class to all 2L students. In the past, the law library faculty have had some staffing issues and needed the assistance of an adjunct (Rob Mead, the Director of the Supreme Court Law Library), but that issue has recently been resolved. The law library faculty now consists of six librarians, five of whom are available to teach the course.

As far as the law library faculty's satisfaction level with the placement of the course and the credit hours they are asked to teach, that is still under assessment. The class has been taught in several different iterations over the year, as only an upper division course, as a first-year only course and as a course open to all years, with credits varying from one to two per class. The analysis of the placement of the class is a little more involved, but the credit hours seem to be at an appropriate level, and it affords the librarians the opportunity to construct one to two credit hour advanced courses in different substantive and skills areas.

The general observation from instructors and students when taught at the 1L level, is that the students have no real context for the legal research skills and information that they are being presented with, as the 1L year is quite overwhelming for all law students. It has also been the observation that classes with a mix of 1Ls and upper classmen are hard to teach because of the gap in understanding of the substantive law and the opportunity to apply their legal research skills outside of class between the 1Ls and the 2/3Ls. Further, the students that take the research class either the summer before or in the fall semester of their 2L year seem to be more receptive to the skills they are learning because they are applying them immediately in their clerkships, externships and seminar writing courses. The students that are taking the Spring semester sections express regret on taking the class late, and perceive some sort of disadvantage. 3Ls that have taken the courses express the same sentiment.

Student Perspectives.

Student responses to the research course were mixed: about half of the students that responded said they felt that the legal research class was useful; and about half said they felt it was a waste of time. Of the respondents that said it was useful, what they felt worked well were project-based assignments where they had to apply research skills. Almost all respondents, even those who felt the class was useful, were critical of the timing, and suggested moving it into the 1L curriculum.

Comments tended to express the opinion that a research class in theory was useful, but the class they took did not turn out to be as useful as they hoped. The majority opinion was that it should be moved into the first year of study (particularly before students went off to work for the first summer). Apart from concerns about the timing of the course,

there were some complaints about individual teaching methods that likely do not represent a concern the Curriculum Committee is meant to address.

Overall Assessment.

This aspect of the curriculum is effective. Student concerns about the placement of the requirement should be monitored, but should also be balanced against both the expertise of the library faculty and the practical realities of scheduling the entire curriculum. Moving the required research to the first year, as many students suggest, would displace other courses in that program – most likely the first-year elective, which is a successful component of the first year.