

# Courses and Programs Originated, Proposed or Conducted, In Whole or in Part, outside the Regular CLA&S Departments of Instruction

## College of Liberal Arts & Sciences Committee on Curricula & Courses

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In light of recent uncertainties expressed about policies and practice governing such curricular matters, it may be useful to review certain features of this committee's responsibilities and authority.

**The CLA&S C&C Committee is above all else an accrediting body.** The practice of formal accreditation is an ancient one: modern usage of the term arose from medieval banking practice. On the strength of their widely-acknowledged reputation and resources, banks could guarantee payments by *letter of credit* (Latin for 'faith, trust'), even for remote transactions. Sums guaranteed in such letters became known as *credits*, convertible into cash. Modern collegiate terminology derives by analogy from such usage.

**Course accreditation** is a process by which a competent body of faculty guarantees the durable quality and character of instructional offerings conducted under its supervision. In American universities, credits earned for such courses can be applied to curricular goals according to approved rules. **The faculty vouches for the course's negotiable value**, both on campus and to other institutions that might recognize such evaluations reciprocally (transfer credit).

**The source of such accreditation** is always a faculty (the scholarly bank), for only a faculty's reputation carries such weight. This does not mean individual faculty *members*, however much respected, but the body of regularly appointed scholars organized over the long term to act collectively on such matters (Latin *collegium* = collection). Even in departmentalized colleges, course accreditation requires approval of the collegiate faculty body.

As new courses are (with rare exception) intended to be permanent fixtures of a faculty's curricular offerings, their accreditation must involve two very different considerations. **The first**, widely understood, is the informed judgment that a course is appropriate in form and content for inclusion among the faculty's curricular offerings. This is what most people associate with 'course approval.'

**The second element is different**, but at least as important, for it goes to the heart of the accreditation process. This is the determination that the course will be offered under the continuing supervision of a trusted group of scholars suitably organized to exercise responsibility for its staffing and conduct over the long term. This is why proposals must provide substantial detail about plans for the course's staffing, management, and likely effect upon other departments.

And this is why interdepartmental proposals, and others not fully grounded in a single department, often require special scrutiny. *Interdepartmental* naturally implies some *extradepartmental* elements. This demands additional assurances that the course as taught will be well grounded in an operational instructional unit.

Interestingly, this concern to guarantee continuing operational oversight of such new curricular features (however meritorious in concept) prompted the University Senate, which does not itself approve or conduct courses, to urge detailed guidelines upon the Provost providing for the stable maintenance of such innovations (2 May 2005). And Provost Nicholls recently restated this principle in his announcement of the restructuring of certain academic units:

"Quality requires consistently high standards across the entire university. In matters of curricular review, promotion, tenure, and reappointment, universities rightly give a great deal of autonomy to the expert and experienced tenured faculty in their schools and colleges. This works well when there are at least two criteria in place. *There should be a critical mass of faculty to provide the requisite levels of rigorous academic evaluation, and there must be a degree of disciplinary coherence that promotes collaboration and common goals, both internally and in relation to national and international professional organizations.*" [italics added]

**In brief, to accredit a course or program implies more than 'approving' it in concept.** Accreditation confers the college's guarantee that a properly organized faculty vouches for the course's continued conduct, staffing and quality. Such 'course ownership' enables the assertion that a course will remain creditable (academically negotiable) as advertised, and on a durable basis.

Such matters are what our committee addresses. We are charged by our college faculty to review and adjudicate all changes and innovations to the curricular offerings of the college. We are expected to apply to all such proposals the standards and expectations of quality and suitability arising from the college's customary values and practices. Paramount among these latter is the threshold expectation that our courses and programs will reflect continuing review and supervision by the regular faculty.

University of Connecticut faculty members, particularly in recent years, have exhibited commendable enthusiasm for developing interest in cross-disciplinary, interdisciplinary and multicultural research and have sought to put their research

to productive use in innovative courses, combinations of courses, and programs of instruction. These developments are to be encouraged.

But such courses and programs, whatever their conceptual origins, require for proper accreditation a stable faculty home. As above, *course approval* is not enough. *Course ownership* demands an organized instructional unit to furnish '*requisite levels of rigorous academic evaluation, and ... a degree of disciplinary coherence that promotes collaboration and common goals.*' This is a burden well beyond the capacities of any administratively-conceived committee, whatever its makeup. Such courses need identifiable adoptive parents, not foster care.

These matters invoke collateral issues not for exploration here, such as cross-listing and novel 'subject matter areas.' Indeed, many issues generated outside our committee will continue to vex us. But perhaps this commentary will help to focus deliberations of our committee as we struggle to exercise responsibilities with which our faculty has charged us.

JJM