

A Conversation on Standards | CIETL

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Video: I'd like to talk to you about my grade (XtraNormal)

GOAL: To come to an agreement about problems regarding standards and some solutions.

1. Pressure to lower standards
2. Prerequisites
3. Issues unique to multi-faculty member departments

What's in our control/what's not?
Where is our common ground?

TOPIC 1: Do you experience pressure to lower standards?

Need to have classes in line with other colleges; lack of pre-reqs lowers standards, particularly in classes with a lot of writing. Impacts Ss negatively.

In 12-15 years of teaching, I've never had any comments from administrators about the number of Fs given.

Technology needs of Ss—inability to type, lack of computer literacy, lack of access to computers—put pressure to lower standards.

Mathematical shortcomings not required by pre-reqs force either re-teaching or ignoring needs of particular students.

If I pass students who don't know how to compute [basic mathematical concept], they are not prepared for other classes, but if I fail too many, am I going to be criticized for my lack of retention and success.

ECE treated as a “natural” course for women (!), so they don’t take writing placement tests or English courses; language learning needs are an issue; all courses transferable, so many people want them; they also fulfill workforce requirements. Full-timers feel less pressure/part-timers feel more. Ss w/language issues encourage not to take full-time courses.

Need to bring adjuncts into this conversation because they are vulnerable and nervous about success and retention. They need to be supported.

The counselors also need to be brought in on this conversation; they shouldn’t discourage Ss from taking classes that require lots of writing.

Retention rates should not be a measure at all? What good is it if Ss sit around and get an F?

Are we judged on the basis of success and retention?

SLOs have made this more of an issue for many instructors.

What are the real and perceived pressures to lower standards?

TOPIC 2: Do you believe that prerequisites will help to address the issues around the underprepared student?

It will help; if you don’t have the prerequisite, you cannot move on, and you end up teaching things that you should not be teaching. Many Ss simply take placement test, and the tests are not accurate; if we could improve the placement test, it would be a good step for the math department. After two weeks, I can already tell that some Ss have no chance for success.

Prerequisites would help for the social science courses in particular; most people who take my class have taken ENGL 100 because they have figured out that if they haven’t taken it, they won’t do well (relies on personal reputation). But the big question is, how do we combat laziness? There are many Ss who won’t read, or won’t take notes, and who don’t understand why this is not a good strategy. How do you get Ss who don’t want to read and take notes to do the things that they need to do to succeed? But better to have the prerequisite than not. Because then we know what we are working with.

There are obviously a lot of people who are not working who are going to fail; won’t failing teach them a lesson? Won’t they do it differently next time?

That is an expensive way to run education.

There is a guilt factor there, which can be very severe; it's depressing if a lot of people are failing.

I have mixed feelings about prerequisites; it depends on the class, and it depends on the prerequisites. A lot of my students fail, but I also have older students who are wise, thoughtful, and passionate who wouldn't do well in ENGL 100, but do all right in sociology because of their other strengths.

I have very mixed feelings about prerequisites. On the one hand, it is great to have Ss who know what to do, but it adds another obstacle, a gatekeeper function, that shuts out Ss that I really want to reach. I want them to realize that reading can be fun and exciting and necessary. The Ss who see nothing but basic skills on the horizon don't stay. I think it would be good to expand the conversation—do these Ss exceed in our Learning Community? Yes, they do. Could we consider supplemental classes to accompany content courses?

If the right prerequisite is not required for a class, we are setting Ss up for failure. Even if they show up and they try, even if they overcome other pressures that take up their time instead of reading, if they are not prepared, they will fail.

Ss who don't meet prerequisites need support, but support won't necessarily be enough. It's a heartbreaking conversation to have. The prerequisite needs to be there unless you are going to do a Learning Community or some other kind of support system. Even those who have taken ENGL 100 are challenged.

On the other end, there are motivated Ss who are doing well whose experience is compromised because Ts are spending time explaining basic concepts that they already know. For a songwriting class, had no prereqs because wanted to increase enrollment. Not everyone could read music, and it changed how I conceived the course in a good way. The academic structure I had originally decided on didn't work, so I had to restructure and it turned out for the better.

There is not consensus. The absence of a prerequisite says something to the Ss about what they do and don't need to know. We have to decide collectively or individually what kind of message do we want to send?

Maybe we choose certain courses, very selectively, that we think are the most important, and place prerequisites on those?

In certain classes, success rates increase significantly when prerequisites are in place. We need to gather data, but we also need to erect some kind of policy of how we are going to determine which courses need or don't need prerequisites.

TOPIC 3: How do we (should we?) deal with varying standards in departments with multiple faculty members?

Wouldn't SLOs do that? Wouldn't they give us a starting point for the conversation.

We already have on our CORs objectives, and we have SLOs; the real question is, who do we want to be policing them? We have freedom to do things in the way we choose. No one goes back and looks to see what inconsistencies there are and how and whether objectives are being achieved and outcomes are being met. It's a challenge.

What about the issue of varying rigor within a department? We can have academic freedom—different forms of pedagogy, different texts, different classrooms styles, but how can we maintain consistency of rigor?

Should have a "Conversation: Part II"

Should bring student input into the discussion

Need to discuss what "rigor" or "standards" means (i.e. not interfering with academic freedom)

Student motivation; problems and solutions

Need for data on prerequisites

Other comments

1. The main downward pressure on standards comes from the economic crisis—or rather, my struggle with enforcing things like deadlines on students whose lives are falling apart in ways over which they have no control.

We can't do much about that, but these two we can:

2. Downward pressure on standards is also a function of our workload. We teach too many classes and the classes are too big. This has always been true, but the students (perhaps because of point 1 above) seem to be more and more underprepared, which makes it harder and harder to teach them.

In SFSU's composition and reading program, the recommended size for a developmental class is seventeen. Our developmental classes are 35 people for Reading and English 826, 35 people for Reading 836, and 26 people for ENGL 836 and all transfer-level composition courses. These numbers are English and Reading-specific, but I am sure that it is true in all disciplines that having fewer students would allow for more consistent upholding of standards.

3. The recent demand that we have our grades in on December 20th, two days after the last final is over, puts an immense downward pressure on standards. First of all, it makes essay exams impossible. Second, it takes longer to thoughtfully grade an exam. People wanting to give essay exams or grade thoughtfully will have to give them earlier. This will give us less time to spend on our curriculum.

I don't understand how the District can mandate this without having it go through shared governance.

CIETL and our administration could support us in upholding standards by finding ways to reduce our workload and by reversing the decision to make us turn our grades in two days after finals are over.