

Background: The Curriculum Review and Renewal Committee identified a problem in the Faculty that many programs – and almost all majors and specialist programs in the social sciences – are grade restricted, leading to a situation in which: many students are shut out of a whole sector of study; college advising staff must work with students to find alternative programs; and some programs shoulder a disproportionate load of students with lower GPAs.

In April 2008, Faculty Council passed a new policy to address this problem, by requiring all units (departments and EDU-As) to participate in offering at least one non-grade restricted program. Over the ensuing year, it became clear that this solution is not practical: enrolment controls of some kind would still be required in most cases to manage the demand, and a lottery approach – the available non-grade control device – was deemed inappropriate after much further consultation.

Over the last 6 months, the Curriculum Renewal Steering Committee, in consultation with undergraduate coordinators and department and college advising staff, have been discussing alternative responses to the underlying problem: i.e., how do we fairly manage access to very high-demand areas of study? One problem has become clear: we have no policy on limiting enrolment in programs by grades – i.e., there are no guidelines on when, how, and why a program can restrict access through grades. The suggestion is that a fair set of guidelines might best ensure that those students most qualified to study in a subject area will be able to do so. In particular, the proposal is that only grades in courses relevant to the program of study can be used as a measure of qualification for the program. This avoids a situation where a student who does reasonably well in relevant courses but less well overall is shut out of the programs in the discipline because of a lower GPA. By requiring grade-restrictions that are directly relevant to performance in the area of study, we would avoid closing off whole areas of study to students who show capability in the area.

We have also discussed a number of “best practices” that would help to address the original problem of access vs. demand, such as encouraging units to focus on limiting the resources taken up by students in Minor programs in order to allow more students into those Minors; to be open to students satisfying program requirements by substituting relevant courses from other less-pressured units; to consider carefully coordinating the course-mark threshold for access to scarce upper-year course places with the grade threshold for admission into the relevant program. These suggestions are designed to reduce some of the extraneous pressure on courses that contributed to program restrictions, thus allowing more students into the programs and access to those places. More detail on all these aspects of the proposal are spelled out below.

Proposal:

1. Specialist, Major and Minor POSTs can be grade-restricted only for reasons of enrolment pressure. Those proposing to limit a POST must make a case based on past experience, and must make separate cases for each type of POST (Specialist, Major, Minor) rather than automatically extending a restriction from one type to all.
2. In designating the entrance requirements for restricted POSTs, units must identify a course or set of courses that is relevant to the subject content of the POST. That is, the entrance threshold cannot be based on the student’s GPA nor on some arbitrary set of courses:

Specifically, the unit will identify a course or set of courses on which the grade restriction will be based. The unit can specify the restriction as a minimum grade in each identified course, a minimum grade in any one of the identified courses, or an average across the identified courses. The relevant set of course options may be larger than 3 FCEs, but only 3 FCEs can be used in the application of the restriction (since programs can require no more than 3 FCEs of study in first year). E.g. “at least 65% on CRS100Y” or “at least 70% in one CRS 100-series course” or “an average of at least 63% on two courses drawn from the following list.”

3. The grade cutoffs for entrance to a POST will be established by analysis of recent patterns of course and program enrolments, leading to a grade restriction for achieving the target enrolment that can be accommodated by the unit. Grade cutoffs will be reviewed on a regular basis for their effectiveness in achieving the target enrolment numbers.
4. Units with restricted POSTs should consider having a second, different entrance requirement (following the guidelines in point #2) for those beyond first year, so that students overcoming a bad beginning can qualify later by demonstrating ability without having to repeat introductory courses as Extras. The second, later requirement may impose a higher grade cut-off than the first year one, e.g. “at least 65% in CRS100Y after first year, but an average of at least 70% on two CRS2**Y courses after second year.”
5. To the extent possible, Minor POSTs should be left unrestricted. In order to achieve this, units may impose a limit on the number or range of courses to which those enrolled in the Minor may have access. For example, units may limit students in Minors to no more than 4 FCEs of the unit’s courses. Also, all minors must contain at least 1 FCE at the 300+ level, but units need not allow students in Minors unlimited access to all their 300+ level courses, e.g., they may designate a limited subset of the unit’s courses that those in the Minor may use to satisfy this requirement, or they may limit access to a particular number of courses at the 300-level. They may also, if pedagogically appropriate, create specific 300-level courses for students in Minor POSTs.
6. Units asking to restrict POSTs because of course enrolment pressures will be asked to consider allowing students to satisfy some portion of their program requirements with relevant courses from less-pressured units. If this were done more widely, some of the course-enrolment pressure in the program-sponsoring unit might be relieved, allowing more students access to the grade-restricted programs. Note that we are not suggesting that program sponsors “export” their students to unwilling units; rather we are recognizing that students often have access to relevant courses in other units that could contribute to a coherent program in the pressured unit, but currently may not be allowed to count them.
7. Units with pressured upper-year courses should coordinate the grade requirement for entrance to their POSTs with the grade required to take courses at the 300- and 400-level. This avoids having scarce upper-year course spaces occupied by those who have not qualified to be enrolled in a restricted POST. However, the course mark restriction on taking further courses should not be so restrictive as to frustrate the “second qualifying opportunity” recommended in #4 above.