

September 19, 2012

To: Academic Affairs Faculty and Staff
From: Donald J. Para, Provost and Senior Vice President for Academic Affairs
Subject: Curriculum guidelines in context

Dear Colleagues:

At a recent meeting of the Academic Senate, there was discussion of guidelines for curriculum process. I am writing to provide some context for discussion.

We are facing an unprecedented fiscal shortfall that has created workload challenges for us all. Curriculum guidelines are intended to help us adapt to challenging circumstances while keeping our focus on our mission: graduating students with highly valued degrees.

I want to offer three points: first, our complex curriculum contributes to delays in graduation. Second, workload associated with curricular revision is burdensome. Third, the content of the curriculum is and will remain under the supervision of the faculty, but the size of the curriculum is constrained by several factors including national norms, Title 5, system guidelines, campus policies, and accreditation. I will conclude with a note about anticipated policy directives from the Chancellor's Office.

Student Success and Curricular Complexity

We may think of our degree programs as comprised of 120 units that can be completed in four years of full-time study. In reality, only 14% of CSULB freshmen graduate within four years. On average, CSULB students who began as freshmen take over five years to graduate (in every college) and over six years in several majors. About half of graduates earn 27 units more than the nominal number needed to graduate; one quarter earns 40 units beyond what is needed. These unit counts exclude all pre-baccalaureate and high school credit such as AP or IB.

These delays are costly: a year or more of students' time and \$6,000 or more in tuition fees and increased student debt. Federal attention to four-year graduation rates is growing, and CSULB's performance in this area is low in comparison to national figures.

Delays are costly in another way: continuing students who don't graduate occupy spaces that could be used to admit other California young people. At a time when access to higher education is greatly threatened by budget cuts, increasing access by shortening time to degree is critical to the next generation.

While it is tempting to attribute delays in graduation to part-time attendance, in fact, over 90% of undergraduates are full-time. Excess units demonstrate that graduation delays are not due to too few units, but to taking units not necessarily needed for the degree and, in some cases, excess units result

from course sequencing or scheduling that force students to add units to achieve full-time status for financial aid eligibility.

Curricular complexity and high unit major requirements are barriers to timely degree completion. The importance of a curriculum that is efficiently designed and delivered cannot be overstated. Students need to graduate with meaningful degrees that meet our learning goals, and they need to do so efficiently. As the work of curricular review gets underway this semester, faculty and curriculum committees are asked to work toward the goal of decreasing excess units and time to degree.

Curriculum Workload

The workload associated with academic curricula is substantial. In the December 2010 curriculum cycle alone, there were 503 changes to individual courses and 96 changes to program requirements. This workload falls not only on Enrollment Services staff who must code and recode the PeopleSoft system with each curricular change and on the staff of the Curriculum and Articulation Offices, but also on the curriculum committees and their staff support at each level of review. When courses and program requirements change, advisors face an added burden. With faculty and staff across the university doing more with less, it is important to identify ways to reduce workload in this area.

Faculty Oversight

The intellectual content of our academic programs is the work of the faculty. Our faculty is routinely praised by accreditors, external reviewers, and campus review committees for the disciplinary expertise and currency that our faculty translates into majors, minors, and graduate programs. At the same time, the length and organization of degrees are also subject to regulation at the national, regional, state, system and campus level. While asking that faculty and curriculum committees be mindful of the need to avoid curricular accretion through intentional discussions of academic program changes, we also want to point out the opportunities for innovation provided by special topics courses and within existing disciplinary courses that are constructed with enough flexibility to allow different instructors to incorporate content from their area of expertise.

Our academic purpose is to “graduate students with highly valued degrees.” Studies have revealed that campuses most successful at graduating students are characterized by an ethos that “student success is everyone’s job.” On these campuses, faculty, administration and staff implement policies, curriculum, and practices with a focus on helping students succeed. CSULB aspires to be such a campus. We need to be certain that first and foremost, curriculum is designed to help student to progress to degree in a timely way and become successful.

Anticipated Chancellor’s Office Guidelines

We expect the Board of Trustees this week to promulgate additional guidelines for leaning down curriculum (although an earlier proposal to eliminate some GE units may not be forthcoming). The impetus behind these additional guidelines is the continued lack of progress by CSU campuses in speeding time to graduation for students. Unfortunately, CSULB does not appear to have made much

progress in this regard in recent years. We expect that campuses will be directed to work with departments to reduce units in the majors. Once these system guidelines have been promulgated, I anticipate issuing revised guidelines for the curriculum process.