

CASE STUDY STATE U HUMANITIES COURSE

State U wants to redesign Understanding the Visual and Performing Arts, a required general education course for all students entering the university at the freshman or sophomore level. The course is taught in face-to-face sections of about 30 students each. Because of steadily increasing enrollments, the number of sections has grown from 7 sections enrolling a total of 180 students in the 1997-98 academic year to 25 sections enrolling a total of 800 students in the 2001-02 academic year. These sections are taught by a combination of full-time and adjunct faculty members.

Like many other introductory humanities courses, Understanding the Visual and Performing Arts is designed to enable students to receive a broad-based understanding of a variety of art forms and to develop the critical and creative thinking skills needed to analyze and participate in these art forms. Faculty want students to be active engaged with ideas and to participate in collaborative and experiential learning experiences. Some faculty have been reluctant to incorporate technology into the course because of their perception that doing so might eliminate the active engagement with issues and activities that are central to humanities courses.

The course covers six content areas, three focusing on Visual Arts (Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture) and three focusing on Performing Arts (Drama, Music, and Dance). Learning goals for the course require students to develop:

- the content knowledge of the terms, concepts, periods, and forms that underlie the various visual and performing arts;
- the skills to be able to analyze and critique the various arts; and
- an attitude of willingness to attend various arts activities.

In the current model, the department must offer increasing numbers of sections of their courses without the ability to hire full-time, credentialed faculty due to budget restraints. Consequently, the department is employing ever-increasing numbers of adjuncts (approximately two-thirds of the sections are taught by adjuncts). While the university has developed learning goals and objectives for the course, many of these course sections are not structured or taught in ways that achieve these goals and objectives because of the large numbers of adjuncts required to meet the growing enrollment. For instance, adjuncts with backgrounds in English, teach the course through the perspective of critical theory, only incidentally touching on the visual and performing arts. Even full-time faculty, who specialize in one of the areas of either visual or performing arts,

are not able to cover the entire range of the course in depth. A comparison of the syllabi, assignments, and assessment measures would not lead to the conclusion that these items were developed for the same course, evidence of what the university calls “course drift.”

In summary, the course suffers from several academic problems typical of multiple-section courses:

- Large numbers of fulltime and part-time faculty design individual sections resulting in duplication of effort;
- Faculty effort in course delivery is inefficient use as each person tries to cover all content areas;
- Course drift and inconsistent learning experiences for students result as each faculty member designs the course to suit their individual interests rather than adhering to learning goals and objectives;
- Significant increases in enrollments, which are expected to continue, have required growing numbers of small sections, exacerbating the problem. Resources to offer increasing numbers of sections of this required course are limited.
- It is difficult to recruit qualified adjuncts. Many have a limited background without the depth to teach the wide range of the arts required in the course.
- Students with highly variable learning styles and study skills inefficiently served by a single "fixed-menu" course delivery strategy.

Summary of the Current Course Structure

Three full-time faculty each teach one or two sections per year (5 total) and six part-time faculty teach 20 sections per year with the following responsibilities:

- Develop course syllabi and materials
- Acquire materials from the arts for class work
- Prepare and deliver two lectures per week per section
- Prepare and oversee active learning activities in class
- Create and grade assignments and exams
- Hold two office hours per week per section