SPH Core Course Subcommittee
Core Course Review, 2010

Executive Summary

The SPH Academic Programs Committee (APC) Core Course Subcommittee met on October 14, and November 11, 2010 to engage the full APC in a final review of and recommendations for the School’s core courses. The October 14 report follows and includes a series of recommendations supported by data collected in the past year regarding the SPH Core Courses.

APC members believe that the School’s core courses should represent the best the School has to offer in teaching and learning; our teaching faculty aspires to the highest quality instruction. We want our core courses to stand as the “flagship courses” for our School, serving as models for other schools. The content should be so exciting that students demand to take the courses, and talented faculty members are eager to teach the courses.

Many APC members expressed the opinion that the evidence-based recommendations included in the report should be expanded to satisfy the highest standards to which Committee members believe the School aspires. Indeed, many members of the Committee feel the data – which suggest that among residential students, the core courses are mediocre overall—reinforce the need for major improvements of the School’s core courses. (The distance students, in general, expressed satisfaction with the courses.)

The Committee held a brainstorming session about what the core course curriculum could be. Given that the School strives to meet the teaching needs of multiple constituencies and the requirements of multiple accrediting bodies, careful thought and planning are required in devising both the content and the design of the curriculum. New and emerging technologies, as well as changes within the public health disciplines, offer opportunities for innovation in delivering the core course content. Current economic realities require us to innovate as well.

In addition to the recommendations included in the following preliminary report, the Academic Programs Committee discussed the following recommendations.

- Consider an integrative approach to combine, in new ways, material currently covered in five separate core courses. Redistributing the content in different and innovative ways could increase flexibility in scheduling, elevate the learning environment, and thus improve student and faculty satisfaction with the coursework.
- Assess the School’s priorities and approach to addressing the needs of multiple student constituencies (e.g. undergrads, residential master’s degree students, distance learning students). Because the satisfaction level was quite different between the residential and distance students, unique approaches for these populations may be needed.
- Assess approaches other schools use for delivering core course content.
- Include a module during student orientation that addresses the importance of and vision for core course content.
• Consider incorporation of content related to public health biology, nutrition, and maternal and child health.
• Secure funding for, and pilot-test, a simulation model using health indicators – an innovative teaching approach with potential for integrating content from multiple disciplinary areas.

While innovation and major restructuring of the courses should be considered, many factors related to course improvement are known factors in student satisfaction (in general and documented in our SPH core course survey) and learning outcomes: personal contact with instructors, small class size, dynamic teaching faculty, and individualized evaluation of student performance.

The Core Course Subcommittee report may ultimately serve as a springboard for a new discussion about how to elevate the status and quality of our School’s core courses. At its heart is a decision about our School’s goals and priorities for these pillars of our graduate curriculum.

SPH Academic Programs Subcommittee Core Course Recommendations 2010
Oct. 14, 2010

Subcommittee Members: Stephanie Baker (PhD student, HBHE, APC), Nancy Colvin (EPID, APC), Shelley Golden (HBHE core course instructor), Suzanne Hobbs (HPM, APC), Jane Monaco (BIOS, APC), Sherry Rhodes (Office of Student Affairs).

The SPH APC Core Course Subcommittee was charged with examining the efficacy and efficiency of the design, delivery and schedule of the School’s core courses (BIOS 600, ENVR 600, EPI 600, HBHE 600, HPM 600) and making recommendations to the APC for potential actions for improvements. The subcommittee gathered information from a variety of sources including core course instructors and key administrators, existing course evaluations, and a dedicated core-course survey. The committee investigated course format (residential, online, hybrid), timing, credit hours, modularization, combining courses, pedagogy, costs, and faculty preference.

Core Course Faculty Summary
The subcommittee met with the majority of the Core Course faculty and key administrators for in-depth discussion. All the Core Course faculty members were firmly committed to delivering high quality courses designed to meet student needs and expectations. The subcommittee’s charge did not include embarking on a comprehensive redesign of the Core Courses, particularly in the absence of demonstrated dissatisfaction with the current courses. Instructors cited increased workloads and diminished teaching support as barriers to course development or a substantial redesign.

SPH Student Core Course Survey Summary
The subcommittee implemented a targeted student survey conducted in May 2010. Invitations to participate in the online survey were emailed to all 1692 degree and certificate students (including distance students) enrolled in SPH in Spring 2010. 505 students responded to the survey for a response rate of 30%. An Ipod Touch prize, generously provided by the Dean’s Office, was awarded to a randomly selected participant in efforts to increase response. The survey was administered by the SPH Office of Student Affairs.
Findings of the survey are summarized below:

1) Students were reasonably satisfied with Core Courses. The satisfaction with the courses was not uniform across the different courses.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>COURSE</th>
<th>% Very Satisfied</th>
<th>% Satisfied</th>
<th>% Total (Satisfied or Very Satisfied)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>HBHE 600</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>73</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BIOS 600</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HPM 600</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EPID 600</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ENVR 600</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2) Most important factors in Core Course effectiveness

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Factor</th>
<th>% Very Important or Somewhat Important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Availability of course offered 3 times per year</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Access to personal contact with instructor</td>
<td>93%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mix of students from various programs</td>
<td>79%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small class size</td>
<td>75%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3) Although offering the courses 3 times per year was important to students (See above Comment (2)), 82% of respondents said the courses are offered frequently enough to graduate on time. Currently all Core Courses are offered in the fall, spring and summer (with the exception of ENVR 600, which is not offered in the summer.)

4) Students had a mixed opinion on preference of format. Distance students preferred the online format. Importantly, many residential students were very strongly opposed to offering the “completely online” version as the only option. 61% of residential students “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” courses should be offered residentially. Many open-ended responses were extremely vocal about opposition to all online versions: “No Online Classes! They have absolutely no worth at all. You learn nothing! It’s a joke.” “Don’t go all online. There must be people involved in teaching, I know the rooms are small and money may be tight. You will degrade teaching, reputation, enjoyment by increasing online courses much.”

5) The qualitative responses echoed the findings that the course material is important and strong teaching faculty are essential. Typical responses: “The BEST teachers in each department should be brought in to teach the core classes.” “The core courses lay the foundation for the rest of the education and should, therefore, be provided in a manner with the strongest benefit to a student’s training and understanding of the material.” “More faculty interactions. Less group work…” “Many of these courses are very large and offer little personal interaction with the instructor.”
Subcommittee members agreed that the results of the SPH Core Course Student Survey are consistent with the trend observed in student evaluations over the years. Results generally supported faculty perceptions about overall general satisfaction with the format, design and delivery of the core courses, with room for improvement.

**Course Evaluation Data Summary:**
Subcommittee members examined course evaluation data from the five core courses. Course evaluation data were obtained from two sources:
(a) The open-ended responses to the question, “Please make any comments or recommendations you would like about the DELIVERY and COORDINATION of the course” for three semesters for the online version of the five courses.
(b) Responses from close-ended questions from the course evaluations for the 5 core courses. The specific questions and semesters examined from these course evaluations varied across the departments due to no standard course evaluation form or procedure for these different courses. The committee noted the following:

1) One consistent finding across the courses and semesters was many students found working in groups asynchronously online to be cumbersome. Some typical comments:
   “The discussion forums were worthless and a complete waste of my time.”
   “Discussion groups were tedious and did not help my learning.”
   “frustrating, unnecessarily time consuming and negated the flexibility of an internet class. Having to coordinate with eight other people every week to come up with consensus answers eliminated all the flexibility I assumed an internet course would have.”
   “Group assignments were absolutely terrible. It is too hard to coordinate with a group of 8 other people whom you have never met and are only working together online.”
   “Learning from other students in the group who were all beginners did not prove very effective for me.”

2) A substantial portion of the comments addressed the importance of the material and the lack of resources and contact with instructor, particularly within the online sections:
   “I am dismayed that I am physically here at the school and forced to take an online class”
   “I cannot imagine, why, if the material is important, more effort/resources are not being committed to teaching it. While online presentation of materials may solve the teacher/student/classroom problem, I believe it does so at the expense of providing a truly quality education- if the material is important enough to teach, then I think it is important enough to teach well.”
   “I felt that it was primarily self-study”
   “this is essentially an independent study course”
   “I do not pay out-of-state tuition to take a class with little teacher interaction.”

3) The closed-ended questions in the individual course evaluations that addressed “Overall Satisfaction” were consistent with the results from the school-wide Core Course Survey. The students were reasonably satisfied with the Core Courses, however that satisfaction was not uniform across the courses. The satisfaction rate shows room for improvement.

**Budgetary Issues:**
The five departments offer the Core Courses with a range of formats, class sizes, faculty effort, TA effort and timing. Based on data collected by the SPH Financial Office, the five departments’ average annual spending (faculty and TA costs) on the core courses varies widely, ranging from a high of $199,415 per academic year (BIOS) to a low of $131,532 per academic year (HPM). Annual average enrollment in the core courses also varies widely with a high of 485 students per year in ENVR 600 and a low of 208 students
per year in HPM. The “per student spending” per core course by each department was estimated as follows: $328 ENVR, $411 EPI, $466 HBHE, $486 BIOS, $632 HPM. However, a large number of factors impact these estimates, and the details are available from the SPH Financial Office. Student to (paid) TA ratios range from 18 students per TA for HBHE to 39 students per TA for BIOS. (Some BIOS TA’s are not included into cost analysis due to non-payment).

Conclusions/ Recommendations:
The Gillings School of Global Public Health Core Courses should:
• Provide state-of-the-art learning environment
• Provide convenient, student-centered learning environment
• Ensure academic integrity and honor code adherence
• Meet learning objectives required by CEPH
• Accommodate a variety of learning and teaching styles
• Address millennial student learning styles

The material in the SPH Core Courses is required for graduation. These courses may be the only exposure a student has to the important material in a specific discipline. The Core Courses occupy a substantial portion of the curriculum for many of our students. Our School should strive for the highest standard in educating our students in the core public health disciplines, understanding the practicality of budget constraints. Opportunities exist to provide SPH students with an exceptional learning experience within the Core Courses.

The subcommittee offers the following recommendations:
1) Priority should be given to maintaining adequate levels of support to core course instructors for routine administration and teaching of existing core courses. Consideration should be given to smaller class sizes (with different faculty members teaching the different sections) and/or the maintenance of teaching assistant to student ratios of 1:20 or as close to that target as feasible.

2) Priority should be given to allocating funding to support instructors in updating the core courses, including content and course design. Instructors are receptive to considering updated and innovative approaches to pedagogy and the use of technology in course design and delivery, but feel they do not currently have the capacity to initiate substantial changes to course content or design.

3) Departments should offer some version of the Core Course three times per year if feasible. Departments should include a face-to-face component to Core Courses at least one semester each year to accommodate on-campus students with a preference for face-to-face contact with peers and faculty.

4) The strongest teaching faculty should be encouraged to teach the SPH Core Courses.

5) Course evaluation results should be reviewed and discussed at the Core Course faculty member’s annual review.

6) Excellence in instruction in the Core Courses should be recognized.

7) Instructors are encouraged to consider students’ evaluation data in the following areas:
   a) Update course content regularly.
   b) Group work within the core courses should be assigned carefully and in a pedagogically sound manner. Consideration should be given to small group size. Consideration should be given to limiting group work within asynchronous online versions of the courses.
   c) Student desire for individual, rather than group -level, evaluation from instructors and access to faculty.
   d) Student desire for frequent and prompt feedback.