

2018-2019 Year-End Committee Report

Committee:	Educational Affairs
Charge:	Recommends best practices in academic organization, research, and teaching in order to shape the Northwestern educational experience.
Chair:	Claudia Swan
# of Meetings:	5

Completed Business and/or Accomplishments

Our principal topics of discussion this year were CTEC reform and Pathways to Interdisciplinarity.

One result of our discussions about CTEC reform is a research report on gender bias, the result of working together as a committee to review, summarize, and discuss publications on the subject (see attached). The research we surveyed was gathered by Tricia England, without whom we could not function as a committee. Moved by our shared concern with the disproportionate impact of CTECs (especially on NTE faculty and on women faculty and on faculty of color) we conducted a survey of recent research on the impact of bias on Student-Teacher Evaluations (STEs). This was a follow-up to the resolution we put forward to the Faculty Senate last year, that does not contain any specific recommendations for change. This effort is intended to contribute meaningfully to the ongoing work of the Committee to Reimagine CTECs established by the Office of the Provost and co-chaired by J. Cassazza and B. Goldberg—specifically, to the Question Formation sub-committee, of which Candy Lee and Claudia Swan are members.

As regards Pathways to Interdisciplinarity, the committee discussed (1) student stress, esp. with regard to the pressure to perform to the standard set by the motto “AND is in our DNA”; and (2) productive modes of harnessing interdisciplinary interests and commitments. Claudia met with ASG leadership to discuss student mental health and is following up on the status of the Provost’s Office task force on wellness, on which Candy has served. Our concern is with the stress our students experience in general, and specifically in an environment that promotes the notion that “AND is in our DNA.” This matter seems particularly acute in light of recent publications and programs organized by the Fund Our Care Collective. One way of structuring and fostering interdisciplinary interests and commitments that we discussed is to enable students to devise their own majors. Tricia conducted research on how such majors are supported at peer institutions. In addition, we discussed means to support broad and broadly accessible co-taught courses on topics such as “The Brain”, “The Environment”, or “Art & Science.” Claudia is currently in conversation with Marilyn McCoy and Amit Prachand about ways of fostering faculty collaboration; and is also engaged in discussions with faculty associated with NUACCESS (Center for the Scientific Study in the Arts) about a potential co-taught, cross-school undergraduate course on Art & Science.

Unfinished/Continuing Business

Both CTECs and Pathways to Interdisciplinarity are continuing business. As regards CTEC reform there is only so much we can do as long as the Committee to Reimagine CTECs holds the reins of actual reform. I intend to pass along the attached report on bias in evaluations to the committee and to the administration for consideration, and would be grateful for any advice on how best to follow up. With regard to Pathways to Interdisciplinarity, we discussed means for the university to encourage greater cross-disciplinary interaction among faculty and students alike. Accumulation of credits, majors, club activities, skills—this has been the central precept of Northwestern’s slogan, “AND is in our DNA.” Criticism on the part of students of the concomitant pressure they feel to live up to this ethos has been steady. Already in May 2016, Tim Balk, opinion editor and sophomore then in Medill, wrote in the Daily: “There is a pervasive, pernicious pressure to overcommit and overextend at NU.” Balk stated that “AND is not necessarily in our DNA. For many of us, OR is in our DNA” and proposed that “the goal at our school should not be to do the most. It should be to do our best, and to enjoy what we are doing.” In October 2018, A. Pallas Gutierrez, School of Comm freshman, wrote in an opinion piece in the Daily that the slogan perpetuates the idea that all of the many things Northwestern students are encouraged to do and do do are not enough. “The constant refrain of ‘AND is in our DNA’ both genuinely and sarcastically, only adds to the internalized pressure I put on myself to do everything.” The subject comes up in passing in other student pieces and in conversation with our students. “AND is in our DNA” was raised at the Faculty Assembly this fall; and the late Patricia Telles-Irvin, Vice President for Student Affairs, convened a wellness committee to address student stress. One proposal made several years ago, Junko Sato reminded us, involved change to the credit system here at Northwestern. One possibility we have discussed would be for the university to enable students to create their own majors; Tricia has done preliminary research on peer institutions and the existence of such possibilities. Or to identify broad themes—Brain, Environment—around which faculty and students could coalesce. I am scheduled to meet with Marilyn McCoy this summer to discuss this matter. And am personally pursuing the possibility of co-teaching (with Marc Walton, Materials Sciences, Director of NU Center for the Scientific Study of the Arts) a 200-level course open to all Evanston undergraduates on Art & Science. (As a pilot, and because M. Walton and I are hoping to co-teach in any case; we co-advise PhDs.) We also discussed non-standard delivery of classes, to shift the balance of classroom and non-classroom time.

New Business for Next Year

I recommend research and reporting on how our peer institutions foster interdisciplinarity among faculty and students alike. The committee could follow up on research Tricia initiated, at my request, on schools that enable students to design their own majors, and how those majors are adjudicated and advised. In addition, further legwork is needed to ascertain how collaborative teaching can be made accessible to more faculty at Northwestern and in general how we can foster faculty collaboration across schools, departments, and programs alike.

Depending on what the Provost’s Office feels about it, I recommend investigating avenues for and ways of sponsoring stronger faculty collaboration and opportunities to co-teach and co-advise. Perhaps a forum to discuss “big topics”?

CTEC reform is crucial, we feel, and we recommend continued work alongside the Committee to Reimagine CTECs to ensure that the changes made are as perspicacious and effective as possible.