Background

The WSU Registrar received a Major Curricular Change for a variable credit (1-3), new special topics course from the Department of Plant Pathology. The Major Curricular Change form was received on September 29, 2014.

Reviewer Comments

**Rationale**

* The Department of Plant Pathology would like to address cutting-edge research on various topics related to plant pathology. This course would allow the department flexibility to cover timely topics and test whether graduate demand exists to teach a course more regularly.
* The course will be taught on an ad hoc basis, when “Plant Pathology faculty members…need to teach a course to fulfill the academic obligations of his/her appointment.” This suggests that an underlying reason to add this course is for faculty members to fulfill their appointment, rather than to further the needs of a graduate education. This special topics course might be offered during even-year Fall semesters, when graduate course elective offerings tend to be fewer. This rationale is more convincing.
* Adjuncts with graduate faculty status may volunteer to teach the course. A temporary instructor may be hired if permanent faculty are not available and funding is available. It is not clear from the rationale if this temporary instructor would have graduate-faculty status. It is not ideal to have temporary (adjunct) faculty responsible for graduate education.
* The course would be taught in a peer-led discussion style. The instructor would lecture the first few weeks; in subsequent weeks, students will make a brief presentation and then lead discussion of an article. Students may take up to 6 credit hours of special topics courses.
* Neither the sample syllabus nor the rationale provides a distinction of how the single credit hour variations of the course are different from the two and three credit hour variations, apart from the contact hours in the classroom. Are the students who take a single credit variation of this course evaluated the same way (two exams, one paper presentation, and participation in discussions)?

**Syllabus**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Logistics |  |  |
|  | Instructor contact information | 🗹 |
|  | Course Prefix and number, title, number of credits, pre-requisites | 🗹 |
|  | Meeting schedules and times and building/rooms | 🗹 |
|  | List of required and recommended reading materials | 🗹 |
| Content |  |  |
|  | Student learning outcomes and method for assessing | 🗹 |
|  | Week to week course outline | 🗹 |
|  | Descriptions of required assignments | 🗹 |
| Grading  |  |  |
|  | Relative weighting of required assignments | 🗹 |
|  | Penalties for late assignments |  |
|  | Grading criteria |  |
|  | Composition of midterm and final grades | 🗹 |
|  | Attendance or participation policies |  |
| Policy |  |  |
|  | Accommodating students with disabilities | 🗹 |
|  | Campus safety plan statement | 🗹 |
|  | Academic integrity | 🗹 |

* The syllabus submitted for review is an example or template for other special topics courses in the program. We reviewed a topics seminar called “Topics in Plan Pathology,” which was a 1-credit seminar.
* No prerequisites are listed.
* Penalties for late assignments are not discussed. The primary requirement is to lead discussion, which entails submitting a list of “study questions” one week in advance of the seminar, presenting a 15-20 minute overview of the paper, and facilitating discussion of the paper.
* No criteria are identified to evaluate (grade) participation in discussion. An unexcused absence will result in a loss of 5 (of 50) participation points. No other standards for earning participation points are identified.
* No criteria are identified to evaluate class presentation and leading discussion. It is stated that students will do this once. Will the course be cancelled if enrollment is not sufficient to cover all topics (n=9 in example syllabus)? Or will some students have this responsibility multiple times?
* It is not clear what format the two exams will take, which together comprise 50% of the grade. No final exam is scheduled in the course topic outline. Will it occur during finals week?

**Reviewer’s Final Assessment**

* Students may take up to 6 credits of the special topics courses. Courses are variable 1-3 credits. The reviewed syllabus was a 1-credit course. Would any of the topics courses be 3? What would the course requirements and student products look like in a 2- or 3- credit course?
* Grading criteria for participation and leading discussion should be made more explicit.
* Status of faculty who might teach this course should be more fully articulated and consistent with Graduate School policies and best practices.

The Motions

* We move that PLP 512 be revised to address reviewer concerns about 2- and 3- credit offerings, explicit grading criteria, and faculty status of instructors.