Background

The WSU Registrar received a Major Curricular Change for a variable credit (1-4), new topics course from the School of Biological Sciences. The Major Curricular Change form was received on September 24, 2014.

Reviewer Comments

**Rationale**

* The School of Biological Sciences has identified a need to expand course offerings with specialized “topics” courses at the advanced level. An advanced topics course in Biology would be in line with course offerings in other graduate programs such as Chemistry and Math.
* This topics course would likely attract students from other disciplines within the School of Biological Sciences as well as other Schools across campus.
* The course would be taught in a seminar style. Students may take up to 9 credit hours of topics courses.

**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 a kind of template for seminars in the program. We reviewed a topics seminar called “Advanced Readings in Nutritional Physiology”, which was a 1-credit seminar.
* Course readings consisted entirely of peer-reviewed journal articles available to students on the Angel system. There are reference materials available to students to build requisite background knowledge on topics they are responsible for. The phrase “you are expected to have a solid understanding of nutritional concepts” is not explained. No pre-requisites are listed; thus, how do students know whether they have a solid understanding of material prior to class presentations?
* Attendance and general participation are 40% of the final grade. This is assessed on three levels: full, moderate and little. “Full” effort means that students complete all aspects of the assignment, select a paper “well in advance” of presenting it, and alerting seminar leaders in advance when missing a class. “Moderate” participation uses descriptors from “low” to “full”. A student who did not select a paper to present before presenting could receive a “moderate” participation grade. “Little” participation uses descriptors such as “sporadic”, “low”, “moderate”, and missing classes without notice.
* “Discussion leader” is 25% of the final grade. There seems to be a lot of overlap between this and the attendance/general participation grade. The description of the assignment is 2 sentences long and explains the frequency of the discussion leader role (at least once per semester) and the task of synthesizing student comments.
* “Weekly discussion questions” are 10% of the grade. The task description is 2 sentences long. Students write 1-2 questions to bring to the seminar. This score will overlap with the attendance and general participation score.
* A final take-home exam is 25% of the semester grade.
* Student learning outcomes using the measurable action verbs “demonstrate”, “communicate”, “critically evaluate”, and “synthesize” are not really measured by the discussion/participation assessments.

**Reviewer’s Final Assessment**

* This is a 1-credit, seminar-style course. The course outline contains topics only, which is probably appropriate for a 1-credit, seminar-style course. The grading in this seminar-style course is problematic because it is based overwhelmingly on attendance and participation. There is much overlap between attendance/participation and student roles in discussions. Thus, 75% of the grade is linked to attendance, effort and participation. Is this appropriate for a graduate-level seminar? A student could easily know the material well and yet fail the course, or know little about the material and get an “A” in the course.
* Students may take up to 9 credits of the special topics courses. Courses are variable 1-4 credits. The reviewed syllabus was a 1-credit course. Would any of the topics courses be 3 or 4 credits? What would the course requirements and student products look like in a 2-, 3- or 4-credit course?

The Motions

* We move that BIO 596 be revised such that student learning outcomes are assessed more rigorously beyond discussion and participation.