

COLLIN COLLEGE FACULTY COUNCIL

Position Paper: Academic Freedom, Closing the Gaps, and Course Redesign

Authored by:
The Collin College Faculty Council Committee on Academic Freedom

The Faculty Council, which represents the faculty body at Collin County Community College District, has adopted the following positions regarding academic freedom, the “Closing the Gap” initiative of Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, and the proposed course redesign being researched during the Fall of 2007 by Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Academic Freedom safeguards standards

Academic freedom—the only foundation for a free, open, broad and inventive environment for study— is imperative to maintaining a scholarly community.

In the rapidly changing environment between the academy and society, academic freedom safeguards professional academicians’ appropriate quality control over course standards, content and delivery method. These academicians’ expertise provides the indispensable perspective on what students need in order to master a course of study.

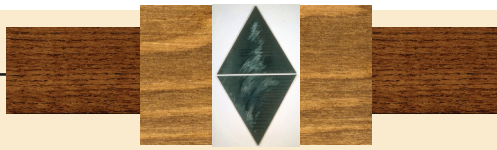
“Closing the Gaps”

The faculty applauds the state’s efforts to improve the academic success of Texas students, especially its emphasis on “high quality programs” in higher education and reforms that promote college preparation in the high school curriculum. It further applauds efforts to involve citizens, businesses, taxpayers and other members of the community in supporting schools and families in the interest of student success. While these influences have valuable perspectives specific to their needs or experience, the faculty believes that meaningful, high-quality education requires and academic freedom demands that professional academicians’ assessment of course content and teaching remain the single greatest influence.

In addition to providing students with marketable skills, academicians also support the intangible benefits of education described thus by Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB): “Education, at its best, also allows individuals to do what they want to do, rather than what they have to do, and it opens their minds to better understand the world around them.”

The faculty is concerned about the potential tension between different elements of the report’s objectives. This tension is particularly manifest in the report's emphasis upon precise quantifiable objectives, such as increasing retention and graduation rates (per the Uniform Recruitment and Retention Strategy), balanced against the requirement that these improvements happen in “high quality programs.” (Some standards that might be found useful in this regard are outlined in "Leading the Way: An Action Plan for Making Texas Higher Education Globally Competitive from the Governor's Business Council," e.g. the Program for International Assessment -- PISA.) When any socially responsive institution is under pressure to measure progress, the natural tendency is to achieve the quantifiable improvements at the neglect of the intangible (“high quality”) requirements. This could result in pressure on colleges and faculties to alter course content and/or lower class expectations of students in order to retain and graduate them, undermining the greater objective of the state educational reforms in the process. Upholding academic freedom could be useful in withstanding any such pressures.

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Addressing "Texas Course Redesign"

Of great concern to the faculty is the Texas Course Redesign Project (TCRP) that began in Fall 2006. The THECB has selected institutions to "review and revise entry-level lower division academic courses ... to improve student learning and reduce the cost of course delivery through the use of information technology. ... The long-term goal of the TCRP is ... multiple models of successfully redesigned courses for a full freshman year of general education curriculum and developmental courses ..."

A major focus of the state reform plan is the issue of the affordability of higher education. The effort to reduce costs by redesigning (and presumably standardizing) courses speaks directly to the issue of academic freedom, clearly presenting the potential of dictating course content and delivery. In higher education, professional academics must defend the integrity of classroom scholarship in its openness, flexibility, breadth and depth of study, which includes an appropriate application of information technology in coursework. While, it is not evident that such redesigned courses will actually reduce costs (given the expense of software updates, comparable to the "new edition" expenses of textbooks), it is certainly questionable that this approach will enhance the quality education that every freshman should enjoy. Software is a dubious substitute for the presence of a qualified academician on hand to introduce students to the riches of the discipline by facilitating class meetings that allow for stimulating inquiry and applies learning to the students' own world and time.

Finally, while the faculty applauds the advisory alliance with business in formulating and supporting curriculum and curriculum needs, there is great concern regarding the potential for narrow, self-interested business motives to foster some technology-based reforms. The National Center for Academic Transformation (NCAT) "is an independent non-profit organization dedicated to the effective use of information technology to improve student learning outcomes and reduce the cost of higher education." Among its resources are "more than 60 large-scale course redesigns." One of NCAT's Board members is a senior executive for the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), a non-profit organization that supports "state strategic decision-making in higher education," providing a "one-stop-shop" for state-level higher education data and information." NCHEMS was a contributor to the Texas Governor's Business Council's report, "Leading the Way." Another board member of NCAT is a senior executive with a leading nationwide business that sells educational software products and services to institutions of higher learning. Essentially, the for-profit businesses most apt to benefit financially from "course redesign" have representatives guiding the "nonprofits" who then work with state governments to see that "course redesign" is implemented. The faculty is concerned that, minimally, curriculum decisions may be driven by interests far removed from the classroom or, at worst, may represent conflicts of interest.