Common Course Numbering

Institutions of higher education across the United States are grappling with the issue of course numbering: does each campus engage in its own numbering system or is there some attempt to move towards a common numbering system? For every advocate of local decision making, there is another who advocates a common system as a way to increase transparency, and this is an issue of particular resonance with the public. There have been a number of attempts by state legislators to dictate a common course numbering system, and the related issue of the ease of transfer and clarity of transfer requirements is a hot button issue with the broader public who frankly don’t understand how we do business and don’t understand why in an environment of ‘plug and play’ and ‘drag and click’ credit transfer is as mysterious and complex as it is.

This issue is even more germane in Hawai‘i, given that all public higher education is part of a single University of Hawai‘i and given that the seven community colleges are now the primary front door for higher education in the state. We will simply not have the college-educated population the state needs unless we collectively do a better job of moving the students from the two to the four-year sector, and we know that the perceived difficulty of transfer—however we evaluate the accuracy of those perceptions—is a major issue in inhibiting that mobility among sectors.

The Committee on Enrollment Planning at Mānoa has therefore suggested that we move towards a policy in which all general education courses which are equivalent in the core would have the same number and all general education courses with the same number would be equivalent. This is not mandating full common course numbering, and it preserves the autonomy of campus decision making over the vast majority of the courses which are offered. But it assumes clarity and commonality among the key courses that are most frequently transferred. The present situation, in which Math 135 at the community colleges is not the same course as Math 135 at Mānoa, is a situation which increases confusion among the students and sharply increases the need for advisors to explain the lay of the land to students.

To announce a policy goal isn’t the same as figuring out how to achieve that goal, so if we adopt this goal, we need to identify the implementation issues and figure out next steps. But we believe that we need to agree on the goal first before we attempt to figure out exactly how to get there. A proposal along these lines was sent by the Mānoa Faculty Senate to the ACCFSC in Fall 2010 and is being considered by them. Since this conversation has been launched among the faculty, it is time to begin to discuss it at CCAO as well.