

The Academic Bulletin

from the Office of the Provost of Calvin College

Friday, December 8, 2017

Student–Faculty Ratios and Big Classes

Four years ago, I wrote an *Academic Bulletin* piece with this same title. There I wrote about the challenges that we would face in our work to get back to a 16:1 student–faculty ratio. At that time, the ratio was 14.6:1, having fallen considerably since the 1990s. Deans and chairs have done a lot of hard work since 2013, and this semester we have achieved a ratio of 15.8:1, the highest it's been this century even though the work was made much more challenging by the unpredicted 6% decline in enrollment over these four years. But this progress has not come without challenges, one of which is class size. This fall, there are eight sections with 50 students or more, and everyone teaching a core course notices the pressure to increase section size.

Does the goal of 16:1 imply unacceptably large classes? The short answer is no. And the pressure to offer larger classes actually arises from declining enrollment more than from meeting the student–faculty ratio goal.

The real culprit is variation in section size. The average section size this fall is around 22 students (depending on how one counts). I think a faculty member teaching three 3-hour courses to a total of 66 students would be churlish to complain about class sizes. To increase the student–faculty ratio and to respond to declining enrollment, we must decrease the number of sections that we teach. However, it is difficult to cut 'small' sections, as these are usually single sections of courses that are required for students to progress in their programs. Small sections just get smaller as enrollment declines. Therefore, we tend to cut sections of multiple-section courses (which are always full), and this puts additional pressure on the other sections of that course. Demand on core courses does not decrease in units of full sections! Of course the whole story is considerably more complicated than this and varies by department. But the seemingly paradoxical conclusion is that as enrollment declines, core course sections get larger.

There are several ways to mitigate this trend, some of which we have used. We could eliminate some programs. We could teach programs with fewer specialized courses. We could reduce core requirements (which is effectively the same as eliminating programs, each core category being a 'program'). We could increase individual faculty teaching-loads. Or we could teach individual sections more cheaply (e.g., use adjuncts). Of course the best solution is to increase enrollment, and thus you're welcome to help the enrollment division in its never-ending efforts to convince students that the wide array of programs and the rich core curriculum that we offer is a very good thing indeed.

Mike Stob, dean for academic administration

Congratulations

Ryan Bebej was selected from a large group of applicants into the Bridging the Two Cultures of Science and the Humanities II Program coordinated by Science and Christianity in Oxford (SCIO). He will join a cohort of 25 international scholars who will participate in seminars during the summers of 2018 and 2019. Within the unique setting of Oxford, England, the group will focus on the development of interdisciplinary skills and understanding that are central to the field of science and religion.

From the Faculty Activity Reports

- Anding Shen (Biology), 'Lymphatic Endothelial Cells Interact Differently with Memory and Naïve Resting CD4+ T Cells to Promote HIV-1 Infection' (poster presentation, Autumn Immunology Conference, Chicago, IL, November 18, 2017).
- John Walcott (Education), 'Equipping Teachers to Understand and Pursue Educational Equity and Justice' (lecture, National Association for Multicultural Education, Salt Lake City, Utah, November 2, 2017).
- John Witvliet (Congregational and Ministry Studies), 'A Pentecostal Christmas,' *Christianity Today* 61, no. 10 (December, 2017): 56–60.

Be sure to [fill out](#) your Faculty Activity Reports regularly. If you have questions, see the [FAQ page](#).

Note: *FEN* activities are called Intercultural Competency Professional Development Activities and are reported via [this link](#). Contact diversity@calvin.edu if you have questions.

Coming Up on Campus

Monday, December 11

- Chapel. Carol-sing. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- Political Science research poster presentations. 2:30 p.m., De Vos lobby
- Engineering seminar. 3:30 p.m., SB 010

Wednesday–Friday, December 13–15, and Monday, December 18

- Final exams
- President's Coffee. 12:00 noon (11:30 a.m. refreshments), CFAC recital hall

Tuesday, December 19

- Final exams
- Faculty Senate meeting. 4:30 p.m., Hoogenboom 280

Wednesday, December 20

- Open house for faculty and staff at DeWit Manor. *Optional* schedule (to minimize crowding):
Last names R–Z: 2:00 p.m.
Last names H–Q: 3:00 p.m.
Last names A–G: 4:00–5:00 p.m.

Monday, December 25–Monday, January 1, 2018

- Campus closed for Christmas break

Wednesday, December 27

- Fall-semester grades due, 5:00 p.m.

Tuesday, January 2

- Campus reopens

Wednesday, January 3

- Interim term begins
- Chapel. Hymn-sing. 10:00 a.m., Chapel
- [January Series](#) begins. 12:30 p.m., CFAC auditorium

Thursday, January 4

- Chapel. Sounds of Gospel worship. 10:00 a.m., Chapel

Friday, January 5

- Chapel. Student worship team. 10:00 a.m., Chapel