In the meeting of September 23rd 2011, the Undergraduate Council (UGC) reviewed and discussed the Center for Teaching and Learning’s (CTL) Program Review submitted by the Interim Director of the CTL. The UGC also reviewed letters from the Dean and the Curriculum Committee of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences (CLAS). The UGC emailed its questions to Kandice Pryor who then provided a written response. Due to her family leave, Kandice Pryor was unable to attend the UGC meeting, but the Dean of CLAS and the Acting Interim Director attended in her place. This memo is based on the program review, supporting letters, the written responses from the CTL, and the discussion that took place at the UGC meeting.

The Center for Teaching and Learning provides a broad range of academic services for students related to individual learning and institutional retention. The areas of service include testing services, math and science skills, reading and writing tutoring, and supplemental instruction (SI) for courses historically identified to be difficult for students. The UGC notes that the CTL wishes to expand its SI programming both in terms of hiring a coordinator and expanding the number of courses with SI. The UGC supports this expansion but also agrees with the College Curriculum Committee and CLAS Dean that CTL should develop criteria for including courses in SI and collect further data to ensure effective expansion and implementation.

Faculty and Staff of CTL are highly qualified professionals. CTL’s effectiveness, though, is challenged by a lack of stability and inadequate staffing. The CTL has had several “interim” directors which has caused problems in vision, continuity, effectiveness, and quality. A permanent director would not only be a sign to the community of the importance of CTL, but would also help with service, oversight, planning, and review. Given the centrality of CTL to the campus and its ever-increasing usage, the CTL and the campus would benefit from additional full-time specialist hires in writing and reading. The institution needs to address staffing issues in the CTL, and we support this effort.

CTL’s provision of services is also affected by its placement in the often confusing warren of Brookens’ offices. Increased signage could help students and faculty find CTL more easily. Plans for the renovation of Brookens seem to be in process, and UGC encourages the responsible administrative unit(s) to consider ease of navigation alongside aesthetic considerations in these new plans.

As has become clear to faculty and staff, teaching online and on-ground are different experiences. The same holds true for the academic services provided by CTL. Simply learning the technology that makes online educational interaction possible is not enough. Technology and best
practices must be learned well and this involves a commitment of time and resources. CTL itself recommends creation of a separate program within the center to deal exclusively with online students. We caution, though, that new programs often entail the hiring of new administrative or coordinating staff. Given the other important staffing needs of CTL, creation of an online program should be conducted if it can be accomplished with CTL’s current resources. We commend the CTL’s recognition of the different investments needed for online and on-ground tutors and encourage them to train staff for online services whether or not a separate online program is created.

External accreditation is an important avenue of quality assurance and implementation of best practices. We commend CTL for recognizing this and exploring the option of seeking certification through the College Reading and Learning Association (CRLA). This would also help with the collection of data on usage and quality of services. While CTL currently uses surveys for feedback, the return rate is rather low, and perhaps there are other methods that could be employed. CRLA looks like a cost effective resource for these efforts.

While the original role of CTL was a combination of faculty development and student services, CTL now primarily serves students. The UGC recommends that the function and mission of CTL be re-examined in light of current campus needs. This discussion needs to involve constituents from across the campus community and should be conducted as soon as possible, so that the purpose of the unit is clear before a permanent unit head is hired.

Recommendations

- CTL staffing needs are determined by usage over the entire campus, yet it is housed and funded within CLAS. CTL, CLAS, and the institution need to explore ways to share the costs of CTL across campus. Allocation of institutional resources towards this initiative would be a strategic investment to promote retention and requires a campus-wide effort.
- CTL should not be responsible for being a testing center. Proctoring make up exams strays beyond the mission of CTL and further stresses its limited resources. UGC recommends CTL to divest itself of this function, with proper faculty development on alternatives to make-up testing.
- CTL should develop a more robust assessment plan that increases survey response rates and explores other methods of feedback.
- CTL should continue working with the College of Business and Management to increase effective academic services offered to its students.
- CTL should continue to strengthen and expand the Supplemental Instruction Program.

CC: Jan Kirkham, Acting Interim Director, Center for teaching and Learning
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HDB