

Comments on the Final Report of the Task Force on Classrooms and Class Scheduling

The Task Force on Classrooms and Class Scheduling recently released its final report and recommendations. These results were discussed with the Faculty Senate Council at its February 8th meeting, but there was almost no time at that meeting for feedback from FSC members.

Building More Classrooms

We appreciate the energy and creativity that the task force has given to better using our current space, and agree that each of the directions outlined by the task force is worth pursuing, at least to some degree, to address our space challenges in the short-term. However, for reasons primarily detailed beginning on page three, we are concerned that pursuing these directions will not, by itself, be sufficient for solving SCU's long-term space problems.

We are already experiencing significant problems with scheduling classes, as well as shortages in both lab space and office space. And the trustees need to maintain the ability to expand the student body size, as they have done over the last decade to address expected and unexpected financial needs. Over this past decade, the partial solutions to our space and population issues have necessitated making fewer classrooms available.

The task force's presentation at the Feb. 8th meeting did an excellent job of quantifying the current state of this problem, which faculty have only been able to discuss through many anecdotes previously: SCU's current overall classroom utilization rate has a 68% average, whereas the task force's presentation at the Feb. 8 meeting pointed out that *a 40% average* is common in private universities. The task force's many thoughtful recommendations for better use of our current space should help address the significant problem that our current utilization goes over 90% at peak times. However, better use of current classroom space only redistributes utilization, which, while certainly worthwhile, does not change average utilization. Average utilization is also clearly a real part of our problem, and new construction of classrooms seems unavoidable if we hope to bring this down to where we remain competitive with other private universities.

Given our day to day experience with the ramifications of these utilization issues, we appreciate the following excerpt from page six of the task force report:

“Any discussion of plans for new construction and/or for changing the size of the graduate and/or undergraduate student body must take into consideration the availability of teaching space and the need to maintain appropriate flexibility to meet student and faculty needs. Faculty should be included in such discussions.”

Within this context, for the reasons outlined above and below, **we feel that it is essential that the upcoming capital campaign be designed to provide the flexibility to allow for the addition of a significant number of new classrooms, especially general use classrooms.** Teaching needs to continue to be our top priority, and the capital campaign should reflect this value. Between the fall of 2007 and 2011, there was a 9.6% increase in scheduled classes according to the report, while, according to the Registrar’s office, between 2006 and 2011 there was an 8.5% *decrease* (from 70 down to 64) in the number of general use classrooms on campus due to converting classrooms to specialized use, as well as needed office space and labs as mentioned above. And this overall decrease includes the classrooms added by the construction of Lucas Hall.¹

There are many potential ways to create new classrooms in current buildings or buildings already in the Master Plan. The current new Art building design calls for only one general use classroom. This could be expanded. The proposed Sciences building could also be designed to create a significant number of new classrooms. Perhaps the Alumni and Daly sciences buildings can be maintained, but be renovated into classrooms as well as office and lab space. Perhaps as administrators and other staff move into the new Admissions and Enrollment Building, some of their old offices could be converted into small classrooms or seminar rooms.

These are just some possible ideas for creating new classrooms, which may or may not prove feasible. The Task Force on Classrooms and Class Scheduling has used a great deal of creativity to look at how to use our existing space better. We believe it is equally important to consider creative ways of constructing new classrooms long-term. And we fear the long-term consequences for the effectiveness of teaching and learning should we fail to act.

¹This continues to be a problem. According to both the Registrar and the report, we are currently expecting to gain two general use classrooms in Graham, but we will also lose two general use classrooms in Engineering which are being converted to specialized use.

Some concerns about the Task Force Recommendations

There were five main suggestions in the report for addressing the current severe crunch we currently have in classroom scheduling. They are

1. Use Bannan space better.
2. Convert some specialized classroom space into general use space.
3. Shorten the Tu/Th schedule to allow for a new class time slot.
4. Use early morning and late afternoon class times more.
5. Have classes taught at less usual times.

While we support looking into each of these, at least to some degree, as short-term fixes, we believe that they will not be sufficient to fully address SCU's space problems in the long-term without creating other significant problems. We detail our concerns:

Use Bannan space better. According to the report, "Ten MWF classes and 13 TR classes can be scheduled immediately (in Bannan) for the winter and spring quarters of 2012." This would be of some modest help if it were possible, but it turns out that because of the Law school's semester and final exam schedule, this option will not be as productive as the task force hoped. At the moment only six classes can be accommodated in the winter quarter, unfortunately.

General use spaces and Specialized spaces. According to the report, "specialized teaching spaces include 28 science or computer labs, 8 studio spaces, 11 theater/performance spaces, and 24 classrooms with access restricted due to location." None but the last category could even possibly also be used as general use classrooms. The report then states, "the average utilization rate in specialized teaching spaces, measured by scheduled classes, is 22%. Some of the specialized teaching spaces are appropriate for lecture style classes." Some? Perhaps, but the majority cannot be used this way.

According to Diane Jonte-Pace, there are three potential specialized spaces in Kenna that can accommodate more than 30 students if converted to general use. There are also two underused computer labs in A&S, a number of seminar rooms with very low utilization but which can accommodate only small classes, and some smaller spaces in RLCs that could be used better. We support looking into these, especially since this attempts to reverse the trend of converting general use space to other uses. However, we point out that sometimes having unscheduled seminar rooms can be important

for having a place for departmental meetings, scheduling talks from outside speakers, accommodating larger groups of students in office hours, review sessions before exams, and other miscellaneous, but crucial, space needs that cannot always be planned far in advance.

Shortening the Tu/Th class times. Normal undergraduate classroom hours are between 8 AM and 6 PM. The extra period produced by the report’s proposed alternative A for 95 minute class schedules doesn’t end until 6:20PM, which is well beyond the time that daycare (including our KOC) stops. The extra period produced by the report’s proposed alternative B starts at 7:30 instead of 8:00 — again a real problem with daycare (KOC doesn’t start that early for the few that can get into it), and it’s a problem for students, who learn less effectively this early according to both research and faculty experience cited by many faculty in Appendix C of this report.

If we want to shorten the Tu/Th class times for pedagogical reasons, that’s great. But there is little evidence that this would provide an additional *useful* class period on these days.

Using early mornings and late afternoons more. According to the report

“To ensure that students have adequate flexibility in course selection, each department should schedule at least 30% of its courses during non-peak times (i.e., at times other than 9:00 AM to 3:30 PM).”

Consider a MWF schedule, which some departments (Mathematics, Modern Languages, etc.) need to use for pedagogical reasons. During normal undergraduate class hours (8 AM–6 PM), there are five class times during peak times (9:15, 10:30, 11:45, 1:00, 2:15) and three during non-peak times (8AM, 3:30, 4:45). Even if all the time slots were equally filled, then $3/8 = 37.5\%$ of the courses would be at non-peak times, barely making these requirements.

The report claims that this new schedule gives more flexibility for work-life balance, but implementing this recommendation would accomplish the opposite. Having 30% of the courses at non-peak times would be a major transition that will make it harder for faculty to balance work-life issues, carve out concentrated time for research, or commute from their homes. It would also make it harder for the university or departments to schedule common meeting times (which are usually scheduled at 3:30 or 4:00).

And it is likely to be a problem for students. For early morning classes, we again point out the faculty in Appendix C of the report who discuss the growing body of research showing that students have difficulty learning effectively this early. And many other faculty in Appendix C point out that their personal experiences with such early classes agree with this research. For late afternoon classes, the ability of students to schedule work or internships or participate in athletics and other extracurricular activities would be impacted. Students have their own “work-life” balance issues, which we need to consider.

Perhaps for these reasons, students generally avoid very early and very late class times. We note the many faculty in the report’s survey who point out that their classes were cancelled when they tried to offer them during these earlier and later times, which often created last minute scheduling problems for faculty, students, department chairs, not to mention an eventual loss of income for many part-time faculty members. (We also note that Diane Jonte-Pace is currently looking into data on these cancellations to understand them better, which we applaud.)

Given these facts, we recommend dropping having such a specific goal of “scheduling at least 30% of courses during non-peak times.” SCU should experiment with offering some more classes at non-peak times, but we should then determine the success of this change before deciding whether or not it makes sense to pursue it further. Also, we recommend consulting with ASSCU about both this suggestion and the next suggestion below, given the potential significant impact this policy could have on students.

Non-traditional class times. The results of the report’s own survey do not suggest a major, positive breakthrough on this front. For any of the suggested alternative class times, no more than 19 out of 223 respondents preferred any of the new times, no more than 70 out of 223 were able and willing to teach during them *even occasionally*, and no more than 60 of 223 were “able, though not willing,” to teach during them. In other words, a large majority of faculty cannot or do not want to teach at these times — even occasionally.

We certainly support making these new times available to the few who prefer them, as that could be a win-win situation. We have concerns about going too much farther beyond this, and again suggest gauging the effect of moving in this direction before going further, especially gauging student reaction.

Summing Up

The lack of classroom space has been a long-term neglected problem on campus, and it is great that, as a community, we are beginning to take a serious look at solutions to it. We believe that we will need a combination of carefully crafted short-term and long-term solutions to effectively address these current and future space issues — primarily for more classrooms, and secondarily for more office and lab space. We hope that the task force's report and this response to it will help form a basis from which we can go forward to create the best possible solutions to these important issues.