

To: The Harvey Mudd College community
From: Faculty Executive Committee

Student workload directly affects the quality of work and life for a majority of Harvey Mudd College community members. It affects students' ability to learn effectively, to pursue non-academic interests, and to maintain their health and happiness. Similarly, it affects faculty members' effectiveness as teachers, research productivity, and ability to obtain work-life balance. For staff responsible for student life on campus, our demanding curriculum is a consistent source of concern, having impact on our students' health, success, and happiness.

Addressing the problems caused by a heavy workload is an enormous and essential challenge for our community, which is why we are grateful to the many members of the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) over the last three years who have undertaken diverse and vital steps toward understanding and addressing these problems.

Foremost among the TLC's efforts has been the commissioning of a study by Dr. Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise, the director and assistant director for the Center of Inquiry into the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, to study the impact of student workload on classroom interactions and learning, students' understanding of their own intellect and ability to learn, and the functioning of our Honor Code. Because some of the information gathered by the Wabash consultants was collected with a promise of confidentiality, the TLC has summarized their findings and recommendations in a report to the Faculty Executive Committee (FEC), "Learning at Mudd," which is attached below.

The FEC has subsequently charged itself with overseeing efforts to address and monitor efforts to reduce workloads, to innovate and demonstrate new ways to address workload in course design, and to implement other changes to the curriculum.

Prior and Ongoing Activities

The attached report from the TLC is one part of a broad set of efforts regarding student workload and its impact across the HMC community. Other related efforts include:

- **Review of the Common Core:** The faculty committed to a full review of the Core prior to the Wabash study. This review was envisioned as part of the overall accreditation process and as part of the analysis of the impacts of growth of the college, but its relevance to larger conversations about student workload is clear. That review will take place in the 2017-18 academic year and will have student workload as one of its central topics.
 - To gain information to support the Core review, educational effectiveness consultants have been hired and to meet with faculty, students, staff and alumni on the purpose and effects of the current Core.
 - Those meetings occurred on March 6 (after a postponement), and we expect results by the end of April. More than 75 members of the HMC community met with the consultants, including students, faculty, alumni, and administrators.
- **Core Working Group:** Established in the 2015-16 academic year, this group examined several modifications to the Core that had been proposed in response to perceptions that

students were struggling in certain Core courses. The working group was specifically asked to develop an understanding of workload in the Core, and the impact any modifications would have on student workload. At this group's recommendation, the faculty voted to eliminate Core lab in favor of a new biology lab, and their input will continue to help guide curricular modifications after the completion of the Core review in 2017-18.

- Assessment Report of Student Experiences in the Core: Undertaken from 2014-16, the Assessment and Accreditation Committee and the Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness brought together institutional data on retention, language study, and diversity; 1st and 3rd semester student surveys; departmental major exit surveys; faculty interviews; and assessments conducted on individual aspects of the Core, such as Writ 1 and Core labs. These elements were combined into a report in spring 2016, which focused on student experiences in the Common Core since 2010, and this report was made available to the faculty and to the educational effectiveness consultants to help inform their review of the purpose and effects of the current Core.
- Honor Code Working Groups: A series of Honor Code working groups consisting of both faculty and students were established starting in the 2013-14 academic year. This fall and spring, the current group proposed specific changes to the faculty notebook to align student and faculty language and understanding of the Honor Code. These changes were adopted at the February 2017 faculty meeting.
- Faculty Survey: HMC is participating in the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education (COACHE) Survey on Faculty Job Satisfaction. This is a benchmarking instrument aimed at gauging faculty experiences with teaching, governance, mentoring, work/life balance, support for research and teaching, and other factors related to their work at HMC. The information from this survey will help inform a range of upcoming discussions on work/life balance and future curricular revision across our community, particularly as these aspects of our work together may be affected by college growth and the insights gained from the Wabash study.
- Upcoming Study of Faculty and Student Time Expenditure: The FEC has begun to look at other data-gathering instruments for understanding the impact of our challenging curriculum on our community, such as using time-tracking apps or other means for students and faculty to record time spent on work or other activities. We are also considering how to best match such data with syllabi and assignments throughout our curriculum, to gauge the relationships between expectations and actual workload.

This list is not meant to be an exhaustive inventory of recent campus-wide efforts to improve our students learning experiences and well-being since the Common Core was launched. For example, the list does not include the important work in the Division of Student Affairs to support student learning and wellness, such as the Peer Academic Liaisons (PALs) program, which was started in 2014, and the expansion of Academic Excellence tutoring to include courses beyond the Core. Nor does it acknowledge the invigoration of the Office of Institutional

Diversity and Summer Institute under the direction of Sumun Pendakur since she joined the HMC community in 2012, or the crucial services offered by Dean Q and the Health and Wellness staff, or the addition of Title IX coordinator Deborah Kahn this year. Nor does it recognize student-initiated offerings, such as the Mudders mentoring Mudders program, now housed in the Office of Institutional Diversity, or the continuing work of ASHMC and student groups to address student needs. The well-being of all HMC community members is contingent on the creativity and labor of many individuals, departments, and groups across our campus, not all of whom are mentioned here.

We also do want to acknowledge that efforts to review and revise aspects of the Core curriculum may not seem to be producing change fast enough for many of our current students to feel their effects. However, we firmly believe that the curriculum ought not to change quickly nor without systematic, careful study and input from our college's many stakeholders: students, faculty, alumni, staff, and trustees. Regrettably, this all takes time. For example, in the case of our last substantial Core revision, review and strategic planning was initiated in 2006, and the Common Core was rolled out in stages over multiple years, starting in 2009-10 with the launch of Writ 001, to full implementation in 2011-12. For the current process of curriculum review and revision, our next major step will be the full Core review in 2017-18, which again will include input from all segments of the HMC community.

We are deeply grateful to those in our faculty and staff who have already been working so hard in the past few years to rethink how to make our curriculum livable and rigorous. We are also deeply grateful to our students, who have been active, honest, and thoughtful participants in this process. Their insights and contributions are vital to the work we have ahead of us, and they will continue to inspire and inform us in the work that is to come.

Faculty Executive Committee
March 2017

Learning at Mudd: Insight into the student academic experience

[1] Motivation for this document

The 2014-2015 Teaching and Learning Committee [Hawkins, Orrison, Sweedyk, Boerkel, Palucki Blake, Hodas] spent time discussing the impact that our challenging curriculum, especially during the first two years, has on individual classroom interactions and learning. These discussions included ways the HMC Honor Code is or is not working for our students and whether the reported increase in Honor Code violations might be related to the pressure created by such a demanding curriculum.

TLC faculty further noticed that *student impression* of their own academic ability, knowledge, and performance is often lower than reality, and that this pervasive feeling of being “less than” impairs their engagement in class and their enthusiasm for tackling the interesting, and often challenging, problems we know they can handle.

We asked ourselves, “What can the TLC do, both as faculty themselves and for the larger HMC community, to support a true sense of achievement among students? What can the TLC learn from talking with students and faculty about issues related to the student academic experience, in particular (1) the challenging curriculum and (2) the Honor Code?”

[2] What TLC did

The committee concluded that an outside voice may offer important insights that might have been missed or insufficiently prioritized. The TLC approached Dr. Charlie Blaich and Kathy Wise, who are the director and assistant director for the Center of Inquiry into the Liberal Arts at Wabash College, respectively, and requested a site visit with student and faculty focus groups. The Center for Inquiry of Liberal Arts is dedicated to helping colleges and universities use evidence to strengthen liberal arts education for all students. Blaich and Wise have visited more than 150 colleges and universities, working to support the missions and students of the institutions with which they collaborate. More information on the center and their core values can be found here: <http://www.liberalarts.wabash.edu/> and the biographies of the consultants are available by request from our director of institutional research (lpblake@g.hmc.edu).

The committee asked Blaich and Wise to:

“Review and recommend strategies for the Teaching and Learning Committee (TLC) as we plan future work with faculty in supporting our students in two specific ways: (1) upholding the Honor Code and (2) appreciating their own growth and success in a challenging curriculum.”

The visit took place in October of 2015 under the purview of the 2015-2016 TLC [Hawkins, Boerkel, Eckert, Karp, Hur, Srebotnjak, Palucki-Blake, Hodas]. The consultants were provided institutional data (*e.g.*, CIRP Freshman Survey, CIRP Senior Survey, NSSE). Blaich and Wise met with 24 students in small groups of 2-8 and 31 faculty (again in small groups of 3-8) over a period of two days.

[3] The findings

Blaich and Wise provided a detailed report of their conversations as well as their own reflections and general recommendations to the TLC. Careful review of their outsider observations as well as extensive discussion within the TLC resulted in the compilation of the following list of issues that we would like to share with the rest of the campus. It is our hope that this list will serve as a basis for continuing and starting new dialogues on campus between students, staff, and faculty, which will begin addressing the issues of student self-efficacy and the role that the Honor Code plays at HMC.

- Student respondents report that relentless workloads often negatively impact their self-efficacy (*i.e.*, the belief in their ability to succeed in specific situations or to accomplish a task. Research has shown that self-efficacy plays a role in how one approaches goals, tasks, and challenges). For example, heavy workload prevents students from performing at their full potential in assignments and this results in underappreciation of their own potential and achievements. Because the quantity of time students spend on a course is allocated by urgency, the amount of time that students spend on a course becomes disjointed from student learning and interest in the course.
- Student respondents report both intrinsic and extrinsic pressure to forego the well-balanced education promised by the HMC mission (“Harvey Mudd College seeks to educate engineers, scientists, and mathematicians well versed in all of these areas and in the humanities and the social sciences so that they may assume leadership in their fields *with a clear understanding of the impact of their work on society.*”) statement in favor of squeezing in as many technical courses they can fit into their schedule.
- Student respondents report that interactions with faculty can have long-lasting effects on their perceptions of their own abilities and achievements, and can either be empowering or discouraging.
- Insufficient coordination among and within departments can result in irregular, and at periods, untenable workloads. This has contributed to the perception that the departments are vying for student attention by increasing workload.
- The Honor Code is differently interpreted and applied by the students and faculty which inevitably leads to misunderstandings. Conversations with faculty focused on helping students develop and adhere to important but abstract ethical principles, while the conversations with students focused more on their social compact with one another.

[4] Moving forward

None of these topics are specific to any one party at HMC and we feel most can only be wholly addressed by frank conversations that involve all members of the college. These are important issues that call for a concerted and sustained effort from students, faculty, and staff at all levels of seniority. Moving forward, we would like to invite all campus members to multiple on-going forums dedicated to each of these 5 major topics so that we can all discuss strategies for moving forward together. To this end, we at TLC would like to make the following suggestions:

- Work in collaboration with relevant constituencies, such as the Division of Student Affairs, Center for Teaching and Learning, Honor Code Committee, Office of Institutional Research and Effectiveness, and the on-campus instructional designer to discuss possible solutions and ways to move forward. One potential example of this might be to bring faculty and students together to discuss differences in perception and application of the Honor Code and how it might impact the number of violations.
- Charge a current standing committee to overseeing these conversations. This establishes credibility with both students and faculty and a go-to resource that adds weight and credibility to these important discussions.
- Implement significant and visible changes in response to the issues that have been identified. Specific examples might include re-examining or piloting courses with different workload expectations or different teaching formats.
- Monitor and revisit the issues periodically for meaningful changes. Follow-up reviews (internal or external) should monitor progress and identify further opportunities for improvements.

2014-2015 TLC members: Jim Boerkoel, Lelia Hawkins, Z Sweedyk, and Michael Orrison. Laura Palucki Blake and Elizabeth Hodas *ex officio*.

2015-2016 TLC members: Dagan Karp, Jim Boerkoel, Jae Hur, Tanja Srebotnjak, Lelia Hawkins, and Jim Eckert. Laura Palucki Blake and Elizabeth Hodas *ex officio*.

2016-2017 TLC members: Talithia Williams, Jae Hur, Tanja Srebotnjak, and Jim Eckert. Laura Palucki Blake, Jessica Greene, Elly Schofield, and Elizabeth Hodas *ex officio*.