

Review of HLTHD04H3-S: Special Topics in Health (Alternative Health: Practice and Theory)

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The Vice-President and Provost received a variety of complaints regarding the assigned readings in a posted version of the syllabus for a class on immunization in this course, alleging that the class would not be taught in a manner consistent with reasonable academic expectations for balance and rigor.

Although the Provost has indicated, and I agree, that it is not the role of senior administration of the University to examine the appropriateness of content within individual courses, she asked that I provide her with comments from the pedagogical process perspective (in particular, whether the processes used to approve and develop the course, at a departmental level, are consistent with best practice), to assist her in responding to the concerns that have been raised.

I have conducted this review in close collaboration with the Chair of the Department of Anthropology at UTSC, Professor Michael Lambek and the Health Studies Program Director, Professor John Scherk. The UTSC Department of Anthropology is the administrative unit responsible for the Health Studies Program.

As part of my review I examined the curriculum for the Health Studies Program, the 2015 syllabus for the course, and student evaluations from the 2014 session for the course. I interviewed Professors Lambek and Scherk, and the instructor, Ms Beth Landau-Halpern.

At the outset I must be clear that evaluations of content and pedagogical approach ought to be done at the level of the program and department, by academic colleagues who have the appropriate expertise to conduct such examinations. Accordingly, my review has focused primarily on the processes that were followed in this case. However, given that the topic of concern regarding immunization is within my academic area of expertise, I do offer some observations for future consideration by the department.

The Health Studies Program at UTSC combines courses from a range of disciplines to examine this critical area from a biological, social and policy perspective. The program enrolls 640 students a year in two Major areas: Population Health, leading to a BSc, and Health Policy, leading to a BA. Each Major can also be taken with a co-op option. All students take a full year two course sequence entitled Foundations of Health Studies. Most students combine the Major with another area, often another science Major. All students take a statistics course and many take a course in health research methods.

The Program Director notes that the majority of courses that students take are firmly rooted in biomedical sciences and students have exposure to issues regarding vaccines and immunization throughout the program. The evidentiary basis for these interventions is presented within these earlier courses. Several of the courses also examine the controversies regarding specific vaccines.

The course offered by Ms Landau-Halpern is a final year option limited to 30 students. The program aims to have several courses under the title Special Topics in Health each year. Students may also take Directed Readings or Directed Research, among other options in this category. Students taking any of these options are in their final year of study and are expected to approach controversial topics with a critical lens.

The program is constantly looking for ways to provide new and emerging topics of interest to students. Health practitioners are often asked to conduct such courses. It is within this context that this specific course was developed as an elective for interested final year students. The course aims to present alternative medicine and to explore the controversies around these modalities. The instructor reports that as the students start with a strong biomedicine background, they approach the topics presented quite critically.

The student evaluations from 2014 reveal that students do understand the purpose of the course and appreciated the opportunity to critically think about these alternative modalities. The course is rated very positively by the students who took it 2014. Many students commented that they felt that the topics covered in the course should be introduced into the curriculum in earlier years. There were no complaints from the students in 2014 regarding the content of the course, and I am not aware of any student complaints so far in 2015.

The session which generated the bulk of the concerns which were brought to the attention of the Provost is one dealing with immunization. Ms Landau-Halpern reports that she revised the curriculum in mid-February in light of the ongoing measles outbreaks. Thus, she had already voluntarily removed the session for which the greatest degree of concerns were subsequently expressed.

I did explore with her how she approached this topic in 2014 and how she would have done so if it had remained on the curriculum this year. She reports that she approaches this issue from a nuanced perspective and encourages students to think critically about vaccine effectiveness and safety.

The syllabus for the course contains a reading list for the immunization class which gives emphasis to materials that primarily focus on risks for vaccines. The instructor reports that she provides these readings as the students have already seen the other side in previous courses. In class they are then able to have a discussion from all perspectives.

As a result, I do not find that the instructor's approach in this class has been, or would have reasonably been perceived to be unbalanced, in the sense that it deviated from a presentation of material that, in context, would enable critical analysis, and inquiry. Thus, from an academic pedagogy perspective, I do not find that there has been sufficient deviation from the range of normal approaches to warrant concerns.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, and based on my own experience as a faculty member working in this area, I would suggest that the syllabus for such a course could explain better the approach that is being taken so that students could better understand the context for their assigned readings. I also note that

many of the readings in the course are from secondary sources on the internet. The course could be enhanced by a greater reliance on the scholarly literature, both biomedical as well as social sciences.

In terms of the processes used for approval and development of the course in question, normally a proposed new course is discussed by faculty in a program and reviewed by the department or program curriculum committee. It then moves through governance reviews at the level of the academic division. In the case of health studies at UTSC, until recently, there were very few core faculty to constitute a curriculum committee dedicated to the program. In the last two years several positions have been filled so such a critical mass exists. As this faculty group continues to develop and mature, the program may find it valuable to work with experts from the health science faculties to assist with curriculum reviews.

In any case, courses such as Special Topics in Health are already approved to cover a broad range of areas. Faculty normally offer courses under such a rubric in areas that they are interested in exploring with students and in conjunction with discussion with colleagues in their department. This is often a route by which new courses get developed. Special Topics are also a means by which new ideas are introduced into the curriculum.

In the case where individuals offering such courses are sessional instructors, the Anthropology Department's position posting asks for a current CV, a proposed course outline, a statement of teaching and evidence of teaching effectiveness and 2 letters of reference. These materials are reviewed by the department and instructors are selected in accordance with the processes in place for appointment of sessional instructors.

On review of the process it does not appear that there was adequate consideration or comment by the department and colleagues on the proposed course outline developed in 2013 for the Spring 2014 session, nor for the Spring 2015 session. While I do not find that the course is unbalanced, in the sense of the term used above, I do believe it could be strengthened by greater engagement of academic colleagues through such a review process. The Department Chair and Program Director will continue to work closely with the instructor through the balance of the term. If the course is to be offered again in the future it should be developed as a regular course and taken through the usual governance reviews.

Such a process, including the selection of the course instructor, would also facilitate the identification of appropriately qualified people to present the broad area of content that is intended to be covered. When combined with the initiation of a curriculum committee, there is every reason to believe that there will be enhancement of the department's ability to offer a range of relevant, rigorously prepared and well-delivered courses to support the degrees granted.