



Graduate Council Meeting Notes

Monday, November 13, 2023

10:00-11:30 am

[Zoom](#)

Attendees: Thomas Cohen, Janet Walkoe, Chris Ellis, Jason Rudy, Lauren Cain, Ernesto Calvo, Ryan O'Grady, Leila Floriani, Jeffrey Klauda, Evelyn King, Lucy Qiu, Autumn Perkey, Souradip Chakraborty, Maria Bustamante, Jillian Rothschild, Steven Mount, Jessica Gatlin, David Van Horn, Betsy Beise, Will Reed, Henry Gittens, Jon Malone, Matthew Nesson
(18 voting members)

GS Staff: Steve Roth, Evelyn Cooper, Jason Farman, Sparkle Lonesome, Kate Oravec, Robyn Kotzker, Fan Tsao, Blessing Enekwe, Yi Hao, Brent Hernandez, Patricia Woodwell

AGENDA NOTES

1. Approval of [October meeting minutes](#)
 - a. Approved with no recommended changes.
 2. Welcome and announcements
 - a. Maryland English Institute (MEI), International TA (ITA) Pilot, Jon Malone
 - The current admissions process for international students whose first language is not English is listed below.
 1. Application to UMD, including proof of English proficiency.
 2. Admission to UMD.
 3. TA appointment, RA/GA appointment, or no appointment.
 - a. No additional English assessment for RA/GA appointment or for no appointment.
 - b. For TA appointment, referral to MEI either for exemption or assessment.
 - i. Exemption if greater than or equal to 26 TOEFL on admission test speaking sub-score; will be cleared to teach with no restrictions.
 - ii. OR referral for MEI ITA assessment with interview and microteaching session.
 1. Then is cleared to teach with no restrictions, with restrictions, or is not cleared to teach.
- Some challenges to the current system:
 1. It was created in the late 80s and early 90s. Language communication skills are different now.



2. It is a complicated and confusing referral process for both departments and international TAs.
 3. There is a growing number of UMD international applicants that have extensive experience in a similar academic environment and have a prior U.S. degree.
 4. Historic concerns about MEI providing both testing and courses.
 5. There is a perception that the testing is punitive and an obstacle to student/ITA success.
 6. The cost for the UMEI 006 oral communication course is high because it does not bear graduate school credit. This course is charged, and has been argued that it is part of the offer of appointment.
- 2021-2023 data:
 1. 17.6% were automatically exempt.
 2. 47.6% passed or were exempt.
 3. 33.4% had a conditional pass.
 4. 1.4% did not pass.
 - Do ITAs need an additional screening before teaching in the class?
 1. The pilot test will help us to see if we can move away from having this additional screening.
 2. For AY 24-25, we will be using intake test scores as placement for TAships.
 - a. TAs in this pilot who have a prior U.S. degree would not be required to do the additional screening.
 - Ideas for a large-scale pilot test:
 1. No MEI ITA assessment in August/January for AY 24-25.
 2. All ITAs who have a prior U.S. degree or are at or above 24 (TOEFL), 7.5 (IELTS), and 76 (PTE) on the speaking section receive an exemption.
 3. Microteaching is still used for feedback, but not an initial placement tool.
 - Challenges for a large-scale pilot test:
 1. Measuring its impact on undergraduate courses.
 2. Some ITAs who were previously exempt based on testing will take the UMEI 006 course.
 3. Some ITAs who previously needed UMEI 006 will need support.
 - Comment from Ernesto Calvo: It looks like you are increasing the number of students taking this course.
 1. It looks like this, but TAs not receiving exemption now may then receive exemption, so the number of TAs in the course will remain about the same.
 2. Will there be feedback on the quality of undergraduate students?



- a. Unsure if the Graduate School would know this or receive this feedback.
- Comment from Thomas Cohen: Physics has set 24 on the test anyway. I think it's particularly important to exempt those with the U.S. degree. You discussed restrictions on teaching; it's currently set on 300-level courses and above. This seems a little awkward. Most teaching is at 100 and 200-level courses. I wonder if there is a better technique to show moderate vs. high proficiency.
 1. An issue is having a blanket policy across campus. I'd be happy to have that conversation for each department.
 2. Many of these TAs are having these high-stakes conversations around grades for students. We want the TAs to be confident and comfortable in their English skills to explain to students why they got that grade.
 - Comment from Jeffrey Klauda: This is nice to see, I think it's a step in the right direction. Has there been a study across other Big Ten schools about English proficiency testing? I think we might be more strict comparatively. Rutgers has 25 as the cutoff. I'm wondering if this is helpful. I'm sure the department-level approach may be better, since some departments have different proficiency levels.
 1. Admissions requirements for students are specified by our counterparts at other institutions. I have concerns about classrooms becoming more discussion-based, and how this would change what we set as the proficiency level. It is probably time to do another study. Historically, it's common to have this review of the Big Ten schools.
 - a. In 2018, UMD had a higher threshold of admission compared to others. It's hard to compare to others sometimes, because of institutional-based testing. We did not make major changes based on this comparison, because we were similar to our counterparts.
 2. Comment from Dean Roth: With our campus being decentralized, it would be hard to have a blanket policy. I think it's good to have a minimum standard across campus, for equity purposes.
 - Comment from Maria Bustamante: I am in favor of using previous data to make these decisions. For more quantitative things, such as math, this may not need as much English proficiency. Maybe having a spreadsheet with what the TA is actually doing would be helpful. If the TA is just helping with grading, like math, then I'm not sure how necessary the talking proficiency is. I am in favor of tailoring to each department.
 1. One place this is challenging could be during those challenging conversations between a TA and a student about disputing grades.



- Comment from Jillian Rothschild: Do students have the option to take this course, even if they are exempt? Maybe once they get here, they want to improve their speaking skills.
 1. This is something we are advocating for, so that it is a credit-bearing course students could take voluntarily. We do occasionally have departments recommend for their TAs to enroll in the course, but this is rare. GAs/TAs are given up to 10 credits of tuition remission, and most courses are in increments of 3, so there's room for more credits to be used.
- Comment from Thomas Cohen: Bearing credit might make life easier in many ways. Do you know how many credits this course would be? If a 2-credit course, this might be better since a lot of first-years take 8 credits. I think 3 credits would cause more issues.
 1. We are having the conversation about holding a 1-credit or 2-credit course. It would be one or the other.
- Comment from Ernesto Calvo: What was your process for selecting 24 as the cutoff? How do we assess that the assessment is effective?
 1. It's difficult to follow up on due to access of information. The historical reason for these tests is due to the difficulty of undergraduate students understanding their TAs. I am not sure where the complaints go. Sometimes they will go to the Office of the Dean at the Graduate School. This is part of the conversation of considering measuring the success of TAs in the undergraduate classroom.
 2. Not opposed to making the cutoff at the 22-23 level. However, this is getting into the 50/50 proposition, where confidence decreases.
- Comment from Maria Bustamante: What if you want to hire a TA unexpectedly, such as mid-semester?
 1. In the current process, we do hold sections of the MEI course in the fall and the spring. We would love to be able to hold the course on demand, but we do not have the administrative ability to do so. We would recommend making sure that the TA has met the proficiency requirements.
- Comment from Jillian Rothschild: Are there any strategies for native English speakers to be able to better understand non-native English speakers? I feel like the burden should not just fall on the ITAs.
 1. Historically, the burden on the TAs has been due to the number of undergraduate students vs. TAs. The focus is more on the speaker level rather than the listening level, especially for the power dynamic of the TAs having authority over grades. Student orientation and UNIV100 courses could be places for strategies for listeners to take.



- Comment from Betsy Beise: Here is the [summary comparison](#) to peers for English proficiency that was carried out in 2018.
- b. Graduate School workshops on using AI (Linda & Yi): [Session 1 - AI and scholarly writing: ethical concerns](#) (11/30, 4-5 pm); Session 2 - [using chatGPT to explore careers](#) (12/5, 4-5 pm)
 - Session 1 includes how students should consider using AI tools for writing. Linda will hold a session about the ethics behind using AI to help with writing.
 - The second session will be how to utilize AI for career exploration.
- c. GSG's request for the GC to review collective bargaining
 - Dean Roth has only received one volunteer for the committee.
 - Comment from Dean Roth: We really need a neutral body to help provide feedback. I think the Graduate School is the appropriate body to take this on. Please email me about this.
- 3. Proposed policy discussions
 - a. There are no current policy discussions.
- 4. Future Discussion
 - a. GS Admissions standards/policies for international students (subscore requirements)/ITA
 - Comment from Thomas Cohen: I am in support of the reevaluation of admission standards for MEI. I think this would be very useful within the next year or so. I think our admissions standards are much higher than others in the Big Ten.
 1. Comment from Dean Roth: MEI is in a conversation with the campus about how to restructure their content.
 - Comment from Maria Bustamante: The Smith School is very concerned about this as well. The dean at the business school is definitely concerned about this too.