

Office Hours

Academic Policies Committee

February 24, 2010

On October 5, 2010, the APC received the following charge from the Senate:

Please review the language in the Faculty Handbook requiring faculty members to maintain 5 office hours per week. Considering the number of online courses and the different forms of technology, discuss whether this requirement is overly prescriptive. If the committee believes the language should be changed, please offer a revision for senate consideration. Please plan to report to senate by November 9, 2010.

The Academic Policies Committee requested an extension to the reporting deadline until the final Senate meeting of the Fall 2010 semester via e-mail on October 5, 2010; this request was approved by the President of the Senate on October 6, 2010. Press of work prevented the committee from completing its formal report until February 2011.

In order to allow its members to have ample time to discuss this important issue with their constituencies, the APC postponed discussion of this charge until its November 3, 2010, meeting. Just before that meeting, the Perdue School representative provided the committee with comments from faculty in that school forwarded to him by Kashi Khazeh on November 2. (The comments have been appended to the end of this report.) Other schools did not provide similar documentation.

An investigation of the Faculty Handbook found limited instances of the phrase “office hours.” One section mandates that FTNTT faculty be provided with “an appropriate place for meeting with students during scheduled office hours, except if instruction is completely technology-mediated” (SU Faculty Handbook, Ch. 2-30); another requires the same for PTNTT faculty (Ch. 2-33); and a third stipulates that syllabi must include instructors’ office hours (Ch. 10-2). All other instances are in the passage below:

Faculty Handbook: Ch. 9-2, Faculty Advising

1. All faculty are required to advise matriculated students and to be available to meet with them outside formal classes. It is suggested that a minimum of five (5) hours each week be set aside for scheduled office hours. These scheduled hours should provide access for students at various times and on various days of the week. The schedule of office hours is to be posted on the faculty member's office door, filed with the faculty member's department chair and dean, and with the Office of Academic Affairs. During program planning weeks, it may be necessary for faculty to schedule additional office hours in order to accommodate advisees.

From this, it appears that faculty are currently required to be available to students outside of formal classes, but that no specific number of hours is stipulated. Five (5) is currently recommended.

While we hear and sympathize with our colleagues in the Perdue School—and elsewhere in the University—who are seeking to make the best use of their limited time, the APC finds that faculty practices and experiences regarding office hours vary very widely. While some faculty virtually never see students during their scheduled office hours, others have them lined up in the hall, waiting their turn. Some faculty feel strongly that electronic communications are no substitute for face-to-face conversation, while others revel in the opportunities these media create. Faculty hold their “office hours” not only in their offices, but in their labs, in the library while working on their research, and even in Cool Beans. This diversity is, we feel, a positive facet of our occupation, and flexibility needs to be promoted.

However, the committee also recognizes the value and importance of direct personal communication with students, even as both parties become increasingly adept and reliant on digital media. Salisbury University is not an on-line university; what we offer that they do not is the advantages of and opportunity for face-to-face communication between faculty and students.

<u>Number of courses</u>	<u>Regular</u>	<u>Hybrid</u>	<u>On-line</u>
Fall 2009	2488	157	28
Winter 2010	170	12	39
Spring 2010	2532	167	19
Summer I 2010	188	26	60
Summer II 2010	102	2	25
Fall 2010	2503	176	29

<u>Percentage of students</u>			
Fall 2009	93	6	1
Winter 2010	77	5	18
Spring 2010	93	6	1
Summer I 2010	69	9	22
Summer II 2010	79	2	19
Fall 2010	92	6	1

While we might wish to be available to our students 24/7, we do not believe that is a realistic goal, nor one that is sustainable in the long term; for reasons of privacy or security, it may be unwise for faculty to make their personal (as opposed to university-assigned) contact information available to students; some discussions may be more profitable face-to-face, or best kept off any record; and digital communication is not always the most efficient mode, with increased risks of misunderstanding compared to face-to-face communication. Furthermore, research shows that students who meet with faculty outside of class have better learning outcomes.

Recommendations

For all of these reasons, therefore, the APC recommends that the following text replace the second sentence in the section of the Faculty Handbook quoted above.

All full-time faculty members are required to be available for three to five (3–5) hours of scheduled campus office hours each week. Part-time faculty must be available for a number of hours in proportion to their teaching load.

We are not asking faculty to “waste time” sitting in their offices when no one ever comes, and we recognize that hours that suit faculty are not always those that suit students. If individual faculty members feel such concerns are significant, they can schedule on-campus office hours for three hours a week (the minimum required) and meet their students’ needs through alternatives such as digital communication methods or individual appointments. If faculty feel they would be more productive somewhere else on campus than in their offices, doing research or other work that could be interrupted to speak to a student, then they can schedule their “office hours” for that location or leave a note on their door directing students where to find them on campus. But the APC overwhelmingly supports the proposition that we need to be available to meet with our students face-to-face, on campus, at predictable times. Such reliable hours also promote collegiality within departments and among colleagues in all the schools, of course, as well as provide Chairs with opportunities to meet personally with their faculty.

Appendix: Comments from Perdue faculty

Comment 1

With the Senate taking up the issue of office hours reform, I wanted to highlight an important issue. The current 5-hour recommendation does not take into account total teaching load. Many adjunct instructors teach a single class, while faculty members with teaching downloads may teach two or three classes, while colleagues in other schools may routinely teach 4 courses in a given term. It makes no sense therefore to dictate a single level of office hours. Instead, any standard should be expressed as a fixed rate. Given that most faculty members at SU have a teaching load of 12 unit hours, the rate should be set at 25 minutes per credit hour of instruction (25 minutes/unit * 12 units = 300 minutes = 5 hours).

What I am addressing is an issue of **quantity**, which is separate and distinct from another important issue being debated by the Senate, i.e. **method of delivery**. While reform in the area of delivery methods is also long overdue, the issue of quantity should not be overlooked.

Comment 2

Since we are also advisors and either our advisees and students may have issues they want to discuss with us face to face, I think we should have some office hours. I think three hours per week, plus electronic availability is a reasonable minimum.

Comment 3

I think that we would be more in tune with our students if we used some form of electronic media be it e-mail, Twitter, Facebook, Skype, or what have you, That’s the way they have learned to communicate. It is easier for 200+ faculty to learn and some are already doing it then to ask 8000+ students to learn a 20th century behavioral pattern.

Outside of class, I already communicate electronically more often with students than I do face to face.

Comment 4

I completely agree with you. Faculty can, should, and do hold formal online office hours, and those should count toward the total. There are numerous tools available for faculty and students to interact real-time online.

Comment 5

All of my students have my cell phone number, and between that and email, they can always find me (and they do). I very seldom have students drop in during office hours, except at advising time. I agree the 5 hours are a bit much with all the other options available today.

Comment 6

Thank you for raising the office hours issue that needs to be addressed. Teaching faculty need to be available to students. This availability must be realistic. How one defines "available" and "realistic" is a matter of individual interpretation. I think it should be up to the individual to establish the best and most effective way to be available, whether it be office hours, email, meeting before or after class or most realistically—some combination of all three.

Comment 7

I don't feel that the 5 hour decree is legitimate: it assumes that all hours—set by faculty members largely for their own convenience—will adequately accommodate all student needs. Some of us manage the relationship with our students by being flexible with meeting times. Students will send e-mails, drop by, or arrange individual appointments when it's convenient for them anyway. Why waste time with redundant obligations? I realize that my personal approach may not suit everyone, but it's worked for me and my students so far.

Comment 8

Rather than mandating x number of daily hrs I think faculty should be available to meet with students after class and some scheduled office hours a few days prior to an exam.

Comment 9

I concur that the current office hour requirements are outdated, and certainly not reflective of the way that I interact with students. I have 5 hours of office hours posted, as I am required to do so. However, with rare exception I am in my office for some time every day, even on days I do not teach. When in my office my door is open enough for it to be evident I am in the office. I never turn a student away. Quite frankly, I believe I can say with assurance that more students stop by my office outside of office hours than during office hours.

Also, with email and My Classes, I am available to students essentially 24/7. It is not uncommon to receive emails from students over the weekend, and even then I respond some time during the weekend. Not to sound sarcastic, but students would be justifiably unhappy in today's environment if we said we were only available to them immediately before and after class, and during office hours.

It might be reasonable to expect established office hours from part-time faculty, but for those of us committed on a full-time basis, I believe that most of us are more than responsible in this regard. Those faculty who are not responsive to students can be dealt with accordingly, but they are likely already quite well identified.

Comment 10

For the past few years I used to have 3.5 hours of office hours:

Tuesdays: 11:00 AM –12:00 PM

Wednesdays: 10:30 AM –12:00 PM

Thursdays: 11:00 AM –12:00 PM

In an attempt to align the number of office hours with stated university policy, I started having 5 hours of office hours beginning this semester. I added 1.5 hours to my Wednesday schedule and changed it to 9:00 AM–12:00 PM. To date I have not seen a single student coming to my office during that additional 1.5 hours. I believe almost all of us serve students based on appointments and communicate with them

frequently via email. Five hours of office hours is excessive and is not in alignment with the way students seek assistance from the faculty members nowadays.

Comment 11

I hope it's not too late for my opinion on this issue.

Most of us check emails constantly on our smartphones and reply to emails whether it's late evenings, early mornings or weekends. SU does not provide us with any resource that helps us to serve our students better. We pay for the phones, data plans etc. all by ourselves (maybe administrative staff have a different privilege, I don't know!)

At least the IT dept can provide is Wi-fi access to our iPhones, Blackberrys, Android devices since we can access information (emails etc). Currently there is a policy of not allowing iPhone to be able to access Wi-fi on campus. This policy is just short sighted and does not help us the faculty. I do think the wireless infrastructure can cope with iPhones (faculty, staff) usage without any noticeable decrease in speed. AT&T's 3G does not work in our campus so it's as good as the smartphone that's dead since we really cannot use it while at SU.

Similarly, there's a Blackboard app for smartphones that is not supported on campus. If we use Blackboard but cannot access it using our smartphones we truly are not working efficiently.

Anyway I don't think any of our representation makes any difference because I feel they just don't care with what faculty needs to help students better.