

October 2, 2019

## **Proposal to Create a University-wide Course Approval Process and Subject Code for Learning Where You Live Courses**

This is a proposal from the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (VPUE), Lisa Nishii, and the Learning Where You Live (LWYL) Review Committee to create a university-wide course approval process, including a university-wide curriculum committee, to review and approve proposed LWYL courses. In conjunction with this centralized process, we propose that LWYL courses be accorded a university-wide subject code (such as UNILWYL). Currently, the courses are reviewed and approved by the instructors' departments/colleges and given department subject codes. Yet, typically, the content of the courses differs widely from the subject matter of the departments. Due to this misalignment, the course review and approval process is confusing for LWYL faculty and departments/colleges. The misalignment is baffling to students and, likely, decreases enrollment. It is also difficult for students to find the LWYL courses because they are not listed in an organized and intuitive way within the course catalogue (i.e., the courses are scattered across a wide range of departments). This proposal has been endorsed by Provost Michael Kotlikoff.

### **Background – The LWYL Initiative**

Learning Where You Live is an academic, living-learning initiative comprised of undergraduate courses that are taught on North and West Campuses. The initiative is overseen by the Office of the VPUE. The initiative was created in 2013 as a means of enhancing the intellectual content of programming in the North Campus residence halls without increasing academic stress for students. Since its inception, House Professor-Deans on West Campus have joined the initiative. Most LWYL courses are taught by residential faculty (Faculty-in-Residence on North Campus and House-Professor Deans on West Campus) or faculty members serving as fellows in the residential communities. Typically, LWYL courses are small, carry only one-credit, and are taught on an S/U basis. In this way, they are designed so as not to add academic pressure. Each year, there are typically about fifteen LWYL courses with total annual enrollments averaging approximately 200 students.

A defining and important feature of LWYL courses is that they are fundamentally different in both form and content from typical courses at Cornell. The courses are designed to bring faculty and undergraduate students together in comfortable, welcoming settings (often with food in North and West Campus residences) that eliminate the formal barriers of the traditional classroom, foster a sense of “home” and social belonging, encourage sustained interaction between students and faculty, provide students with opportunities to explore topics outside of their intended fields of study, and promote active participation of students in their learning experience. Imbued with a liberal education orientation, LWYL courses are meant to encourage intellectual curiosity, exchange, and exploration in and outside of the classroom as core features and values of a Cornell education. Courses that engage students around topics of diversity and equity are encouraged. Learning Where You Live courses also provide faculty with

low-stakes opportunities to engage in innovative pedagogy and formats, explore new ideas, teach in teams, teach across disciplines, or offer immersive experiences in condensed time periods.

### **Learning Where You Live Course Learning Goals**

To achieve this educational philosophy, LWYL courses must be designed to achieve specific learning goals:

1. Provide a welcoming learning community.
2. Foster informal interactions with the faculty instructor and any guest speakers.
3. Allow students to explore topics that they might not otherwise study and obtain a feel for an academic discipline or subject, research opportunities, or potential career options.
4. Offer meaningful learning experiences that are not a significant source of stress. (Faculty who wish to use letter grades and/or provide more than one credit must explain why they wish to deviate from the S/U and/or one-credit features.)
5. Promote the idea that intellectual exchange, curiosity, and exploration are core values of a Cornell education.
6. Offer students opportunities to engage as citizens in the broader community or participate in service-learning projects. (For Engaged LWYL courses, which were added in fall 2017.)

### Specific Goals for LWYL Courses on North Campus

Learning Where You Live courses on North Campus are intended to enhance the first-year educational experience for students in ways that are often lacking in the formal curriculum. To achieve these ends, LWYL courses on North Campus are capped at twenty or fewer students and enrollment is limited to or prioritized for first-year students. Additionally, LWYL courses on North Campus should provide for sustained and meaningful connections with a faculty member, offering opportunities for faculty mentorship and instilling in students an interest in and confidence about interacting with other faculty.

### Specific Goals for LWYL Courses on West Campus

Learning Where You Live courses on West Campus serve as a means of connecting students to the goals of the West Campus House System and/or promote active participation in a house in which a student already resides. The LWYL courses on West Campus aim to foster personal discovery and to create opportunities for exploration of and critical thinking and reflection about different perspectives, ideas, and endeavors beyond the boundaries of the students' disciplines.

## Data Confirms that LWYL Courses Greatly Achieve Their Learning Goals

During fall 2014 through spring 2016, the VPUE office surveyed students enrolled in LWYL courses taught on North Campus. (LWYL courses are also subject to course evaluations used by the LWYL instructor's college.) The participation rate was 79%. The results were extremely positive. A summary of the data, in order of the learning goals, is as follows:<sup>1</sup>

1. Provide a welcoming learning community: 97% of the students said that their LWYL professor seemed to care about the student as a person; 82% reported that participating in a LWYL course made them feel more a part of Cornell; 62% said that their LWYL course helped them find their niche; and 99% indicated that their LWYL professor increased their excitement about learning.
2. Encourage sustained and meaningful connections with a faculty member, offering opportunities for faculty mentorship and instilling in students an interest in and confidence about interacting with other faculty: 88% of the students reported that participating in a LWYL course made them more confident interacting with other faculty; 84% said that their LWYL professor served as a mentor to them; and 74% noted that they knew their LWYL professor better than any of their other professors that year.
3. Allow students to explore subjects outside of the established curriculum: 97% of the students said that their LWYL course allowed them to explore a topic that the student would not have otherwise been able to explore.
4. Offer meaningful learning experiences that are not a significant source of stress: 88% of the students reported that taking a LWYL course did not add stress to their semester; 94% said that they had a meaningful learning experience in the course; and 99% said that they would recommend the LWYL course.
5. Promote the idea that intellectual exchange, curiosity, and exploration are core values of a Cornell education: 97% of the students stated that their LWYL course promoted intellectual exchange between them and the professor and 96% said that the course also promoted intellectual exchange among the students in the course; 97% reported that their LWYL course increased their curiosity in the course subject; and 89% stated that due to their participation in a LWYL course they already had or were likely to choose future classes based on interest and/or curiosity.

The LWYL Review Committee has reviewed and revised the survey instrument utilized for the 2014-2016 course evaluations. Using this revised survey instrument, the VPUE office will resume its evaluation of LWYL courses commencing the 2019-2020 academic year and continue to conduct course evaluations annually.

---

<sup>1</sup> At the time of the survey, some of the learning goals differed slightly from the current learning goals set forth on page 2. During the 2018-2019 academic year, the LWYL Review Committee reviewed the learning goals and made minor revisions to the earlier goals.

In addition to the direct assessment of students' experiences in LWYL courses, the VPUE office recently examined data from a Social Belonging Survey that was administered to first-year students in the spring of 2018. By merging this survey data with academic records, we were able to compare survey responses based on whether or not respondents had taken a LWYL course in either the fall or spring semester of their first year. Despite low statistical power (N=45 first-year students who had taken a LWYL course), analyses validated findings from the LWYL course evaluations that students who took LWYL courses were significantly more likely to report having developed a relationship with a mentor at Cornell who was helpful to their academic development.

### **Necessity for the Proposal**

The LWYL Review Committee believes that LWYL courses are aimed at and achieve important learning goals, are integral to the North and West Campus living-learning communities, and are a great supplement to the formal curriculum of our undergraduate colleges. To sustain the initiative, maintain its vitality, and potentially grow it in size, the committee believes it necessary to make it less cumbersome for faculty to teach LWYL courses and easier for students to learn of them. The committee believes that a centralized approval process and unique university course subject code would decrease administrative impediments for instructors (as well as departments/colleges) and increase visibility of the courses to students.

As previously mentioned, currently, LWYL instructors must seek approval and subject codes from their home departments/colleges. While the departments/colleges have universally approved the courses,<sup>2</sup> and are quite supportive of them, LWYL instructors report that the approval process can be clumsy and prolonged because the LWYL courses are outside the formal curriculum and the content of the courses often is unrelated to the subject matter of the departments. As a remedy, some departments use a "Special Topics" or other special subject code for LWYL courses, but usage may be restricted to a certain number or type of courses, making these codes unusable in some cases.

Two examples of the misalignment between department subject codes and LWYL course content are easily found in the 2018-2019 roster of LWYL courses. First is the course *Cook Community Engagement: Bridging Self, Community, and World* taught by Shorna Allred, Associate Professor, Department of Natural Resources, and House Professor-Dean, Alice Cook House. Although Professor Allred's course is an interdisciplinary course, it had to be offered as NTRES 4940, denoting the course as *Special Topics in Natural Resources*. A second example is a woman's leadership course taught by Susan Daniel, Associate Professor, Department of Chemical and Biomolecular Engineering, and Faculty-in-Residence, Balch Hall. Professor Daniel's woman's leadership course had to be offered as CHEME 4900, identifying that course as *Undergraduate Projects in Chemical Engineering*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Since 2013, there has been only one instance when a department/college did not approve a faculty's LWYL proposal. The proposal was rejected because the content of the course did not align with the content of the department.

Students tell us that such listings of LWYL courses by departments/colleges is confusing and misleading and makes the courses hard to find for students interested in the true, not labeled, subject matter of the LWYL course. While LWYL courses are advertised in a brochure that is distributed in August of each year, the brochure has limited reach as new students are inundated with print and electronic materials. Also, because LWYL courses may not be taught for multiple years, they do not become part of any tradition of courses handed down from student to student. To increase visibility, in the many instances where the LWYL courses are co-taught by faculty from different colleges, the LWYL instructors will cross-list the courses across their colleges, but this simply increases the number of times that a LWYL course has a subject code wholly unrelated to its content.

A centralized approval process and subject code would not negatively impact departments, colleges, or faculty. They would not affect the colleges' and departments' prerogatives over curricula or teaching arrangements with faculty. As is currently the case, departments/colleges would have authority over whether to give their faculty teaching credit for LWYL courses.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, it would be up to a LWYL instructor and their department whether to cross-list a LWYL course with the department. While cross-listing of a LWYL course with the instructor's home department would not be required, it would be optional, and in such cases, the department would utilize its customary curriculum review process and department subject code for the cross-listing.

We consulted with the Associate Registrar in the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) to understand whether centralized processes would create additional administrative burdens for the OUR or college registrars or departments. The Associate Registrar did not think the proposed processes would be burdensome and agrees that the proposed approach is sensible.

### **Proposed Curriculum Review and Approval Process**

#### The LWYL Curriculum Committee

To facilitate a centralized review and approval process, we recommend creating a university-wide curriculum committee to review and approve proposed LWYL courses. This LWYL Curriculum Committee would be composed of faculty who have taught LWYL courses as well as non-LWYL instructors, to ensure representation of both perspectives. Committee members must be voting members of their college faculty, with the exception of the Director of Faculty Living-Learning Programs, who serves ex officio.

---

<sup>3</sup> Currently, the colleges do not grant faculty teaching credit for their LWYL courses. In the twelve semesters that LWYL courses have been taught, there was one occasion when a department chair granted an instructor teaching credit (partial) for a LWYL course. In that instance, the course content corresponded to the subject matter of the department/major; 50% of the course enrollment was reserved for students in that major; and the course was taught for a letter grade, which is atypical. The department chair determined that the LWYL course fit within the department's curriculum and well served departmental needs.

The proposed composition is as follows:

1. Committee chair, a current LWYL instructor.
2. A second current LWYL instructor.\*
3. An academic associate dean from one of the undergraduate colleges.
4. A faculty member who has not taught a LWYL course.
5. A recipient of the Kendall S. Carpenter Memorial Advising Award or one of the Stephen H. Weiss awards.
6. The director of Faculty Living-Learning Programs, Office of the VPUE, ex officio.

The VPUE would appoint the committee members. Appointment to the committee would be for three years; the terms would be staggered initially.

\*One of the LWYL instructors should be a Faculty-in-Residence on North Campus and one should be a House Professor-Dean on West Campus. (Regularly, these two groups constitute a large number of the LWYL instructors.)

#### Review and Approval Process and Course Proposal Materials

As is the current practice, the VPUE office would provide prospective LWYL instructors with informational material about LWYL courses, including the learning goals. Faculty seeking to teach a LWYL course would be required to submit a LWYL course application, also distributed by the VPUE office. In addition to addressing the LWYL learning goals, instructors would be required to include in their proposal a syllabus that contains a course description, specific course objectives or learning outcomes that supplement the general LWYL learning goals, a description of assignments, methods of assessment, basis for grade determination (typically S/U), and other relevant course policies.

The ex officio member of the LWYL Curriculum Committee, the Director of Faculty Living-Learning Programs (hereafter director), would retain responsibility for the administration of the application process, including consulting with potential LWYL instructors about the required learning goals (noting the special learning goals for North and West Campuses), as well as various administrative details. These learning goals along with syllabi would provide the LWYL Curriculum Committee with requisite guidance for its review of course applications. As is customary now, if a LWYL course is approved, the director would work with the instructor to determine the best location for the course and, as needed, connect the instructor to a living-learning community. The director would also consult with the instructor about funding support from the VPUE for food for the students and, occasionally, course materials or other expenses.

In sum, as evidenced by the precedent of universal course approval by departments/colleges, and the excellent assessments by students, LWYL courses provide a valuable educational experience. The proposed review and approval process would reduce burdens for faculty, department, and colleges and help sustain the LWYL initiative, without sacrificing rigor in the course review process.

## **Appendix**

### **Membership of the 2018-2019 LWYL Review Committee**

- Lisa Nishii (Chair), Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education and Associate Professor, Human Resource Studies
- Shorna Allred, Associate Professor, Natural Resources, and House Professor-Dean, Alice Cook House
- Sahara Byrne, Associate Professor, Communication, and former Faculty-in-Residence, Mews Hall
- Jeff Godowki, Assistant Dean, Flora Rose House
- Aaron King, Assistant Dean, William Keeton House
- Carol Grumbach, Associate Vice Provost
- Lori Leonard, Professor, Developmental Sociology, and Faculty-in-Residence, Mews Hall
- Katherine McComas, Vice Provost for Engagement and Land-Grant Affairs and Professor, Communication
- Chris Schaffer, Associate Dean of the Faculty; Associate Professor, Biomedical Engineering; and Faculty-in-Residence, Mary Donlon Hall
- Ethan Stephenson, Director of Faculty Living-Learning Programs