

Topics Courses Background (pg. 1-3) & CALS Guidelines on Topics Courses (pg. 4-6)

Background

Over the last few years, campus has modified its guidelines regarding topics courses. Specifically:

- The guidelines recommend that topics course sections should be offered no more than three times within a five-year period.
- Campus guidelines state that topics courses should rarely, if ever, be used to fulfill core requirements in a major or certificate.
- Beginning in 2019, campus began providing schools/colleges with an annual report that documents topics course sections that have been taught more than three times in a 5-year period with the expectation of school/college oversight on these matters.

The CALS Curriculum Committee has started to address these issues in recent meetings in 2018 and 2019. In these discussions the committee has stated:

- Topics courses are important and can be used for a variety of things, such as teaching course content varying from semester to semester, piloting a new course, or when ongoing teaching longevity is unknown
- Would prefer that the number of times a topics title can be used is restricted so that departments go through the governance process for a permanent course number

These discussions provide CALS with an opportunity to clarify and improve our own processes, provide guidance to departments, and resolve some issues, including creating a policy and process.

CALS Topics Courses Summary

- 313 total unique titles used in any CALS subject listing since 2014
 - 131 used more than once (74 undergrad courses)
 - 75 used more than twice (41 undergrad courses)
 - At least 6 have since converted to permanent course listings

Select Examples of Topics Course Issues in CALS

- Example 1: Courses taught as topics courses that have previously been approved as permanent courses.

AN SCI	375	Special Topics	Animal Health and Disease Mgmt	Spring 2017, Spring 2018, Spring 2019	3 credits
AN SCI/ DY SCI	320		Animal Health and Disease Management	Last taught Spring 2016	3 credits

- Example 2: Courses simultaneously listed in two different departments and/or two different numbers. Since topics sections aren't crosslisted, this leads to two identical (or nearly identical) courses on record for a semester, which may have different attributes, breadth designations, credit allowances, or requisites:

Fall 18	PL PATH	375	Special Topics	Agriculture and Conservation	2 credits	Biological Science breadth	LAS Intermediate level	None – All students can enroll
Fall 18	PL PATH	875	Special Topics	Agriculture and Conservation	2 credits		G50%	Grad/prof students only

Fall 18	AGRONOMY	375	Special Topics	Frontiers in Plant Biology	Nienhuis, James	1 credit		Junior Standing or Higher
Fall 18	HORT	375	Special Topics	Frontiers in Plant Biology	Nienhuis, James	1 credit		BOT 130, BIO 152, BIOC 383, jr
Fall 18	PL PATH	375	Special Topics	Frontiers in Plant Biology	Nienhuis, James	1 credit	LAS Intermediate level	Junior Standing or Higher

- Example 3: Course taught more than 3 times in 5-year period. Question whether this is actually a Topics course.
 - Genetics 915: Computn&Informatcs in Biol&Med
 - No Section-level titles
 - Taught 11 times in the past five years
- Example 4: Courses re-listed with slightly different topic names, which muddles records for students and curriculum
 - E.g., Economics of Sustainable Ag; Economics of Sustainability
- Example 5: Course taught more than 3 times in 5 years. Missing attributes for students.
 - HORT 375: Special Topics
 - Section-level title: Plants and Human Wellbeing
 - Taught 5 times in the past five years
 - Part of a FIG
 - Does not have LAS credit/level – cannot have attributes that aren't shared by every section of HORT 375

UW-Madison Topics Courses Guidelines and Policies

There are two campus documents that set guidelines for the use of topics courses. The first is a KB document specifically about topics courses, the second is the campus's certificate policy which includes topics course policy. Both are shared here for the committee's reference.

1. Campus [KB Document](#) on Topics Courses (12-17-2018)

A topics course is a designation used for courses with content that varies with each offering.

A topics course will:

- *fall under a disciplinary area of closely related course content,*
- *align with the approved catalog-level components for the course, including learning outcomes, component type(s) (lecture, lecture/discussions, seminar etc.), and course designations*
- *have at least one learning outcome that applies to all offerings of the course, each topic will have additional, section-level outcomes*
- *appear on students' transcripts with the specific title of the topic,*
- *typically be repeatable with a different topic,*

- *follow the same requirements for credit hour, instructor qualifications, syllabus information etc. that all courses must follow.*

Typical Uses of a Topics Course

- *Pilot and refine an idea for a new course*
- *Offered on an experimental or trial basis*
- *Address a timely issue of special interest*
- *For courses that will be taught infrequently or a limited number of times such as those offered by visiting professors*
- *Topics courses should not be crosslisted unless there is a specific programmatic and scholarly reason. The expectation is that there will be shared scholarly oversight among all crosslisted subjects for each offering of the course.*

Topics courses should not be used to circumvent the course proposal and approval process.

A new course does not need to be taught as a topics course prior to being proposed and approved with a permanent course number. If a topic title will be a regular offering in the curriculum, it must be created as a new course.

Guidelines for Reviewing Topics Courses

The decision to offer particular topics should be part of the regular process for establishing the department/program schedule of courses and should involve conversation with, and planning by, the department faculty members.

On an annual basis, each school or college will be provided with a list of topics courses that were offered through subject listings in their departments showing the number of times each topic has been offered. It is the responsibility of the school or college and their departments to review this list and determine whether there are courses being offered as a topic that should be proposed as a stand-alone course with a permanent number. It is recommended that a limit of being offered three times within a 5-year period should be considered the standard.

2. August 2016 [University Certificate policy](#), p.5

- *The course requirements for the certificate program must be defined discretely enough so that the certificate requirements can be encoded in the degree audit system (DARS).*
- *Core courses to be included in the certificate must be approved as a distinct course when the proposal is advanced (not special topics courses). Such courses should be included in a proposal for a certificate only if they have been approved at the school/college level. The certificate may only be implemented after core courses are approved by the University Curriculum Committee.*
- *Courses that are offered as special topics courses should be used sparingly because of the considerable administrative burden they add. Ideally, special topics courses will only be included if all offerings of the given special topics course will satisfy the requirement.*
- *If exceptions and substitutions are allowed, a process should be developed for considering exceptions and substitutions; the certificate should be designed so that exceptions are rarely required. Any substitution or exception that is made should be added to courses that meet the requirements for certificate program so that substitution/exception is available to all students. Resources allotted to the program must be appropriate to handle the one-on-one advising required to allow exceptions. A “no exceptions” policy is allowed.*

CALS Guidelines on Topics Courses

Courses with the “Topics” attribute provide flexibility for departments and programs to offer new content on a trial basis, provide a home for courses while they are going through the governance process for a permanent course number, and offer timely content from visiting or new faculty or in response to emerging issues. Topics courses contribute to the rich education our departments provide to students at UW-Madison.

In CALS, Topics courses are generally used for the following reasons:

- Piloting a new course on an experimental or trial basis
- Providing special interest content that will only be offered one or two times, such as courses taught by visiting faculty
- Providing content on time-sensitive issues of special interest (this typically does not apply to seminar or journal-style courses, which are generally designed to have consistent learning objectives that cover current topics)

A topics course is a course that allows sections to have different content, which vary with each offering. The subject listing/course number for a topics course must be approved through Lumen, and all sections of a topics course share the approved characteristics based on their governed content.

- Regardless of section-level variability, all sections are considered part of one course; they all share governance approved ‘course-level’ elements:
 - Learning outcomes (at least one course-level learning outcome that is shared among all sections – additional section-level learning outcomes must exist but are not approved by campus governance)
 - Course designations (LAS level, Gen Ed breadth attribute, graduate attribute, etc)
 - Component type (lecture, lecture/discussion, lab, etc)
 - Course description (sections will also have their own description, but must align with the description and disciplinary area of the parent course)
- Elements that may vary at the section level (credit variability, course components to be scheduled) must be approved as such through the governance process when the course is created.
- Regular and substantive interaction between instructors and students must be an integral part of the course, and credits assigned comply with campus credit hour policy, whether offered face-to-face or online (45 hours of work per credit hour).
- Instructional assignments comply with campus policy governing instructor qualifications.
- Course offerings are consistent with the documented disciplinary expertise of the faculty in the sponsoring department or program.

Topics courses have the following special characteristics:

- Topics courses have relatively general course-level titles and catalog descriptions, and broadly stated learning outcomes. These generic tools allow the flexibility to offer a range of more focused topics under one approved course, and topics offered may have highly variable section-level/ topics title offerings.
- Topic titles are assigned to sections. The section topic title must be consistent with the course title and subject listing, but the topic title informs the student of the specific content covered in the course. Student transcripts include the course title and the topic title.
- Topic titles are temporary. University policy states that if a topic title will be a regular offering in the curriculum, it must be created as a new course.

Topics Course Creation and Maintenance:

Departments are responsible for ensuring appropriate use of Topics courses and sections. The decision to offer particular topics should be part of the regular process for establishing the department/program schedule of courses and should involve conversation with, and planning by, the department faculty members.

1. Topics courses must be reviewed and approved by the departmental governance body responsible for curriculum before they are offered. The department should ensure that the course:
 - a. Aligns with the approved characteristics of the parent course, as listed above
 - b. Has unique content and does not significantly overlap with an existing approved course
 - c. Meets the general course requirements for credit hour, syllabus information, and institutional quality standards
 - d. Has a [qualified instructor](#)
2. Due to their temporary nature, specific topic titles/sections should not be listed as program or certificate requirements.
 - a. If appropriate, a program/certificate may include all sections of a topics course in their published curriculum (e.g., NUTR SCI 421 is an approved course for the Global Health Major.)
 - b. A specific topic title/section may be approved by a program/certificate to fulfill a requirement by exception. In these cases, it is expected that the program/certificate governance body responsible for curriculum has reviewed and approved this exception. The exception process cannot be used to bypass governance processes or approvals.
3. If a topics course is offered a second time within five years, the department should consider whether this is the final offering of this topic, or if it should start the process to convert the course into a permanent course offering. Topics courses may be taught a third time if they have an active proposal in Lumen workflow.
4. Departments should consider carefully when offering the same topic in a “meets-with” format in multiple subject listings (e.g., “CALs History” in INTER-AG 375 and INTER-LS 375) or in multiple course numbers (e.g., “CALs History” in INTER-AG 375 and INTER-AG 875.) The course must align with the course title and description, attributes, course designations, and requisites for all “meets-with” courses. As a best practice, departments should avoid “meets-with” Topics courses unless there is a clear reason for doing so and alignment of all governed course characteristics has been thoroughly reviewed. “Meets-with” courses that include undergraduate and graduate-only course listings must have separate assessments for graduate students and at least one course-level learning objective specific to graduate students.

Process:

1. CALS Academic Affairs will review the Topics courses and titles and provide departments with an initial overview of courses with the Topics attribute and topic titles that have been offered in the past five years. Departments will be requested to review:
 - a. the governed content for all Topics courses to ensure that they are an accurate reflection of the course’s current use;
 - b. Topics that have been taught more than twice in the past five years, and indicate whether the topic will be converted to a permanent course listing, if it will no longer be taught, or if there are other considerations to discuss with CALS Academic Affairs;

Departments will be provided ample time to discuss their options and communicate with Academic Affairs. A complete year will be provided to implement changes based on this review to align with the new policy.

2. CALS Academic Affairs will review current program and certificate course listings and provide departments/programs with an initial list of any Topics courses used in the published curriculum. Departments will be requested to review this list and:
 - a. Ensure that all sections for Topics courses listed as part of the published curriculum satisfy the intended curricular requirement;
 - b. Any section-specific requirements are removed from the curriculum. Course proposals to create permanent courses from Topic sections may be added to the curriculum as needed.
3. Once a year, CALS Curriculum Committee will review a list of Topics titles taught more than twice, including closely related titles, and determine whether courses are in process or are no longer being taught. The CALS Curriculum Committee will direct CALS Academic Affairs will follow up with departments as necessary.
4. When programs/certificate proposals are reviewed by CALS Curriculum Committee, the committee will ensure that the policy is being followed, and that any topics course in the curriculum are inclusive of all sections of the course.

Approved by CALS APC on May 5, 2020