

Faculty Survey Regarding Effects of Fulton Reform 2008-2009: A Summary Report

At the end of the 2008-2009 academic year, the first year of full, School-wide implementation of the Fulton curriculum reform, all fulltime Fulton faculty were given the opportunity to fill out a survey regarding their opinion of the effects of the reform. Over half—more than 70—Fulton faculty participated in the survey. Brief summaries of their answers to the four questions that made up the survey appear below, followed by an overall conclusion regarding the survey results.

1. Briefly, what enhancement(s) did you incorporate into the courses you taught in 2008-2009? Be as general or as specific as you see fit.

Most faculty reported that they chose to enhance their courses via Enhancement Menu Option #1: “Increased Course Content and/or Collateral Readings.” Exactly how faculty employed this option, however, varied far more widely than its name—or at least its frequent nickname of “more reading and writing”—might suggest. Faculty also mixed or blended this option with others, particularly #2: “Undergraduate Research and Information Literacy,” and #4: “Higher Level Critical Things Exercises,” and they sometimes—fairly often, in fact—employed #3: “Technology” to some degree in order to deliver and/or receive elements of the aforementioned options, as well as other options on the Menu. Some examples of enhancements, or pieces thereof, touching on the options mentioned above included, of course, the assignment of additional texts (compared to those used in the former 3-credit version of a particular course), some of which were fully incorporated into the course and class discussion, while others were more independent, sort of parallel-track reading assignments; the reading of scholarly articles (journal articles on works of literature, for instance), followed by the writing of reaction and/or analytical essays; the writing of journals or reading logs, and of working bibliographies; the writing of more and/or longer essays/papers; writing assignments that, more so than in past courses, emphasized the step-by-step research and writing process, requiring students to meet with the instructor and/or turn in work-in-progress at set points in the path from idea to finished product. Some faculty reported not only assigning more reading, but more difficult reading, and giving more difficult exams or other assignments. Many faculty used technology for additional, online discussions, or to deliver learning activities, such as Web-based reading and/or research assignments, as well as Web-based interactive assignments, and online quizzes. Many faculty made more use of outside group or team assignments—both online and in-person—and one course even organized a class-wide “book club” regarding additional reading during the course. Some faculty sent their students out of the classroom and into the SU and local communities, to attend on-campus academic and cultural events (and to write reflective papers on them) or to interview other students or local residents (as part, ultimately, of a writing assignment or presentation), or to provide some sort of service or participate in civic engagement (Menu Option #5). Some faculty took students out of the classroom on experiential field trips, as close as the local community, and in a couple of cases, via short-term, in-course (Spring Break) study abroad, to other countries (Ghana and England)—Menu Option #6. A few faculty members coordinated their classes with other faculty in other disciplines, in such way that their combined classes would view films in non-class hours and then discuss the films—and from the different points of view of their respective disciplines—together. A small number of faculty (in many Art and Theatre courses and in film courses in English) added class, studio or lab time to their courses

(Menu Option #7), all of these as appropriate to their disciplines or otherwise to the nature and needs of the course. So though Enhancement Menu Option #1 clearly dominated in enhanced Fulton courses in 2008-2009, all Menu options were employed across the School, and, in many if not most courses, even those dominated by Option #1, some combination of options was used. And it is safe to say that in keeping with both the reform's intent and promise, as well as COMAR regulations, the work related to these enhancement elements all directly contained or led to assigned and graded work, specifically meeting the COMAR requirement of "supervised, documented learning" (it is safe to say this because all of the courses offered were vetted precisely for this important piece, as well as others, by both FCC and UCC prior to being offered, but many faculty, in their surveys, point this out as well).

2. How do you think students responded to the enhancements in question and to the reform in general (i.e., quality of the study work, student engagement)?

Most faculty thought that students, in general, responded well to enhanced courses and to the specific enhancements themselves and both accepted and rose to the challenge of the more rigorous and/or intensive courses. Many said that students, again in general, were more engaged, learned more, wrote better, and did work, both in amount and in depth and type, that the faculty member would have hesitated to include—or not have been able to include at all—in the previous 3-credit version of the course(s) in question. Some faculty, however, including those who thought students responded well to the reformed courses, recognized that many students, even ones who were ultimately successful in their courses, struggled with, for example, the extra reading and writing, and that some students got bogged down, some even to the point of failing a course they might not have failed in the old 3-credit course model. While it seemed clear that most students adjusted to the greater workload and challenge of the reformed courses, and some even embraced the new model and everything that went with it, other students—including some of the successful ones—resented the change to the 4-credit model and the workload and the specific nature of the enhancements included in their courses. One faculty member observed that the student culture change had been slow. Another said that many students did not appreciate the goal of the reform and viewed the change as simply more work. Another faculty member, however, pointed out how helpful it was to students to articulate very clearly during the first week of classes the difference between a 3- and 4-credit course, and yet another said that he/she explained this difference, as well as the full expectations of a 4-credit course (12 hours of work per week, combined between class time and out-of-class work) and the overall purpose of the reform, and this seemed to be very helpful in setting up the course and preparing students for it. Finally, several faculty members thought they over-enhanced their courses in the fall—or enhanced them via too much reliance on X Course Enhancement Menu item or via the wrong mix or balance of Menu items—and took steps to adjust their enhancements in the spring—while still meeting COMAR requirements—and this helped significantly.

3. What has your own experience been like, teaching enhanced courses and teaching within the reconfigured load? Do you think the reform—and focusing on fewer sections and fewer students—has made you a better teacher?

Most faculty said that the reform and the reconfigured teaching load had made them better teachers; in fact, many were adamant about this. The reasons they cited included the fact that they had more time to meet with students and otherwise deal with their fewer students more individually/personally. They also mentioned that the reconfigured load—and both fewer

students and, in many cases, more writing assignments—allowed them to provide their students with more feedback, such as more—and more thoughtful—written comments they found themselves writing on student exams and papers. Others said that the reconfigured load—as well as the need to seek materials for enhancing their courses—forced them to become familiar with new textbooks and/or new ways of putting their students to work with the subject covered in the course, or to experiment with new ways of teaching and approaching different learning styles, none of which they would have done had the reform not pushed them toward innovation. Some said that the reform had reenergized their teaching and that, specifically, the reconfigured load had given them greater energy for their fewer classes and fewer students. This said, many said that the new load and the enhanced courses—and the enhancement-related assignments therein—had not made for less work; some thought their overall teaching load was heavier than before; many of those who made this observation, however, also pointed out that this was probably because they were going through the newly reformed courses, and the specific enhancements, for the first time, and that ultimately the reconfigured, reformed load would provide a far more manageable teaching load than its 4-course predecessor. Most respondents—and particularly the most enthusiastic—would probably agree with the one faculty member who called the reform “one of the best decisions the Fulton School had ever made.” A very small minority, however, a handful, in fact, suggested the exact opposite, saying that the reconfigured load had made them worse teachers than before, had taken breadth away from the liberal arts experience, and represented “the biggest administrative mistake” the University had made in 30 years.

4. Based on what you have observed regarding your students’ experience/performance and on your own experience, where might the reform need improvement?

Many faculty thought that improvement in the reform, or in the execution thereof, would come by more faculty embracing a wider variety of Menu items, rather than relying so strongly on more reading and more writing assignments. Besides offering students who might be taking multiple Fulton courses a rather limited range of enhancement experiences, some faculty were concerned that some of these assignments lent themselves—or could lend themselves—to “busy work,” or at least work in which quantity sometimes threatened to override quality (a danger inherent, in some ways, in the COMAR regulations). Some faculty were concerned that too many of the same type of enhancement assignment, again across several Fulton courses a student might be taking at the same time, might be “piling on,” when Fulton has a varied enhancement Menu of which faculty are not taking full advantage. With this in mind, some faculty suggested more faculty development opportunities—like the original reform workshop and the reform Brown Bag series—so that faculty might learn how to employ Menu items with which they had no prior experience. (Some faculty did suggest that these workshops/Brown Bags be in June, August and January, and not during the semester, when faculty were too busy to dedicate the time necessary to learn about the Menu items in question. Other faculty pointed out that even though the workshop and Brown Bag series had already been offered, they were worth offering again, as faculty are only now realizing—and still others will realize, as the reform continues to roll out—that they need to look at other enhancement Menu options.) As expressed above, many faculty were concerned that they had over-enhanced their courses, and that was something upon which they needed to improve. One faculty member said that the University needed to push for the reform—or some aspect of reform—across the entire University, both because the Fulton reform was a positive thing, but also because University-wide reform would make changing the academic culture at SU—and for both students and faculty alike—easier. Many faculty, in fact,

wrote about how improvement in the reform would come simply via the gradual change in student culture, which most who cited this suggested was sure to come; it would just take more time. Most faculty responding to this question would agree with the faculty member who said “the reform is on the right path,” as well as with the contention that the reform itself *is* the right path. Once again, though, as in #3 above, a very small minority of respondents was of the exact opposite opinion, with one of this small group of respondents stating that “the greatest improvement [regarding the reform] would be to abolish it.”

It is clear, from the 70+ returned survey responses, that the vast majority of Fulton faculty view the reform in a positive light; see students’ responses to the reform as generally positive but also clearly as a work in progress; are, in many ways, working harder in their teaching than ever before, but feel they are serving their students better than ever as well and recognize that this is a rather intense period of transition, the full benefits of which, for both students and faculty, still lies down the road a bit. They also recognize that they and/or their colleagues need to add further variety to their approach regarding course enhancements, and that student culture needs to—and will—change. This, in sum, is what most Fulton faculty think; not all, but most. What may be most impressive about the results of this survey—even more than the very positive light in which the reform and its potential are viewed by the majority of Fulton faculty—is how honestly and thoughtfully Fulton faculty, regardless of their view of how the reform is going so far and of the reform in general, responded to it.

The results of the survey are not simply informative but instructive, and the Dean’s Office will be sure to take active steps to follow up on the survey’s results, as appropriate, during 2009-2010 and beyond.