

**Austin Peay State University (APSU)**  
**Faculty Senate**  
**Academic Red Committee Report**  
**November 2024**

**Academic Red Committee, 2024-2025**

- Christina Chester-Fangman (Chair), Woodward Library
- Florian Gargallo, College of Arts & Letters
- Charles Gonzalez, College of Education
- Bettina Shank, College of Behavioral & Health Sciences
- Jennifer Thompson, College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics

**Committee Charge**

*"Course caps review according to different pedagogies such as writing intensive, reading intensive, math, lecture, technology using both regional and national comparators."*

**Considerations**

- Are there general recommendations for class sizes in higher education?
- Do APSU's peer institutions have policies and/or guidelines related to student caps for courses?
- What are best practices for course sizes according to the literature, professional associations, etc.?
- What does data from Decision Support and Institutional Research (DSIR) indicate about course caps at APSU?
- How can we move forward using what we have learned researching our charge?

**Introduction**

Interest in class size and student success in higher education is not new. One of the earliest investigations in the study of this issue can be traced back to a 1924 article by Edmondson and Mulder. The authors compared class sizes of 43- and 109-students, and found minimal differences between the two groups in achievement, but a preference by the students for the smaller classes. With class size and its impact on university instruction being an ongoing topic of interest in education for a century, there are some generalized findings on the subject:

- **Undergraduate Courses**
  - Usually relatively high course caps (25-200 students, depending on the institution) across all disciplines, with large lectures still common;
- **Graduate-level Courses**
  - Often smaller class sizes (5-20 students) across all disciplines to allow for advanced discussions and research-focused learning.

Variations in class sizes also occur based on the instructional method and discipline:

- **Online Learning**
  - Varies by institution and discipline, but approximately 20 students for an undergraduate course and between 8-15 students for graduate courses are commonly thought to be ideal;
- **Lab-based Learning in the Sciences**
  - Often capped at 15-25 students due to safety concerns, equipment limitations, and complex problem-solving and discussions;

- **Reading-Writing Intensive / Socratic in the Humanities**
  - Ideally kept small (10-20 students) to allow for facilitating discussions, analyzing texts, workshoping writing, and individualized feedback;
- **Research Methods in the Social Sciences**
  - Typically limited to approximately 10-20 students to allow for personalized instruction due to the complex nature of research design, data analysis, and ethical considerations;
- **Clinical Practice for Professional Programs**
  - Often capped at 8-10 students per instructor due to accreditation requirements;
- **Studio-based Learning in the Arts**
  - Can be small (usually 5-15 students) to allow for individual instruction, hands-on learning, critiques, and rehearsals, as well as space and equipment constraints.

### Austin Peay State University Comparators and Course Caps

There are 82 universities designated as APSU comparators based on Fall 2024 data from Segal. Committee members reached out to 21 of them, including all of our Tennessee peers:

California State University- Chico	Georgia College & State University	SUNY Brockport
		SUNY College at Oswego
California State University- Dominguez Hills	Jacksonville State University	SUNY College at Potsdam
California State University- San Marcos	Middle Tennessee State University	SUNY Cortland
		SUNY Oneonta
California State University- Stanislaus	Morehead State University	Tennessee Technological University
College of Charleston	Murray State University	
East Tennessee State University	State University of New York at New Paltz	The University of Tennessee- Martin
	SUNY at Fredonia	University of North Alabama

Below is a summary of the responses Committee members received from APSU's peers. Factors influencing institutional course caps include accreditation requirements, classroom capacity, instructional methods, and software license restrictions.

- **California State University – Chico:** No Response
- **California State University – Dominguez Hills:** Course caps are determined at the department (and often instructor) level, so that if someone wants to maximize class size, they could elect to teach in the university theatre. We had an instructor who did this in the past for several years. He's since retired so he's not around to ask for details, but I assume he thought it was working well enough for students. More recently and more often, we have faculty who will elect to teach courses of 120 students. This fits well with the capacity of our larger spaces. Of course, these large classes come with teaching assistants to support the faculty member, and the courses will count as 2 (for a class of

120) classes as far as teaching goes. Having said all that, recommended course caps are set when courses are approved in our curriculum review process. These recommendations are based upon the content and general nature of the course. As mentioned above, individual faculty members can elect to increase their course caps (with approval of the department chair and pending availability of a large-enough space). Generally speaking, however, the highest cap recommended is 60 students.

- **California State University – San Marcos:** There are no hard course caps for GE at CSUSM -- class caps vary greatly by GE area and lower division vs. upper division. For example, our lower division general education writing classes are quite small (cap of ~20), while some of our lower division GE science lectures are very large (240, though with associated lab sections of 30). Upper division is mostly in the 40-60 range but may again vary by department and GE area. Is there a specific GE area or level that you're interested in? There is no one-size-fits all number across all GE. Any class with an enrollment of  $\geq 120$  students is considered equivalent to two classes. As such, most of our largest classes (both GE and for majors) have caps of around 120-130. There are some exceptions (rarely ~200 in LD GE), but in general most classes (GE and majors) are in the 20-60 range (instructor receives credit for one course) or the 120-130 range (instructor receives credit for two courses).
- **California State University – Stanislaus:** No Response
- **College of Charleston (South Carolina):** There is no policy on course caps. According to the Associate Provost, each department can determine the course caps at their own discretion. The Registrar's Office stated that, generally, first-year courses do not exceed 19 students, but this is not a firm rule. They could not cite any other course cap expectations based on college, department, or level (introductory vs. upper division).
- **East Tennessee State University:** Course caps are set by the departments, based on best practices and available room space.
- **Georgia College and State University:** There is no policy on course caps. According to the Registrar's Office, the course cap is entirely dependent on the classroom that is chosen for a course. Classroom assignments are determined by each department.
- **Jacksonville State University (Alabama):** Has a policy on class sizes, but only regarding minimums.
- **Middle Tennessee State University – MTSU:** The capacity of each course is determined in part by the department offering the course and the physical capacity of the room it is assigned to (if in person). The enrollment capacity on the course must be at least 67% of the room it is scheduled in, so a class in a 100-person room must have an enrollment cap of at least 67 students. Outside of that, it is up to the department how large or small to schedule their classes, and many times, factors such as accreditation, course type, and level impact that size. There are workload considerations for faculty, in that faculty teaching large capacity courses may get double workload (or partial workload) since there are so many students in the course.
- **Morehead State University (Kentucky)** Departments create their own capacity levels, which may be determined by classroom size or professor.
- **Murray State University (Kentucky):** Caps are determined by a number of factors. The initial limiter of in-person course caps is the size of available classrooms. Other factors can include the nature of the courses; for instance, chemistry lab courses and courses that involve experiential art are much smaller due to the instructor-to-student ratio needed to ensure an appropriate (and safe) learning experience. Past that, the type of course delivery also impacts caps. Composition courses and oral communication

courses are much smaller than lecture-based instruction courses for disciplines in the social sciences, as an example. Mathematics courses may differ by level; students who test into the courses that need the most support have smaller class sizes than students who test into courses with for those who need less personal assistance. Lastly, whether or not the course is a synchronous or asynchronous online course may also mean some modifications are made. In short, our general education course caps range from 20 - 60+.

- **State University of New York at New Paltz:** There is no formal policy on course caps. Still, they do have guidelines by college based on the type of course (e.g., level, instructional method, lab, writing intensive, etc.), and provided the table below.

Type of course	School of Science & Engineering	College of Liberal Arts & Sciences	School of Education	School of Business	Fine & Performing Arts
200 level	50-120 Usually <80	25-100	30	35-50	35 (Art History) 70-80 (GE Music) 24-75 (Theatre)
300 level	48 Lectures for labs 30-40	25-40	30	25-52	20-27 (Art Ed) 25-30 (Art Hist) 12-30 (Music) 24-75 (Theatre)
400 level					15-20 (Art Hist) 12-30 (Music)
Labs	16-24	16-25	25	27	Studio-12-20 (Art) 8-18 (Theatre labs)
Upper-division	Approx. 24			35-40	20-27 (Art Ed)
Writing Intensive	16-18	15-25	22	25	
Senior Seminar / Capstone		10-25		25	20(Art)
Hybrid			20		
Online			20-22	20	
Graduate seminar			15		Studio 6-12 (Art) 18 (Art) 15 (Art Ed) 12 (Music experiential) 15-18 (Music)
Graduate Lecture			25	30	20 (Art Hist)

---State University of New York at New Paltz, Course Caps Table, July 2017

- **SUNY at Fredonia:** There is no policy on course caps.
- **SUNY Brockport:** There is no policy on course caps.
- **SUNY College at Oswego:** No Response
- **SUNY College at Potsdam:** No Response
- **SUNY Cortland:** There is no policy on course caps.
- **SUNY Oneonta:** No Response
- **Tennessee Technological University:** According to the Registrar's Office, departments determine caps for their own classes. The primary consideration is best practices, though departments also consider variables such as room size and software license restrictions.

- **University of Tennessee – Martin:** According to the Registrar's Office, colleges and departments determine course caps. The primary consideration is best practices, as well as other variables (principally the legal limit of classroom size as determined by the Fire Marshal).
- **University of North Alabama (Alabama)** Has a policy on class sizes, but only regarding minimums.

### **Decision Support and Institutional Research (DSIR) Data on Course Caps**

DSIR is APSU's primary source for official campus data, complying with federal, state, and university reporting standards and requirements. The Committee Chair requested a [report from DSIR](#) with the course caps and class sizes for all courses for the five most recent academic years (2018-19 through 2023-24), which does include the time period impacted by COVID-19. The report is comprised of the following data:

- **Term**
- **CRN**
- **Course**
- **Instructional Method**
  - **CLN = Clinical:** A course that involves hands-on field experience with skills taught by a licensed practitioner.
  - **CON = Face-to-Face Traditional:** A course in which the instructor and the students are in the same classroom at the same time. The course can include the learning management system (LMS) tools.
  - **DVC = Desktop Video Conferencing:** A course taught live (synchronous) with video-conferencing where course content is delivered at a scheduled time.
  - **HYB = Hybrid/Blended & HYBL = Hybrid Light:** A course that must have both face-to-face (classroom) and online components (learning management system).
  - **NCM = Non-conventional Media:** A course in which the circumstances do not fit any of the other mediums of instruction, such as a private lesson or studio session.
  - **PRA = Practicum:** A course that provides practical instruction outside the classroom, such as student teaching, field study, or cooperative experience.
  - **WEB = Online/Web:** A course in which all content, interaction (instructor-to-student, student-to-student), and exams must be delivered 100% online via the learning management system (LMS) and online proctoring.
    - For **Restricted Online/Web** courses, content and interaction (instructor-to-student, student-to-student) must be delivered 100% online, but students must report to campus or an approved testing site for proctored exams.
- **Credit Hours**
- **Actual Enrollment**
  - The actual number of students enrolled in the course
- **Room Fire Code**
  - The maximum room capacity allowed by the fire code
- **Max Enrollment**
  - The maximum enrollment for the course set by the department

A preliminary review of the data is summarized in the tables below, which include the average enrollment cap and average actual enrollment for courses by instructional method, college, and level.

### Instructional Delivery Method of the Course

Instructional Method	Average Enrollment Cap	Average Actual Enrollment
Clinical (CLN)	27	16
Conventional (CON)	23	17
Desktop Videoconferencing (DVC)	21	14
Hybrid (HYB) + Hybrid Light (HYBL)	24	17
Non-conventional Media (NCM)	7	3
Online (WEB)	22	17
Practicum Student Teaching/Field Study/Co-op (PRA)	38	7

### College in which the Course Is Taught

College	Average Enrollment Cap	Average Actual Enrollment
College of Arts & Letters	19	15
College of Behavioral & Health Sciences	24	19
College of Business	33	23
College of Education	28	15
College of Science, Technology, Engineering, & Mathematics	24	16
University College	19	16
College of Graduate Studies	8	14

### Level of the Course

Level	Average Enrollment Cap	Average Actual Enrollment
1000 – 1990	25	19
2000 – 2999	25	20
3000 – 3999	22	15
4000 – 4999	19	13
5000 – 5999	14	8
6000 – 6992	15	8
7000 – 7550	17	10
8000 – 8630	12	5

### A Summary of Best Practices for Class Sizes

- **Clinical Courses, American Nurses Association (ANA):** The number of students assigned to a clinical instructor is typically six to ten. That ratio depends on the school, clinical site, and state regulations.
  - **APSU's School of Nursing:**
    - the clinical facilities are the driver for clinical caps.
    - The standard practice for local facilities in Tennessee is 6 to 8 in the clinical setting. (e.g., Vanderbilt is 1:6).

- According to the National Task Force (NTF) standards for Nurse Practitioner (NP) education, they recommended that the student ratio for clinical oversight in an NP program is typically 1:8.
- **Laboratory Courses, American Chemical Society (ACS):** The *2023 ACS Guidelines for Undergraduate Chemistry Programs*, updated in March of 2024, states the following related to “normal expectations” in “Laboratories & Classrooms” for both “Infrastructure” and “Creating a Safety Culture”: The number of students supervised by a faculty member or by a TA in an instructional lab should not exceed 25.
  - **APSU’s Radiologic Technology Program:**
    - Cohort size is based on the number students we accept.
    - Some classes have additional students and we go by classroom size allowance.
    - Our labs have 6 students max since only one person can operate equipment at a time.
- **Online Courses, Quality Matters (QM):**
  - Colwell and Jenks (as cited in Burruss, Billing, Brownrigg, Skiba, & Connors, 2009) set the upper limit for a desirable class size as 20 for an undergraduate course and between 8 and 15 for graduate courses.
  - Burruss et al. concentrated on finding the class size that fostered the correct balance of interaction in the course — not so large that students feel lost and disconnected and not so small that there are too few opportunities for interaction.
  - Parks-Stamm et al. (2017) looked at student and instructor posts and interactions in 500 online courses to find factors contributing to those interactions. They found that both class size and the amount of instructor participation had a significant effect on interactions and that these factors were related to each other. While the amount of instructor participation did not predict the number of posts per student in courses with 15-30 students, courses with fewer students showed significant differences in student participation depending on the amount of instructor participation. In other words, in the courses in this particular study, student interaction in classes of 14 or fewer students increased when there was more instructor participation.
- **Writing / Literature Courses, Association of Departments of English (ADE):** The *ADE Guidelines for Class Size and Workload for College and University Instructors of English: A Statement of Policy* promotes the following regarding class size:
  - Class Size in Writing Courses:
    - All courses (face-to-face and online) should be limited to 15 students. No more than 20 students should be permitted in any writing course.
    - Remedial or developmental writing courses should always be limited to 15 students.
    - No writing instructor should teach more than 60 students in one term.
  - Class Size in Literature Courses:
    - Literature courses (face-to-face and online) should be limited to 30 students, but no larger than 35 students. The instructor should have a qualified assistant (one per 30-35 students in the course) to assist with grading and supervising discussion sections.



- Writing-intensive literature courses should be limited to 20 students, in accordance with College Composition and Communication (CCCC) guidelines for writing courses, but no larger than 25 students.
  - Honors courses and seminars that require students to conduct research and produce sustained critical essays should be restricted to 15 students.
- **World Language Courses, American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL):** The ACTFL has issued several position statements related to class size:
  - Frequent and Meaningful Interaction, May 2006
    - Given the goals of a standards-based language program (i.e., the development of students' communicative competence), there must be opportunity for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback during instructional time. This warrants attention to a class size that remains as small as possible.
  - Maximum Class Size, July 2012
    - Since the goal of a standards-based language program is to develop students' ability to communicate, there must be opportunities for frequent and meaningful student-to-teacher and student-to-student interaction, monitored practice, and individual feedback during instructional time. Therefore, while ACTFL recognizes the fiscal realities faced by schools and institutions of higher education, ACTFL supports the recommended class size of no more than 15 students, made by both the National Education Association (NEA) and the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages (ADFL). Since the most important consideration in determining class size should be pedagogical efficacy, ACTFL's position applies to both traditional and online classroom settings. Where larger class sizes exist, teachers must be provided with additional support in order to maintain sound pedagogical practices.
  - Best Practice of 90%+ Use of the Target Language by Both Teachers and Students, May 2021
    - It is progressively more challenging to implement the best practice of 90%+ use of the target language by both teachers and students as classes grow larger. Large class sizes reduce a teacher's ability to have productive one-on-one communication in the target language and provide sufficient feedback especially on written tasks (NCTE, 2014; Muldrow, 2013), potentially influencing the number of students achieving biliteracy. This is a critical concern given that the foundation of standards-based language learning and proficiency development is immersive communication in all modes (Interpretive, Interpersonal, and Presentational), with time for frequent formative assessments and individualized feedback. Immersion in the target language while supporting learners' comprehension is essential for language acquisition and while possible in larger classes, large class sizes make it difficult to provide feedback and engage in open-ended communicative tasks.

## Conclusion

Most of APSU's peers that responded to Committee members' requests for information indicated they do not have formal policies related to course caps. At many universities,



departments have the flexibility to create their own course caps, which are determined by such factors as accreditation requirements, classroom capacity, and instructional methods. A cursory online search shows that there are institutions that do have protocols for setting and/or revising course caps. Please see Appendix A for one such example. There are guidelines for establishing course caps for specific disciplines and pedagogies (writing intensive, reading intensive, math, lecture, technology, etc.). Based on DSIR data, it appears that APSU has appropriately aligned our course caps with best practices, pedagogical approaches, and accreditation needs, but there are areas for improvement.

### **Committee Recommendations**

- Assess the impact of class size on student outcomes and adjust accordingly based on data and feedback
  - Get students' thoughts on class size
  - Compare to retention and graduation rates
- Investigate workload considerations for faculty teaching "large capacity courses" (*MTSU above*).
- Review the equitable distribution of workload related to course caps and how it may impact job satisfaction and burnout, particularly among faculty of color.
- Develop guidelines (in lieu of a formal policy) for course caps, asking each department to provide the caps they think are suitable for each course level based on best practices, accreditation requirements, etc. (*State University of New York at New Paltz above*).

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## **APPENDIX A: A SAMPLE Policy for Establishing and Modifying Course Caps**

### **Definitions**

- **Course Caps** are the maximums for student enrollment for all sections of a course as listed on the Course Outline of Record for each course.
- **Enrollment Maximums** are the total number of students that can enroll in a section of a course. Enrollment maximums for individual sections of a course may be less than the course cap due to factors such as site restrictions, classroom size, and/or modality.

### **Principles for the Initial Establishment and Modification of Course Caps**

- Course caps will be established initially by using the current enrollment maximums as reflected in the banner for each course. These enrollment maximums will become the official course caps for all courses and will be listed on the Course Outline of Record (COR) for each course.
- Faculty members have the authority to submit a major course revision to the Curriculum Committee to modify the existing course cap based on the criteria outlined below with the consent of their fellow division faculty and with appropriate documentation.
- If the Curriculum Committee approves a major course revision to modify a course cap, then the new course cap will become the official cap for student enrollment for that course and will be listed as such on the Course Outline of Record (COR), effective the following semester after approval.

### **Process for Changing Existing Course Caps**

- A. Division faculty may submit a major course revision to the Curriculum Committee to modify an existing course cap based on the established criteria as outlined below, each of which must be supported and/or justified with appropriate documentation. One criterion is required, but two or more are recommended for justification of a Course Cap modification proposal to the Curriculum Committee.
- B. Documentation to support a proposal to change a course cap based on one or more of the criteria may include, but is not limited to, the following:
  - a. Comparative research of caps for similar courses at peer institutions;
  - b. Recommendations or requirements from a professional association, accrediting body, or academic publication; and/or
  - c. Course-specific documentation, such as a course syllabus, course objectives, assignment criteria, and student learning outcomes (SLOs).
- C. The Curriculum Committee will review proposals to change the existing course cap for a given course. The Committee will determine whether or not the proposed change and supporting documentation are consistent with the established criteria for the modification of a course cap and will make the final decision regarding the proposal to change the existing enrollment cap for a course.

### **Criteria for the Modification of Course Caps**

Modifications to a course cap must be justified with at least one of the below criteria, and it is recommended that two or more criteria be considered in a proposal to modify a course cap. Under each criterion below, suggested examples are provided of the types of data that may be used to justify a modification to a course cap. In addition, faculty members who propose a new course to the Curriculum Committee can opt to establish the course cap based on the

course cap of a similar course(s) within the discipline or based on one or more of the below criteria:

- A. Health and Safety
  - a. Fire codes: All APSU buildings and properties must comply with applicable fire codes and safety standards. In-person courses cannot admit additional students once the room reaches the fire code capacity.
  - b. Supervision: Number of students who can be safely supervised by available faculty and/or staff within a classroom when the students are undertaking hazardous activities or working with hazardous equipment.
- B. Facility or Other Class Capacity Limitations
  - a. Availability of equipment or supplies
  - b. Availability of required or necessary teaching or lab assistants
- C. Course Modality: Caps may be determined differently for labs, which may have different limitations compared to lecture-only courses.
- D. Instructional Delivery
  - a. Nature of classroom activities
  - b. Nature of interaction between instructor and students
  - c. Use of group work or group projects
- E. Student Assessment
  - a. Types and/or amount of individual assignments, projects, and/or papers to assess
  - b. Methods of student assessment, feedback, or evaluation
  - c. Course-level or Program-level student learning outcomes (SLOs)
  - d. Course objectives in the COR
- F. Use of Existing Course Cap for a similar course(s) within the discipline
  - a. For new courses only – cannot be used as one of the required criteria for modifying an existing course cap
  - b. New course should be comparable (i.e. objectives, topics and scope, assignment, assessment, and pedagogy, etc.) to other course(s) in the discipline

*---Adapted from Crafton Hills Community College, Yucaipa, California*