Open letter regarding teaching in the Mathematics Department

Wed, Dec 17, 2014 at 10:51 AM

To: Alexander Coward <coward@math.berkeley.edu>
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Dear All

My complete lack of qualification on these matters places me in a unique position to comment.
(I have missed most department meetings over the past two years, due to the scheduling of my teaching, and can plead ignorance of the matters mentioned in the original message).

First, I am mortified to hear, as I am sure my colleagues are, that work-related issues in the department have led one of my colleagues to a serious personal crisis. I wish Alex all the best.

Second, I would suggest that the problems listed in Alex's messages are not the root of the matter; instead, this is the teaching workload in mathematics, which has become unsustainable.

This is not due to an increase in nominal teaching load, but to a gradual increase in student expectations and the continuous withdrawal of staff and secondary support.

Quickly, I can list

* the reduction in real FTEs in the department (leading to chronic over-teaching)
* managing a small army of GSIs without assistance from a head GSI;
* creating and maintaining websites for the class, on complex and ever-changing platforms, without any real computer support;
* providing feedback to students without the benefit of homework grading (quite scandalous indeed);
* handling strikes by GSIs (who are overtaxed in their turn);
* managing differing and ever-more complex examination demands for increasing numbers of special needs students;
* increased class sizes in upper division;

Faculty find different coping methods: early sabbaticals with partial support from elsewhere; fellowships for teaching relief; second jobs at institutions with lower teaching, while dropping to part-time service in Berkeley; becoming chair, or one of the vice-chairs (with teaching replacement points); or simply, finding jobs elsewhere.

Lecturers have fewer options, and while debates on teaching methodology do add a complex layer to the work, the root problem
may be that the underlying task is becoming humanly impossible.

I can only hope these unfortunate development will catalyze a thorough review of teaching in the department, of the proper level of support needed to manage the task well, as well as the proper teaching methods that balance the means with the needs.

All the best
Open letter regarding teaching in the Mathematics Department

Arthur Oqus <ogus@math.berkeley.edu>  
Wed, Dec 17, 2014 at 11:04 AM

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Dear [redacted]

Thank you for your very thoughtful and apt comments. We have in fact already formed a curriculum review committee, chaired by Craig Evans, to discuss this kind of issue thoroughly. I have encouraged them to focus not just on issues of course content requirements, but to the large issues of how we manage teaching in general.

Best regards,

Arthur

[Quoted text hidden]