

Passed Unanimously by the GSC on May 7, 2014

Motion to Cap FAS Section Sizes

Whereas sections are at the heart of learning for undergraduates in Harvard College, especially in large lecture classes, which are a crucial first stage in the undergraduate academic experience; and,

Whereas pedagogical research and teaching experience clearly and decisively demonstrate the benefits of smaller groups for the quality of discussion, teaching, learning, and writing feedback; and,

Whereas excessive teaching loads hinder graduate students' ability to make progress toward their degrees, and

Whereas the cost to the University would be minimal (refer addendum) relative to the pedagogical benefit to both undergraduate and graduate students;

Be it therefore resolved that the Graduate Student Council calls on Harvard University to fulfill its commitment to educational excellence by committing to providing reasonably sized sections and lab groups, and

Be it therefore resolved that the GSC advocates that FAS institute a policy that places a maximum (cap) of 12 students for every graded section or lab group, including graduate-level courses, and

Be it further resolved that the GSC raises awareness on campus about this issue and gathers data through its means of campus wide communication

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Addendum

Why Section Size Matters

The Harvard Teaching Campaign emerged from a sense of frustration among graduate students and faculty at Harvard that increasingly large section sizes were hindering our ability to be effective teachers, and diminishing the undergraduate experience for students at Harvard College.

We have found that in general, current section sizes and lab groups make effective teaching and safe working conditions impossible. Harvard students know that smaller sections and lab groups mean more help from TFs, more space for participation, more productive discussions, and more detailed feedback on writing assignments and problem sets. Harvard students expect to learn and Harvard faculty and graduate students hope to teach at the highest level in accordance with Harvard's traditions of excellence. In too many sections and labs, the large number of students makes this impossible.

We are calling on Harvard University to implement a firm maximum for sections and lab groups. The maximum should be set at 12 students per section or lab group. As graduate students and faculty leading section, we have observed that as group sizes increase, the quality of learning and participation deteriorates. The literature on effective discussion-based pedagogy supports our observations. As lab supervisors, we are concerned about the safety of students in larger groups.

Undergraduates should expect sections that are the most conducive to learning

Our proposed cap is based on the most up-to-date literature on effective pedagogical approaches in humanities, social sciences and natural science lab settings. Our conversations with faculty, graduates and undergraduates across a variety of departments have demonstrated overwhelming support for such a limit. Smaller sections, across disciplines and fields, allow instructors to provide detailed, constructive, and thorough feedback on student assignments. In smaller sections, beyond instruction and guidance from faculty and graduate students, Harvard undergraduates can effectively learn from each other, harnessing the ideas, interests, and specializations of their peers for deeper and more enriching learning.

The cost of reducing section sizes would not constitute an excessive financial burden. Only the University administration can detail the potential financial impact of reducing section sizes. We believe that excellent pedagogy constitutes the core of the College's mission, and as such believe that students, faculty and administrators should engage in a serious conversation about the appropriate costs of improving pedagogy. Moreover, in the context of Harvard's unparalleled resources, we believe that teaching and learning should be prioritized. Setting a maximum for section sizes would be the single most important, and cost-effective, means to boost pedagogical excellence. As a point of reference, in 2009 FAS Dean Michael Smith anticipated that increasing section sizes from an average of thirteen students to a "more rigorously enforced maximum" of eighteen students would cut costs by 2 million dollars--less than 1% of the 220 million dollar budget deficit then faced by FAS. We believe that a maximum of 12 could be instituted for less than 5 million dollars, which represents less than 0.5% of the \$1.2 billion budget for FAS in 2013.