



Office of the Chair and Graduate Chair

DPES 2011-26 Prerequisite checks

From: William A. Gough, Chair and Graduate Chair, DPES

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Dear DPES faculty and course instructors

As course instructors you have the opportunity to ask for prerequisite checks for your courses and to act upon the results of such checks. This memo is intended to provide some context for prerequisite checks and to initiate some deeper thinking on what are appropriate courses to list as prerequisites.

For 2nd, 3rd and 4th year courses, pre-requisite checks are straightforward to do and relatively simple to understand and act upon. When courses are developed or modified specific and general prerequisites are identified. Ideally specific prerequisites, typically lower year courses, are chosen because they are deemed to have essential material or skills needed for success in the subsequent course. If a student does not have a specific prerequisite or its equivalent, the instructor can exclude the student from the course. Often an instructor will have a dialogue with the student prior to exclusion. In some cases, usually exceptional ones, an instructor will waive a prerequisite if the student provides a compelling reason. This is of course allowable but please be aware of some pitfalls.

The major pitfall is the “propaedeutic rule”. If a student takes a course in which he or she has not taken a specific prerequisite, the student cannot then at a later date take the prerequisite course for academic credit. The thinking behind this is that the student would have an unfair advantage over the other students in the course. Therefore an instructor should ask the student what program he or she is in and if the specific prerequisite is a program requirement. If it is a program requirement, the instructor would not be acting responsibly by waiving the prerequisite. Even if the prerequisite is not a program requirement, there is no protection for the student if he or she should change to a program in which the specific prerequisite is required. Some circumstances are clearer and waiving a prerequisite is more acceptable. This can occur for example when a student is in his or her final year and the likelihood of changing programs is nil. In the case of a more general prerequisite (i.e., X courses in Environmental Science), the propaedeutic rule will not apply, although the rationale for the general prerequisite should be carefully considered.

Another pitfall is more institutional in nature. Although prerequisites should be included strictly because material covered and skills acquired are foundational for the subsequent course, occasionally this has not been the case. Sometimes built into a program is a desire to insure courses are taken in a proper sequence as students progress through the program. Another scenario occurs when a course has evolved, often when there is a change of instructor, and the prerequisite is considerably less relevant than it once was. In both cases an institutional response is needed and waiving a prerequisite in such cases should be a very short term (a year or less) remedy and changes to the course prerequisites should immediately go through departmental and campus governance. In the first example, there may be some serious propaedeutic issues for the students if the prescribed sequencing is breached. We need to carefully consider the prerequisites we currently have in place to insure that we are avoiding this pitfall. This is particularly critical issue for students taking courses, perhaps in an irregular sequence, due to Co-op or if the student is part time.

Prerequisite checks for first year courses are trickier. Whereas in the upper year courses, we have a clear understanding of what is taught in the prerequisite course, this is not always the case for high school prerequisites. We do have admission requirements for entry into DPES that typically insures our students have the right Ontario high school (or equivalent) courses for success in our programs. However the landscape of Ontario high school education does vary considerably and instructors weigh this carefully and some feel quite comfortable allowing students without specific high school courses into their courses. A tangential issue is the assessment of “equivalent” qualifications from other provinces in Canada and those who were educated outside of Canada. Thus the department in the past has been quite lenient on prerequisite checking for first year courses. However, on the other hand, we do have a number of “back door” students who enroll in our first year courses. Typically these are students who have been accepted in other UTSC departments or other campuses of the University of Toronto where the high school admission requirements are different. Although this has not been identified as an issue in first year environmental science courses, this is being considered carefully, and in some cases acted upon, for first year chemistry and first year physics.

My last remarks are pragmatic. The Chair’s Office does the prerequisite checks. These are handled by the Chair’s Assistant, Rose Jones, rjones@utsc.utoronto.ca. I ask that these checks be done well in advance of the beginning of a term in consultation with the Chair so that any actions taken can be accommodated. This is particularly important for laboratory based courses in which a significant drop in enrollment will affect the number of lab sections needed and the number of teaching assistants hired. I want to emphasize only pedagogical reasons are valid for exclusion of students based on prerequisite checks and never fiscal reasons. As Chair I am neither trying to pack courses for additional revenue, nor trying to restrict enrollment to mitigate expenses.