

COH Slash Classes: Challenges and Best Practices

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(Adapted from CEOAS best practices shared in February 2024 that were based on discussion amongst CEOAS faculty and students, together with valuable input from Demian Hommel (CEOAS CTL fellow) and Regan Gurung (Executive Director, CTL).

Classes that include upper division undergraduates and graduate students – designated 4XX/5XX or “slash classes” are relatively common at OSU and in COH and are an important part of the undergraduate and graduate curriculum in the college. It is growing since there are expanded opportunities with the Graduate School for Accelerated Master Programs (AMPs) that allow undergraduates to take slash courses at graduate level to count towards a Master degree.

Effectively developing and teaching slash classes often represents a challenge for instructors and they can also be unpopular with students – stemming from the need for instruction to be effective for two distinct audiences.

No additional resources are provided for instructors of slash classes and so instruction needs to occur within the same limits of effort as other classes. Additionally, the students registered for the slash course are all taking the same number of credits therefore the course delivery should occur within similar limits of instruction, understanding the graduate students will be assessed and should be engaged for the higher-level learning outcome.

University Requirements

OSU has the following requirements for all slash classes¹:

Courses bearing dual-listed numbers must provide students who are enrolled for the 500-level credit with education and training that satisfies all of the following conditions. Evidence of the following distinctions must be clearly stated in the syllabus:

- *The 5XX course must include graduate-level work appropriate to the field (e.g., exams, papers, projects, problem sets, responsibility for lecturing or leading discussions, etc.),*
- *Students enrolled for the 5XX credit must present work that is significantly more rigorous in both depth of study and methodology than students enrolled for the 4XX credit, and*
- *When making qualitative evaluations of students, the instructor must hold students enrolled for the 5XX credit to a standard higher than those enrolled for 4XX credit.*

In addition, curriculum proposals to create or change slash courses must clearly articulate the graduate level [learning outcomes](#) expected of students registered for the 5XX version of the course, as distinct from the outcomes expected of those registered for the 4XX version of the course.

In most cases this distinction should include emphasis on developing skills in analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation for the 500-level credit, as opposed to, or in addition to, acquisition of knowledge, comprehension and application of information, which are more characteristic of undergraduate curricula. In addition to different student learning outcomes, there should also be appropriate differences in instruction and evaluation procedures.

Note also that OSU requires that 50% of graduate credits be stand alone, although as thesis credits are considered stand-alone means that this requirement is less effective in minimizing slash classes in thesis based graduate programs.

¹ <https://apa.oregonstate.edu/slash-courses>

Some Best Practices

Learning Outcomes. Make sure there are clearly articulated and logical graduate learning outcomes, and that your class activities provide a means to meet and assess these outcomes. Avoid making the graduate learning outcomes a “mirror” of the undergraduate learning outcomes by using different Bloom’s taxonomy verbs, and as noted in the OSU requirements above, graduate learning outcomes should focus more heavily on analysis, synthesis, and/or evaluation than information acquisition and comprehension etc.

Understand the different needs of undergraduates and graduate students in your class. Slash classes in range from those that are largely undergraduate dominated – including core classes required for an undergraduate major, and upper division electives that have a minority of graduate students. Other slash classes enroll a majority of graduate students, with fewer undergraduates. In each of these situations the needs and expectations for undergraduates and graduate students can differ. Having a clear understanding of these expectations and communicating these to students is essential.

Communicate consistently with both groups of students. At the start of a class meet with graduate and undergraduate student groups to discuss how you plan to manage the different aspects of the slash class, and to get feedback on their expectations. Be honest about the difficulty of teaching a slash class and provide your strategy for teaching.

Make sure graduate students know how they will benefit from the class. For graduate students in undergraduate-dominated slash classes it is important to verify that they understand what the specific benefit of the class will be to them. This might be that the class provides foundational knowledge that the grad student has not yet been exposed to, or a class where re-exposure to material is important. Making sure the graduate student needs to take the class helps avoid needless duplication and will get “buy in” for engagement. In some cases, this might also require a conversation with the advisor. Also note that graduate students (particularly new students) may not be aware they are registering for a slash class, so make this clear in initial course communications.

Make sure that graduate students don’t overly elevate the course for undergraduates. Having enthusiastic graduate students in the class can be great, but it is also important to maintain space and a pace of learning that is appropriate for undergraduates as well, so they do not feel overwhelmed.

Avoid using graduate students as “unpaid” instructional labor. Feedback from graduate students consistently highlights that they do not want to meet slash class requirements by being given responsibilities for instruction of undergraduates, or by leading group projects involving undergraduates. If you plan to use this approach, it is critical to communicate with graduate students and clearly demonstrate how this approach will benefit them and meet the learning outcomes.

Consider avoiding or minimizing group work where graduate students work with undergraduates. Graduate students report that this is very unpopular as they feel saddled with the additional responsibilities of having to undergruaduates and not focus on their own learning. If this is important to the class, ensure that the need for this arrangement is clearly reflected in learning outcomes and communicated.

Have a clear strategy for how to conduct the class. Following good course design principles can help also alleviate issues with slash classes. There are a number of strategies and approaches that may prove useful for a specific slash class. Pedagogical approaches such as backward design – choosing the knowledge and skills you want your students to gain and then designing the course to achieve this – can potentially help. It is not necessary to try everything, but it is important to have a strategy that you can communicate to students about how to you choose to manage the slash class.

Consider differences in contextual knowledge between graduate and undergraduate students. Even where graduate students have not covered the specific material in your course, they probably have a

greater overall understanding of the discipline and can be expected to place new information in a broader context (“scaffold”) more rapidly than undergraduates. The instructor needs to thread a line between being too simplistic and overly complex. Class discussions could be designed to help lessen these disparities.

Consider established power dynamics between graduate and undergraduate students. Graduate and undergraduate students may have relationships from outside your class from other slash classes or from classes where grad students have been GTA. It is important that the graduate student not be seen as an unpaid GTA by undergraduates and be allowed to take the course without these expectations. Have discussions with the class to make sure that this is not an implicit expectation, and that undergraduates use the instructor and actual course GTA for assistance as needed.

Other suggestions/strategies for slash classes used/suggested by CEOAS instructors if appropriate.

1. Provide the graduate students some choice in how the graduate learning objectives are achieved and assessed.
2. Have separate homework questions, projects, and/or exams or other assessment activities designed specifically for graduate students.
3. Have a graduate student-only reading list of topical papers. Have regular group discussions of these papers and use them for graduate -specific homework or exam questions.
4. For courses with multiple meeting days, use the early part of the week for introductory material and the latter parts of the week meetings for more focused discussions and lectures with separated undergraduate/graduate portions of the class.