UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO
FACULTY OF APPLIED SCIENCE & ENGINEERING

2019-20/02

MEMORANDUM

To: Faculty, Students and Staff, Faculty of Applied Science & Engineering
From: Christopher Yip, Dean
Date: Wednesday, January 29, 2020
Re: **FASE Decanal Task Force on Academic Workload**

Many in the Engineering community have shared stories of balancing the multiple challenges that they face at university. Chief among these is that of the academic workload and we all recognize that there needs to be a better balance and understanding of this very complex topic. With that in mind, and based on consultation with many from the community – faculty, staff, and most importantly students, we are now launching a task force charged with looking into this topic and developing strategies to help create a better balance. This is a topic that is resonating with the University as a whole and I look forward to hearing from the task force and the community.

Background

Student workload in a standard undergraduate engineering curriculum is regularly cited as a contributing factor to increased stress levels that can often result in mental health and wellness challenges. The *culture of stress* that normalizes a high volume of work can result in undergraduate students being reluctant to seek mental health support[1,2]. Specific to U of T Engineering, we regularly observe that over 40% of our first-year students report the "academic commitments" in first year were "unmanageable" or "overwhelmingly unmanageable"[3]. In a recent Engineering Society census, nearly 60% of student respondents identified their course load as "overwhelming"[4], and over 30% thought the stress from school was "unnecessary"[5]. However, 45% of student respondents also acknowledged that the stress from school is "character building". It is clear that academic workload can have a significantly negative effect for some students, yet it is a complex and multifaceted topic which needs to be better understood from a multitude of perspectives.

Terms of Reference – Phase 1

The primary goal of the Decanal Task Force on Academic Workload is to understand the relationship between academic workload, stress, and mental wellness, and identify potential actions that could improve the overall undergraduate student experience within the Faculty.

Initially the Task Force will work towards answering the questions: How is academic workload defined? What impacts the notion of "academic workload"? How does this relate to stress for students? The objective in this first phase is to:

- Develop an understanding of the key elements of academic workload and how this impacts student mental health and wellness by:
    - Reviewing the research literature to better understand the concept of academic workload,
    - Determine how other programs, universities, and engineering programs are considering academic workload and its impact on undergraduate student experience through:
        - Consultations with other Faculties, groups and academic leaders within the University of Toronto, and
        - Consultations with academic and student leaders at other Canadian universities,
    - Assessing the perceptions of U of T Engineering students, staff, and faculty regarding academic workload and expectations.

This initial phase of the Task Force's work began in November 2019 and is expected to be completed by April 2020. At that point the Task Force will deliver a set of initial recommendations and a set of Terms of Reference for Phase 2, which will take place through the summer and finish by August 2020.

Broad consultations within the Faculty will take place in the coming months. In addition, the Task Force will welcome any thoughts, suggestions, or feedback that members of the U of T Engineering community may wish to share. These may be submitted to the Task Force at: https://tinyurl.com/fase-academicworkload

Membership of the Decanal Task Force on Academic Workload:

Faculty Administration:
Tom Coyle (Vice-Dean Undergraduate, MSE), co-chair
Micah Stickel (Vice-Dean First Year, ECE), co-chair
Don MacMillan (Faculty Registrar)
Mojgan Cossaro (Executive Assistant, VDU and VDFY), Committee Administrative Support

Undergraduate Students:
Zahir Firoze (MIE, 3rd Year, VP Academic Engineering Society)
Rumla Omer (CIV, 2nd Year)
Mirjana Mijalkovic (Engineering Science, 2nd Year)
Polina Govorkova (ECE + PEY Co-op, 3rd Year)

Graduate Student:
Philippa Gosine (IBBME, PhD Student, FASE TA Mentor)

Academic Advisors:
Gayle Lesmond (MIE)
Brendan Heath (Engineering Science)

Faculty:
Chirag Variawa (Director First Year Curriculum, ISTEP)
Ravi Adve (Associate Chair UG, ECE)
Greg Evans (Director ISTEP, CHE)
John Harrison (Associate Chair UG, MIN)

Resources:

[1]Downs, Marilyn F., and Daniel Eisenberg. "Help seeking and treatment use among suicidal college students." *Journal of American College Health* 60.2 (2012): 104-114.
[2]Jensen, Karin, and Kelly J. Cross. "Board 73: Student Perceptions of Engineering Stress Culture." *2019 ASEE Annual Conference & Exposition*. 2019.
[3]In response to the First Year Exit Survey question: "*How would you describe the academic commitments (i.e. time spent in class, doing homework, and studying) you had during your first year of studies? - Easily manageable, Reasonably manageable, Unmanageable, Overwhelmingly unmanageable*" Response rates are around 30% each year.
[4]Engineering Society Census – Spring 2019: In response to the question: "*How much do you agree with the following statement? My course load is overwhelming*", with 457 respondents, which is about a 10% response rate.
[5]Engineering Society Census – Spring 2019: In response to the question: "*Is the stress from school character building or unnecessary?*", with 457 respondents, which is about a 10% response rate.