How Large Can Small Classes Be?
By Steve Chatman

Within the goal area, Learning, *The UC Davis Vision Statement: A Strategic Plan to Achieve Campus Aspirations*, identifies three strategies and several indicators of achievement. One of the indicators by which quality of faculty-student interaction will be measured is class size. Specifically, that every student will have access to at least one small class in their major. The standard suggested parenthetically with the indicator was an enrollment of 30 students or less. That threshold was questioned in discussion at the Chancellor’s Fall Conference and the decision was made to invite student comment for this performance indicator. Student comment was solicited using QuickSurvey through the My.UCDavis.edu portal and the poll found that University’s current threshold of 30 students for this performance indicator would not be controversial but a smaller number, like 25 or 20, would be more widely considered valid.

The class size QuickSurvey ran for one week in early October and appeared as follows:

One of the University's goals is that every graduating senior will have had at least one small class in their major that was taught by a regular faculty member. Regular faculty member include professors, associate professors, and assistant professors, but does not include lecturers and graduate students. Excluding labs, recitation and discussion sections, what would you consider to be the maximum enrollment of a small class?

*A small class has fewer than X students, where X is (numerical value please)...

Is your value based on classes in your major OR in all majors? (answer with MINE or ALL)

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Results

There were 2,011 responses. The first finding addressed the follow-up question that was asked in response to a question about the relationship between class size and major. Would students basing judgment on class size answer differently for their major than for all undergraduate classes? The answer was, “No.” Students did not systematically view class size differently based on their major. The two distributions, small class enrollment based on my major or based on a universal standard for all undergraduate classes, were very nearly the same.

The second finding addressed a question about class size and student class level. Would freshman have a different standard than senior? Analysis of results did not find a difference. There was no evidence of substantial change in the perception of class size from freshman to senior year. For all class levels, the median value was 25 and the averages ranged from 29 to 33 with no direct relationship. From freshman to senior class, the mean values were 30.7, 32.5, 29.0, and 29.6.

Because there were no differences by major or by class level, we can turn to the fundamental issue of small class size treating all undergraduate students collectively. What did students report as the largest enrollment for a small class?

Responses are shown graphically as a cumulative distribution and its complementary curve. The blue curve should be read as the percentage that identified a maximum small enrollment as that value or less. For example, at class size 30, 76% of students said that a small class was capped at 30 or fewer students. The complementary distribution is probably more useful for our purposes. Using the example of a class size of 30, 24% would agree that a class of 30 students or fewer would be a small class.

Source: SARI Report 336
The two distributions cross at the 50\textsuperscript{th} percentile, at about 25 on the graph. Because there is a natural tendency for students to offer enrollments in increments of 5, the median value was 25. The curves are smoothed distribution.

Using the red complementary curve, about one-half of all students would agree that a small class had an enrollment of 25 or fewer. About two-thirds would agree that 20 or fewer was a small class and 87\% would accept that 15 or fewer was small. Opinion about small classes did not approach unanimity until a class size of five. Given these data, the University’s current threshold of 30 students for this performance indicator would not be controversial but a smaller number, like 25 or 20, would be more widely considered valid.