

**Credit Model Task Force Minority Report**  
**March, 2008**

*“In theory, there is no difference between theory and practice. But in practice there is.”*  
*--Yogi Berra*

**Position Overview:** We are not in favor of PSU converting to a 4-credit curriculum. We are unconvinced by the arguments we have heard from those who favor the change. There seems to be a lack of hard evidence to support their claims. With regard to a number of the rational arguments that have been made, counterarguments in favor of the present model seem equally strong or stronger. The evidence is not compelling and the task of implementation would be enormous, so enormous it seemed beyond the scope of the present task force, so enormous, the majority of that task force has proposed another will be needed to grapple with it. We think it would be ill advised for the faculty to approve this change without knowing what it would mean “in practice.” Our reasoning is explained in more detail in the section below entitled Rationale.

We do believe that the faculty needs to make a decision about this issue and needs to commit to leaving it decided for a reasonable period of time. In our memory, this issue has been debated at least 4 times (usually for a year or two at a time) during the past 15 years. Each time progress on development and revision of academic programs comes to a halt pending resolution of the issue. A reasonable period of time between reconsiderations would seem to be 7 years. Why 7? It takes 2 years to make significant curriculum revision. Once implemented, such major changes need a minimum of 5 years before assessment is complete (4 years for the first cohort to run through the program and 1 more year for the assessment data to be interpreted.) Therefore we offer the following alternative resolution.

**Resolution: That the Faculty of PSU reaffirms its commitment to the present credit model, which regards 3-credit courses as the norm, but allows for exceptions (1-, 2-, or 4-credit courses) when sufficient justification is provided, and resolves to reconsider this issue no sooner than 7 years from today.**

**Rationale**

1. **Lack of real evidence.** The arguments made in favor of the 4-credit curriculum are based on few actual data. The evidence is mostly anecdotal and comes from a few examples of institutions with such a curriculum that are either dissimilar to us or for whom the change is so recent that no long-term assessment data are yet available. PSU has committed to become a culture of assessment. We believe that making this great a change on such weak assessment data would deny that commitment. The task force sought to find stronger evidence and failed to do so. At the suggestion of the Provost we asked the Director of Institutional Research

and Assessment to find graduation rate and retention data from appropriate comparator institutions that represent the 3-credit and 4-credit models. He was unable to do so.

- a. **Universities usually have the 3-credit curriculum.** The problem seems to be that virtually all of our comparator institutions have had and continue to have 3-credit curricula. Of our 16 official “comparator” institutions, 13 have a 3-credit system, 2 have recently converted to 4-credit, and 1 uses a quarter system. As part of an effort to answer our questions about how changing to a 4-credit curriculum would affect our transfer process, Director of Curriculum Support Mary Campbell, examined the curriculum models of each of the 182 institutions who call themselves “universities” from which PSU students have brought transfer credit since the year 2000. She found that 171 (94%) have a 3-credit curriculum and only 11 (6%), a 4-credit curriculum.
  - b. **Liberal Arts Colleges more often have the 4-credit curriculum.** It is our impression that the 4-credit curriculum is more common in liberal arts colleges, where fewer requirements and fewer standards for professional accreditation allow for more flexibility in what students study, and where, in particular, depth may be valued over breadth. We think it is significant that all three of the institutions the task force visited to gather anecdotal evidence about the process of converting to the 4-credit model pride themselves on their liberal arts orientation. The University of Maine at Farmington calls itself on its masthead “Maine’s Public Liberal Arts College.” Keene State College claims a similar niche here in New Hampshire. St Joseph’s College on its website makes much of its status as a “small, Catholic, liberal arts college.” We question the extent to which we can generalize from any of these schools to PSU.
  - c. **Further reasons to question generalizations from the three visited schools.** Those three schools, anecdotes from which are the primary evidence the majority presents, differ from PSU in other important ways. All three have considerably simpler curricular offerings. PSU offers 96 major/option combinations. Keene, which in many ways such as size (about 4,600 undergraduates vs. 4,200 at Plymouth) is the closest comparator, offers only 63. Farmington has fewer than half the number of undergraduates we do (2,000) and offers just over half as many major/options: 50. St. Joseph’s is a school of only 1,062 students offering only 38 majors. Our greater curricular complexity is bound to add to the task of implementation.
2. **Questionable arguments about direct effects.** The rational arguments that have been made in favor of the change to a 4-credit system seem weak to us:
    - a. **Student workload will be reduced.** Students will take 4 courses each term instead of 5. Thus they should be better able to manage their time. We seriously doubt that it is the number of courses students must balance that overwhelms them. It may be the number and length of assignments. But everyone is assuming that 4-credit courses will have proportionally more work than 3-credit courses: either more assignments or assignments

with more depth. (Unless that is the case the change will result in an overall watering down of the PSU education, and no one wants that.) We are not convinced that this change would reduce overall student workload.

- b. **Faculty workload will be reduced.** This argument has the same flaw as the one about student workload. Though faculty will be teaching 3 courses at a time instead of 4, if seat time is increased proportionally for 4-credit courses, faculty will be preparing the same number of class hours per week. If number and length of assignments are increased, they will be grading the same amount of student work. We acknowledge that each faculty member will be teaching fewer students, and that there will be some savings of time and attention in having to get to know and respond to fewer individuals. We see reduction in faculty workload as modest at best. We fear, however, that others will regard that very real problem as resolved if this change is made. We were alarmed to hear Provost Bernier say to the task force that solving the faculty teaching load problem is on hold pending resolution of the 4-credit issue, and that if we adopt the 4-credit curriculum, she will regard that as the solution to the problem. If we do not, she will seek other solutions, such as negotiating teaching load (versus scholarship and service load) with individual faculty members or a gradual movement toward a four-three (as opposed to a four-four) annual teaching load—those struck us as better permanent solutions.
- c. **Four-credit courses will have more depth.** We believe greater depth can only be achieved by sacrificing breadth. For example, within a particular major, a department might decide to divide the content and skills it has been teaching in 3-credit chunks into 4-credit chunks. If all the content and skills are still to be taught, depth remains constant. Greater depth in some content can only be achieved by leaving some other content out. If within a major greater depth is achieved by converting all 3-credit courses to 4 and requiring the same number of courses, then students would indeed study the major more deeply, but would sacrifice the breadth of taking courses outside the major, since the number of such course would be reduced.
- d. **Less complex sets of requirements yield fewer advising/scheduling errors and result in faster time to graduation.** This may be the strongest argument in favor of the 4-credit curriculum as no one can deny that keeping track of which 30 courses must be taken to graduate has to be simpler than keeping track of which 40 courses must be taken. We would note, however, that the challenge of the current curriculum does not rest so much with the number of courses that must be taken as with the complexity of the rules for what combination of courses is required. There is no guarantee that the 4-credit curriculum will include fewer complex and confusing rules. There is nothing to stop the faculty from working to simplify the present curriculum, except, of course, that such efforts seem to be on hold pending discussion of the 4-credit curriculum.
- e. **“Errors” can more easily be corrected with the 4-credit curriculum.** If students typically take 4 courses a semester,(32 courses over 8

semesters), and need only 30 courses to graduate, they have two extra course slots that could be used to repeat courses failed or correct advising/scheduling errors without the student falling behind. This is a strong argument in favor of the change, but it presupposes that majors will require only the minimum 120 credits (recently reduced from 122 by action of the faculty). That seems unlikely. As departments struggle to restructure their majors to fit the new model, particularly those which are designed to match accreditation standards for content (the very ones that are often already larger than the university minimum), the temptation will be great to go above the minimum number of credits, particularly given those two extra course slots. We note that when Farmington converted to 4-credits, they raised the number of credits required for graduation from 120 to 128. Perhaps they found they couldn't fit all requirements into 30 courses? Whatever the reason, they chose to give up this possible advantage to the 4-credit curriculum.

f. **The “Magic Number 4.”** The weakness of the arguments that have been made in favor of the 4-credit curriculum become apparent to some of us when we ask, “Then why not a 6-credit curriculum?” If faculty teaching three 4-credit courses is better than faculty teaching four 3-credit courses and if students taking four courses is better than students taking five courses, wouldn't it be even better if we had 6-credit courses? Faculty could teach two and students could take three. No one is proposing that. At what point does the advantage of fewer courses and more depth become a disadvantage? The number 4 seems quite arbitrary to us.

3. **Questionable arguments about secondary advantages.** We also question several of the arguments that we hear made that a move to a 4-credit curriculum will have positive side effects.

a. **This will force the faculty to revisit and revise the entire curriculum.** It is true, as noted below, that every major program and most courses will have to be revised. But we question the assumption that will necessarily be done in a thoughtful way that will result in streamlining of requirements and reduction of complexity. We fear that in order to get this enormous task done in a reasonable timeframe, it will have to be done in something less than a thoughtful and reflective way. It is probably the case that each department believes each of its current requirements is necessary and will be unlikely to jettison any content. Some of us hoped that introduction of the New General Education program—with its reduction in the possibility of double counting--would force departments to streamline majors. Some departments did do that with some majors. It seems unfair to require those departments to go through that process again 3 years later. It seems unreasonable to expect that those who resisted then, will be any more willing now. We predict a more likely outcome of this curriculum revision will be an increase in the size of majors, as departments struggle to fit everything they now require into fewer courses.

b. **The new curriculum will encourage innovative student-centered teaching. Longer class periods will encourage methods that go more**

**deeply into the subject matter.** We cannot think of any kind of teaching method that could not also be incorporated into the present curriculum. As noted above, a trade-off for greater depth is inevitably lesser breadth. Longer meeting times are not necessarily associated with better learning. In our experience even 75-minute classes can challenge the attention span of both students and faculty particularly when content is high-level and abstract. We understand that a number of students and faculty at Keene found the adjustment to longer classes challenging.

- c. **The 4-credit curriculum will give departments greater flexibility to vary seat time.** One possibility is that departments could schedule 4-credit courses up to a maximum of 200 minutes per week (proportional to the 150 minutes for which 3 credit courses are now scheduled), but might choose in some courses to meet for less time and expect students to do more of the work on their own. We recognize that seat-time is a complicated issue currently under much discussion and reconsideration particularly in light of the growing popularity of on-line courses. We would not go so far as to defend the position that seat time is perfectly correlated with learning. But we are apprehensive about the wisdom of reducing seat time on the assumption that students will do more of the work on their own. Surveys of PSU students (such as the one conducted by Student Affairs and published in the 2006 *Viewbook*) seem to reveal consistently that students spend considerably fewer hours per week studying than faculty believe they do. Many of us who have been teaching for many years perceive the challenge of getting students to do out of class assignments—especially reading—as ever increasing. Some of us feel that seat time is our best opportunity for teaching, and are apprehensive indeed about making it optional.

#### 4. **New problems that would be created by a 4-credit curriculum.**

- a. **Reduced flexibility in the size of courses.** Though 3-credit courses are the norm in the present system, some courses are 1-, 2-, or 4-credits. In the new system only 4-credit, 1-credit, and 2-credit courses would be allowed. We acknowledge that this restriction would allow for more efficient use of classroom space, and more standardization of meeting times, which might reduce scheduling conflicts for some students. We also recognize that because of these logistical problems, the present system is pretty much at its limit in terms of how many 4-credit courses can be fit in among the 3-credit ones. That said, we have to value the greater flexibility of the present system. Our colleagues from the Mathematics and CEAPS Departments have presented compelling arguments that some of their content is better taught and better meets the needs of students when packaged in 3-credit courses and other, in 4-credit courses. In addition there seem to be special problems associated with converting courses, which in the present system are 4-credit because of inclusion of a 1-credit lab component. There seems to be resistance to raising credit for such courses above 4, but refusing to do so fails to acknowledge that their present status as 4-credit courses is for reasons

entirely different from those being proposed as advantages to increasing the size of other courses. If those advantages are real, then there is at the very least the inequity of denying them to those faculty and students whose subject matter requires laboratory work.

- b. **Transfer issues.** Given that the vast majority of students who transfer into PSU come from institutions with the 3-credit curriculum, evaluation of transfer credit is going to be more complicated. Mary Campbell states, “Students coming to our three-credit institution with four-credit courses are not disadvantaged. We transfer courses at the value awarded by the transfer institution (converting quarter credits or other units to semester hours). A four-credit transfer course satisfies our three-credit requirement (e.g., ENGL 401 First-year Writing from UNH satisfies our composition requirement) and the student has one credit of free elective towards the total number of credits required for the PSU degree.” On the other hand, in cases of some of our 4-credit courses (e.g., BU1150 Financial Accounting and some of the science courses that include a lab), departments have been reluctant to accept a 3-credit transfer alternative. We would certainly have to get beyond that. However, if we do, Mary Campbell worries, “that a transfer student with a three-credit course (e.g., Psychology) would not have the same preparation as a PSU student who took the course (e.g., PS 2010) as four credits (assuming that the four-credit course has more content). Therefore, the student may not be as prepared to take a course for which PS 2010 is the prerequisite, impeding the progress in the PSU major/degree and affecting the grade point average.” In addition we currently have articulation agreements with the NH Community and Technical Colleges and a number of other two-year schools, which specify how their associate programs can be applied to certain of our 4-year programs. All of those institutions have 3-credit curricula. All of those agreements would have to be renegotiated.
- c. **Electives and Minors.** As noted above, we suspect that the size of majors is likely to grow if we convert to a 4-credit curriculum. Although there may be cases where four 3-credit courses can be deconstructed and reconstructed as three 4-credit courses, we predict there will be many cases where a current 3-credit course seems to stand by itself in the present major and where the only solution seems to be to expand it to a 4-credit course. (The alternative might be to reduce it to a 2-credit course, but in our experience, most faculty resist dropping content from courses, and find it much easier to add content or depth.) The present General Education program was designed to be as small as it can be and still meet accreditation standards, and we are assuming the new 4-credit Gen. Ed. program would be the same size. Thus any increases in major requirements would necessarily come out of the number of credits available to students for electives and for minors.

5. **Implementation tasks.** There follows a list of the curricular change tasks that will have to be accomplished to implement the 4-credit model. We think the work will be staggering, easily the largest set of tasks ever undertaken by our

faculty. This is ironic given that concern with faculty workload was one of the motivations for this whole discussion!

- a. **Restructuring of every major, option, and minor.** It is our impression that every major, every option, and every minor at PSU requires one or more 3-credit courses. Therefore every one of these will have to be revised.
  - b. **Restructuring of almost every course.** The majority of PSU courses are currently 3-credit. All will have to be revised. Those that are part of the General Education program will have to be reviewed by the General Education Committee as well as the Curriculum Committee.
  - c. **The General Education program will have to be revised.** This will not be a simple matter. The simple solutions that we have heard proposed ignore the fact that there is a small range of sizes that are small enough to suit the faculty and large enough to suit our accreditors, or ignore the principles on which the program was based, principles that were derived from a two-year process of assessment and research. Revising the program, which is only 3 years old, at the very least ignores the principle that was supposed to be its greatest strength compared with the old program: that future changes would be based on assessment data. We understand that the folks at Keene who were visited by members of our task force commented that we seemed to be doing things backwards: that the credit-model question should have been resolved before the Gen. Ed. program was revised. In fact, it was. The faculty had just failed to accept the last recommendation a group had made that we move to a 4-credit curriculum the year before the General Education Task Force was formed. During the third year of its work when the credit model question was again raised, the General Education Task Force suspended its works pending clarification of the credit-model question and only resumed when assured by the Provost that our credit model would not be changing. Those are among the reasons our resolution contains the statement that this time the decision should stay made for at least 7 years.
6. **Implementation Costs.** We have heard the argument that there will be no costs associated with a change to a 4-credit curriculum. We trust such statements merely express that after some period of years with the new curriculum in place, the same number of students will be earning the same number of credits in courses taught by the same number of faculty—everything will equal out. Surely no one could believe that there will not be costs associated with implementation, and, in fact, the majority has acknowledged this in its resolution. As we have argued above, implementation will take considerable time and effort. Those costs would seem to us to be magnified coming as they would at this time of concern about faculty workload. Surely the institution would have to provide some incentive for at least some of this time and effort: released time from other duties, honoraria—these were provided to support implementation of new General Education, and that was a simple task compared with this one.