CUC Report: Recommendations on Semester Credit Hour Limits  
Submitted to Senate Executive Committee by Susan McIntosh, CUC Chair

In response to a proposal from Dean of Undergraduates to lower the current maximum number of credit hours that students can register for, a subcommittee was formed to study the issue. The main concerns informing the proposal are impacts on student academic performance when students attempt too many courses and end up dropping one or more well into the semester, and the contribution of course overloads to student stress. The goal of the proposal is to establish a new norm that is more compatible with overall academic success. It will also bring us more in line with peer institutions (see attached data; summary of comparisons is included below)

Currently, the limit on semester hours is 20, with a hard cap of 24. Students must petition to take over 20 hours. The proposed revised limits are:

1. A limit of 17 hours for first year students
2. A limit of 18 hours for returning students
3. Students will be able to petition the Office of Academic Advising for exceptions to limits, with no requests greater than 21 hours.

The Dean of Undergraduates provided 2014 data from the Registrar on course drop rates for students attempting 17 or more hours (attached). Of all Fall 2014 matriculants, 15.2% attempted 18 or more hours, but that number had dropped to 8.1% by Week 7. For Engineering Fall 2014 matriculants, 20% attempted 18 or more hours, but only 6.7% earned credit for 18 or more hours. There is a general pattern of 40–60% attrition in attempted hours exceeding 18. However, among all students in Fall 2014, 256 students successfully completed 19-21 hours. From the senior exit survey and surveys of all students, Hutchinson reports that students generally feel overloaded and overwhelmed with academic demands. A table of summary data is included below.

The discussion in the CUC meeting included reports from student representatives who had been asked to collect input. Dorin Azerad, a student member of the subcommittee, attended the SA meeting where the proposal was discussed and said students generally are in support of the 17-hour credit limit for first-year students. Azerad continued that there is some concern about the proposed 18-hour credit limit for returning students. She said concerns stem from worry about students being able to engage in externships, enroll in courses during break periods, etc. Spencer Seballos said he and other students with whom he has discussed the proposal are in favor of the 17-hour restriction for new students, but would prefer delaying the 18-hour credit restriction for all other undergraduates to a future time. He stated there were concerns from current students that it would be difficult to graduate early and to pursue programs such as the Lowenstern. Seballos also said that students expressed concern that the petition process to request taking over 18-hours may be too rigorous, based
on experience with the current petition process to exceed 20 hours. Spencer Seballos and Dorin Azerad said they are concerned about the petitioning process. Brian Gibson responded and said petitions would be handled on a case-by-case basis and some requests may warrant students taking more than 18 hours.

Students have been widely informed of the development of this proposal in a Thresher article: [http://www.ricethresher.org/article/2016/02/limits-on-credit-hours-proposed](http://www.ricethresher.org/article/2016/02/limits-on-credit-hours-proposed)

David Tenney addressed concerns about course overloads caused by deferring credit for summer internships, etc. until the fall. There is a Registrar’s Office initiative to document all credit hours taken in the summer in real-time in the summer transcript. Tenney said there is a goal to allow students to take up to 3 credits in summer with no charge. Aliya Bhimani said the majority of the overload requests denied by the Office of Academic Advising are generally related to summer classes and students not completing all of the work in the summer session. Stan Dodds agreed with Tenney and said the Registrar’s Office solution is more transparent and the university already takes that approach with graduate students.

Dave Caprette asked how many classes students generally take if they are enrolled in 17-credit hours. John Hutchinson replied that credits are variable and are between 1 to 4 credits per course. Hutchinson said freshmen are generally taking less than 17-credit hours per semester; according to the data, 20 percent signed up for more than 17 hours, but only one-third of those successfully completed 18+ hours at the end of the semester.

Stan Dodds said that one of the main drivers for students taking over 18 hours is the decision to pursue multiple majors. Dodds referred to this as a perception of students that it is better to have more than one major. John Hutchinson responded and said that part of the issue is that the university makes it easy for students to take 20 hours despite the fact that we advise students against this decision. Hutchinson said that experienced faculty and administrators need to inform students that they do not have to take this approach and that it is, in fact, counterproductive to the student experience.

McIntosh said she will report the breakdown of the CUC vote to the faculty senate. McIntosh asked how transfer students are classified in the proposal. Dorin Azerad said that transfer students are considered returning students, not first-year students. Ellen Everett agreed with Azerad’s statement and said that students would be identified by cohort code. David Tenney said that first-year students should be classified as new, first time students. Brian Spector asked if the proposal should replace the term “returning” with “all other students.” John Hutchinson agreed with Spector. Tenney also said that “freshman” should be called “new, first time.” McIntosh asked for this distinction to be made in the proposal.

Dave Caprette asked if the intention of the proposal is to give all students the opportunity to petition to go up to 20 hours. John Hutchinson responded to Caprette
and said that new, first time students cannot request to take over 17 credit hours. Stan Dodds said some majors require students to take at least 18 hours. McIntosh asked the proposal to be updated to reflect that new, first-time students cannot petition to take over 17 hours.

Brian Gibson said students’ uncertainty about the petitioning process is not a limitation in and of itself. Spencer Seballos said he was in favor of the maximum credit hour limit for new, first-year, but he again suggested waiting to implement the 18-credit hour cap for all other undergraduates. John Hutchinson responded that no one has given the argument that students collectively cannot take 19 or more hours. Hutchinson continued and said that exceptions should be treated as exceptions, not as the rule. McIntosh brought CUC to vote on the following proposal:

**Proposal for Semester Credit Hour Limits**

The motivation for developing a proposal for additional limits to semester credit hours comes from the Dean of Undergraduates reporting a norm among students of enrolling in a larger number of courses than is compatible with overall academic success and personal wellbeing. The proposal below is a modest limitation which also allows exceptions through a formal process.

The key proposals are as follows:

1. A limit of 17 hours for new first-time students
2. A limit of 18 hours for returning students
3. Music students and architecture students would not be held to these limits (remains at 20 credit hours) due to their unique curricula.
4. Returning students will be able to petition the Office of Academic Advising for exceptions to limits, with no requests greater than 21 hours.
5. Course Registration Planner would remain limited to 20 credit hours in the “shopping cart”, so as to allow some flexibility for students to indicate 1st choice courses and alternates.

Results of the vote are as follows:
Opposed: 1; Abstaining: 2; In favor: 8.
Appendix: COFHE Course/Credit Hour Comparisons 2015-2016

• 17 of 35 schools have students graduate by taking 4 courses per semester/term
• 7 of 35 schools have students graduate by taking 5 courses per semester/term
• 5 schools operate on the quarter system, requiring between 3 and 5 courses/quarter
  o Carleton College – need 3 courses/quarter
  o Dartmouth College – need 3 courses/quarter
  o Northwestern University – need 3.75 courses/quarter (most take 4 courses/quarter)
  o Stanford University – need to average 15 units/quarter, courses range from 3-5 units, so need 3-5 courses/quarter
  o University of Chicago – normally six 4-course quarters and six 3-course quarters
• 6 of 35 schools have students graduate by taking between 4 and 5 courses (half credits or courses) (i.e. CalTech, Duke University, Middlebury College, Trinity College, University of Pennsylvania, Yale University)
• 5 of 35 schools have rules in place that restrict freshmen credit/course enrollment either absolutely or they need to seek permission of the Dean for exceptions (i.e. Duke University, Johns Hopkins University, MIT, University of Pennsylvania, Wellesley College)
• Northwestern has a system where meeting minimum GPA requirements and/or advisor approval allows you to increase course load
• Course/credit rules tend to vary by academic college, with arts and science programs having fewer requirements than engineering departments, in some cases.
• The majority of schools require the completion of somewhere between 32 and 36 total courses to graduate (i.e. Dartmouth, Duke, Harvard)
Appendix
Student Academic Stress

The following table summarizes data regarding student academic stress gathered from the Survey of All Students (SAS) and Senior Exit Surveys (SES) in 2014 and 2015:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Academic Stress-Related Data from Survey of All Students and Student Exit Surveys</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey of All Students - Spring 2015 (excludes graduating seniors)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Exit Survey 2014</td>
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<tr>
<td>Senior Exit Survey 2015</td>
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<tr>
<td>Survey of All Students - Spring 2015 - International Students Section</td>
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</tbody>
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2nd most cited stress related issue was "personal health issue" at 16%

3rd most cited was "post-graduation planning stress" at 10.7%

In addition, Peer Academic Advisor Pooja Reddy (Jones '15) initiated and produced Project WINGS (Wisdom in Goal Setting) with the support and encouragement of Dean of Undergraduates John Hutchinson and guidance from the Office of Academic Advising. The short series of videos specifically addresses the pressures students experience as a result of heavy registration loads and peer pressure: [http://oaa.rice.edu/project-w-i-n-g-s/](http://oaa.rice.edu/project-w-i-n-g-s/). Pooja’s initiated the project due to her own experience and that of many of her peers.