FOR UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS MATRICULATING IN FALL 2016, the following changes will apply. Students who matriculated prior to Fall 2016 are not affected by the new limits and will continue with the current limits.

Faculty Senate and the Dean of Undergraduates propose to change the maximum number of credits for which a student may register without advisor permission from 20 per semester to 18 per semester. Discussion of this proposed change arose from concerns expressed by students to the Dean about academic stress levels and peer pressure to take excessive loads. The Dean referred a proposal to the Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum (CUC) for research and discussion. 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 a number of our peer institutions (see the related CUC report).

The specific proposals are:

1. A limit of 18 hours for new first time students (i.e. freshmen not transfers)
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 who have declared a major will be able to petition their major advisors for permission to register for 19, 20 or 21 credits, with no requests greater than 21 hours. Students who have not declared a major will be able to petition the Office of Academic Advising for exceptions to limits, with no requests greater than 21 credits. New first time students will not be granted permission to take more than 18 credits.
5. We ask the OAA to work with the SA and Faculty Senate to draft guidelines for exceptions.
6. 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.
7. These changes will apply only to students matriculating to Rice in Fall 2016 and thereafter.
8. The Faculty Senate recommends to the President a review of faculty academic advising in light of these changes that includes input from both the SA and Faculty Senate.
9. The proposal will be reviewed by Faculty Senate in no more than 3 three years to study the effectiveness of the new rules in achieving an overall improvement in undergraduate experience.

Background for the proposal

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 of the CUC was formed to study the issue. CUC, working with the Office of the Registrar and the Office of Academic Advising (OAA), compiled information on student credit and course registration loads as a function of class year, school of major, and time of semester. CUC also gathered benchmarking data against peer institutions to compare
Proposal to change Registration Credit Hour Cap to 18,  
Approved by the Faculty Senate, April 20, 2016

maximum registration limits permitted. Finally, CUC reviewed data from the Survey of All Student and the Senior Exit Survey to gauge levels of student stress. Based on these data, CUC voted to recommend to Senate a change in the credit registration cap from 20 to 18 for all continuing students and from 20 to 17 for all freshmen.

The data show that several things. First, Rice permits students to register for more courses/credits than our peer institutions, and by a wide margin. A typical course load at peer institutions, including in Engineering disciplines, is 4 or 5. It is rare of a Rice student, especially in the first three years, to take as few as 5 courses. Second, Rice permits students to drop courses later than our peers do, meaning that students remain in high demand courses for a longer period of time, thus committing more of their time and effort to courses that they do not complete. Third, examining data from Fall 2014, about 14.9% of all students declaring single major (including freshmen) registered for 19 or more credits on Day 1. This number dropped to 12.6% by the end of the add period (week 2), but fell to 6.5% by the drop deadline (week 7). Only 6.0% actually completed and earned 19 or 20 credits in Fall 2014. For students with more than one major, these percentages are 21.5% on day 1, 23.8% by the add deadline, 12.1% by the drop deadline, and 12.1% completed. Thus, of the students who register for large course loads, most remain in these large course loads for long periods but half or less than half complete them. Looking at freshmen for that same semester, 20.2% register for 18 or more credits, 14.2% remain as of the add deadline, 8.1% remain by the seventh week, and only 6.1% earn 18, 19, or 20 credits. (Only 2% complete 19 or 20 credits.) Finally, students self-report that academic stress is the number one reason for a student to consult the Rice Counseling Center or the Student Wellbeing Office.

These concerns appear to arise from a combination of factors unique to Rice in addition to a factor not unique to Rice. Rice permits students to register for more courses/credits, has no financial disincentive for these overloads, and permits students to remain in these courses later before dropping. When overlain with the competitive nature of our students (as with other institutions), students report a peer pressure to attempt more courses and remain in them longer, as the data reveal.

Faculty Senate and the Dean of Undergraduates both understand and appreciate the hard work of the Student Association (SA) in bringing forward concerns raised by the student body about the proposed change. These concerns involve a variety of circumstances under which a student might need to take or might reasonably take 19, 20 or 21 credits in a single semester. These concerns also reflect Rice’s long-standing goal of having our students explore a variety of subjects and courses in our curriculum. Indeed, the Faculty are committed to the core principles of an undergraduate liberal arts education. A challenge is how to achieve the goals of reducing academic stress levels arising from peer pressure while preserving these opportunities. Senate and the Dean of Undergraduates agree with the SA that permission to take 19, 20 or 21 credits could be granted by the major advisor for those students who have declared a major and for OAA for those students who have not. Senate and the Dean of Undergraduates also value collaboration with the SA in determining a set of criteria or individual circumstances for advisors to employ in determining whether to grant permission for overloads. These criteria should balance the competing goals listed above, and should include an assessment of the commitment of the individual student to completing the overload requested.