

Transition to Four Credit Courses: Orderly or Chaotic

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Abstract

Marist College is an accredited institution with a three-credit per course system. The concept of making four-credit courses the standard has been discussed informally for many years by both faculty and administration. In spring 1996, an ad-hoc committee was created to study the feasibility of such a change. The committee did not make a recommendation but focused on the difficulty such a change would entail and the lack of enthusiasm at several institutions that had experienced such a transition. In 1998, a second ad-hoc committee was established to more fully investigate a transition to four-credit courses. The committee was charged to consider the impact on several factors, such as, majors and academic programs, transfer courses, contact hours, staffing, and graduate courses, just to name a few. After one and a half years, the committee developed a discussion document to elicit responses and suggestions from each school. This paper is the author's response for the committee detailing the impact the transition would have on the information systems program, specifically, the Information Systems discipline, and Information Systems majors.

Keywords: Four-credit course transition, information systems major, dual-listed courses, 5-year information systems program, total quality management

INTRODUCTION

Marist College is investigating the possibility of changing from a three-credit per course system to a four-credit system. A committee was formed to consider the impact on 21 factors including majors and academic programs, transfer courses, evening classes, and graduate courses. A discussion document was developed and sent to faculty members to elicit responses and suggestions. The document listed the pros and cons of changing to four-credit courses. The pros seemed to be possibility-based and the cons seemed based on facts. Examples of pros that were presented were: the number of total students taught each semester would decrease, there would be more time for scholarship, fewer adjunct faculty would be needed and therefore scheduling and monitoring by departments would be eased. The cons presented were: a four course schedule would give the students less variety in courses, longer classes would be more costly and more difficult to schedule for adult night students, more classrooms would be needed or faculty would have an increase in the number of students per class.

The transition would be a phased implementation over four years. The focus in the first year would be on the Core/Liberal Studies (LS)

program. The second year focus would be on major, minor, and certificate requirements. Assuming the Department of Education of New York State approval of the transition, the third year would focus on the incoming freshman class which would begin studying in the new four-credit Core/LS model and depending on department timetables, new major, minor and certificate requirements would be in effect. In the final, fourth year, all new major, minor, and certificate requirements would be in effect.

The purpose, as stated, for this investigation was two-fold. First, the changeover to four-credits would provide a more equal teaching load for faculty. Several schools within the college have graduate programs and faculties who teach at least one graduate course have a semester course load of 3 three-credit courses. Those who do not teach any graduate courses have a semester course load of 4 three-credit courses. The proposal would allow a teaching load of 3 four-credit courses for all faculty members.

Second, the changeover to four-credits was expected to enhance the academic experience for students. At present, students are required to take 5 three-credit courses per semester. The committee felt that if students were required to take only 4 four-credit

courses, they would be able to increase their focus on these 4 courses and would learn more.

The graduate programs would not be affected by this change since only the undergraduate programs would change to four-credits. All graduate courses would remain at three-credits since the proposal does not address any change to the graduate programs. This is stated emphatically in the document.

The author developed a response for the committee detailing the negative impact the transition would have on the Information Systems (IS) program, at the graduate and undergraduate levels. The response listed issues and impacts on the IS discipline, and IS majors. The major category, IS discipline, will be the focus of this work in progress.

DUAL LISTED COURSES

The IS discipline, has for many years, dual listed several courses. This has been a resource saving strength of the program. With only four faculty members teaching both graduate and undergraduate IS courses, it has become one method for allowing us to offer a Database and a Communications course, among others, each semester. Both undergraduate and graduate students can enroll in a dual listed course. The major difference in the course is that graduate projects and assignments are more complex than those assigned to undergraduates.

The question now becomes: how can we dual list a course when graduate students will receive 3 credits for the course and undergraduates will receive 4 credits. Even the time in class will be different for each group. At present a single evening session for a three-credit course is 2 hours and 45 minutes in length but the four-credit course will be 3 hours and 30 minutes in length. It is obvious that dual listing will no longer be workable.

5-YEAR BS/MS PROGRAM

The IS discipline offers an accelerated way of obtaining a master's degree. Instead of remaining three additional semesters, at the minimum, to obtain the masters degree, a 5-year BS/MS program has been implemented in which IS undergraduates are invited to enroll in their junior year. The requirements are based on the student's overall GPA and IS GPA. The students are required to take 120 undergraduate credits and 30 graduate credits to obtain both the bachelor and master degree.

We will now be forced to change the required number of credits for this program since there will be a mix of three and four-credit courses. It is expected that

some adjustment of required content and courses will be required.

IS MAJOR

Another issue is the affect the changeover will have on the IS major. At present, the graduation requirement is 120 credits. Will we have to drop some required courses, combine courses, or increase the number of credits necessary for graduation? The proposal has suggested that some disciplines may need to increase the total graduation credits to 128.

If substantial changes are made to the program, dropping some courses and combining courses, it is highly likely we would need to regain the Department of Education of New York State approval to do so. What impact these changes will have on the IS major is unknown at this time. A total review of the IS program and possible redesign of the required courses will have to be made to determine the specific impact on the major.

INTERNSHIPS

We have had a very successful internship program in which students can work for a company and apply their IS skills and gain experience in the major. The proposal has made it clear that the number of elective credits will be decreased for each discipline if the minimum of 120 credits is maintained. Since the Core/LS credits will be increased to four credits, thereby reducing the number of elective credits per major.

The effect on student employment (internship) would be felt in terms of the additional class time required which would reduce the number of hours for an internship. Internships are not required and students use elective credits for this program. Thus, we would be depriving students of a real life work experience that is a critical value-added degree component.

TRANSFER CREDITS

The final issue for the discipline relates to transfer students. The majority of transferees come from three-credit institutions. For each course transferred, only three credits will be accepted to count toward the four-credit courses. This means that for every course accepted for transfer credit, the student would have 1 less credit than needed for graduation. If 10 courses were transferred (30 credits), the student would have to take an additional 10 credits to make up the difference.

The majority of our transfer students come from local community colleges with 50-60 transferable

credits. Think of the impact of a student having 60 credits transferred with necessity to make up another 20 credits in additional courses. What will the motivation be to transfer to Marist? We expect that we will need to schedule many 1-credit bridge courses.

FUTURE WORK

The author is in the process of developing a questionnaire to send out to schools that have undergone this type of transition. The questions will be geared to IS programs in particular. The reason for the survey is to determine problems other schools have had in changing over to four credit courses and the affect on the IS major programs. This is being done to help us make the transition as smoothly as possible, if the change is implemented.

There are many issues that have been raised by all disciplines: class length (hours), lack of classrooms, lack of faculty, evening classes times (6:00 to 9:30 PM), and an increased semester from 14 to 17 weeks. The results of the survey may help us deal with these negative issues and foresee those issues that may have been overlooked in the initial investigation.

In "Total Quality Management in Higher Education" (Sherr 1992), the authors discuss the language of Total Quality Management (TQM). They state that the TQM process is the most critical dimension of quality. The quality of the process often receives little attention when managers or administrators want to change a service. Many processes include steps that do not add value and therefore cause unnecessary complexity. It seems that the four-credit proposal will be a major change to the educational process that will result in very little to be gained and cause much more chaos than expected.

REFERENCE

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Total Quality Management in Higher Education.
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