

Report of the Ad Hoc Task Force to Study Alternative Course Models at UMW

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The question of whether or not the UMW curriculum should change from a 3-credit to 4-credit course system has been raised on numerous occasions in the past by groups of faculty and by administration, including by department chairs in the 2010 Strategic Plan. Many faculty no doubt have existing opinions about it despite the fact that it has never been brought to a faculty vote. While this issue can be polarizing, we ask that readers of all opinions consider this report openly and in its entirety before reaching any conclusions about what might be the best choice for our students and faculty. We appreciate the opportunity to consider and work through the arguments both for and against this issue and to offer a recommendation.

I. Review of Task Force Charge and Document Overview

This Task Force was convened in November 2014 to research alternative course models at UMW. A motion from the CAS Senate to the UFC (see **Appendix A**) recommended that there be established “a University-level task force to investigate the implementation of alternative course models.” According to that motion, a University-level Task Force, with representation from each of the three colleges, was established to investigate student course load. We were charged “to develop specific recommendations regarding the measurement of student course load, the standard number of courses per semester, and the relationship between student course load and faculty workload.”

A subsequent request from the Provost asked for a “report (that) would make a clear recommendation about adopting the 4/4 course system, or a hybrid system should that emerge as a preferred model, with a list of the pros and cons, or benefits and challenges, associated with the proposal. The faculty would then review the proposal, with a vote scheduled either for the end of the current academic year or early in the 2015-16 academic year. The earliest we might begin implementation would be fall 2016.”¹

The following report was developed by the Task Force over the course of the spring 2015 semester and represents research and discussion from representatives of all three colleges at UMW and all disciplinary clusters in CAS.² This report includes a recommendation, an accompanying discussion of perceived advantages and disadvantages, commentary on a hybrid curriculum, a curricular overview and transition plan, a conclusion with possible next steps, and appendices with supporting information.

¹ This version of the charge was sent to the Task Force via email by Brooke Di Lauro of the UFC, 11/12/2014.

² The job of organizing this Task Force fell to the Chair of the UFC and the Provost; all faculty were invited to express interest in serving. The representative membership of the Task Force was established by the Provost and Chair of UFC, and includes two members each from COB, COE, CAS-Math and Science, CAS-Arts, CAS-Social Science, and CAS-Humanities. (Because of a scheduling conflict, MLL has two members serving on the committee with the agreement that they “share” a vote; they are represented as a single voice/vote in the tally given here.) With one exception, all departments that indicated a desire to be represented *do* have representation on the Task Force. (The Department of Classics, Philosophy, and Religion, the sole exception, has worked closely with their disciplinary representatives.) Members of the Task Force were therefore voluntary and represented a full spectrum of attitudes about changing to a 4-credit or 1-unit system at the outset of our dialogue.

II. Recommendation and Discussion

A. Recommendation

The majority of this Task Force (8 out of 12 representatives) recommends that UMW move from a graduation requirement of 120 credits, with students generally taking five 3-credit classes per semester, to a graduation requirement of 32 units, with students generally taking four 1-unit classes per semester. Other institutions sometimes refer to this as “a course is a course” system.³ A faculty member who now teaches four 3-credit courses per semester would therefore teach instead three 1-unit courses per semester.

This change would follow the lead of the premier liberal arts schools in the nation, who recognize that if students are able to focus their efforts on four courses a semester, and faculty teach a workload of three courses each semester, there will be greater opportunity for transformational teaching and learning, to include faculty and student research.

A 1-unit course in this model would be approximately equivalent to a 4-credit course in the current model in terms of the amount of content and student learning investment involved. (Measured in simple hours according to SACS guidelines, this would be 10-12 hours per 1-unit class per week.)⁴ Course offerings, enhancements such as practica and labs, and expectations would be structured accordingly.

The general agreement of this Task Force is that we do not need to recommend a change for graduate programs because they are separate entities (their students do not generally take courses in other programs or departments). Some graduate programs, faculty, and departments may opt to change to be more consistent with the undergraduate experience at UMW, especially for students who begin their undergraduate degree at UMW and complete their graduate degree here as well.

Overall, the transition for the undergraduate programs from standard 3-credit courses to 1-unit courses may involve a re-thinking of class syllabi and the distribution of intellectual material, as well as a re-thinking of dedicated class “time.” It may require adjustment to General Education requirements, some major and minor requirements, the weekly teaching schedule, and policies from transfer credits to the paying of adjuncts. In some cases, major courses may not need to change in significant ways, but would rather add additional content to enhance the course as it exists in the 3-credit system. Many members of the university will have to take active part in such a transition. This document begins the process of articulating such a change.

³ N.B. A 1-unit system should NOT be developed with the goal of making a three-year degree a norm or even desirable. The goal is to enrich focus and depth, not facilitate a quick degree. Conversely, the Task Force does not view the 1-unit system as an impediment to graduating within four years.

⁴ A discussion of the predicted effect of this transition on student workload can be found in **Section II.B (Perceived Benefits)**. A discussion of the SACS/UMW policies for planning and measuring credit hours can be found in **Section III.A (Curricular Overview)**.

A note on terminology

In what follows we will use “**1-unit**” to refer to the kind of educational system in which undergraduates take, on average, four classes per semester to graduate in four years, and “**3-credit**” for those in which they take, on average, five courses per semester to graduate in four years. The typical form for a four-year institution, if a 3-credit model, is that the student graduate with at least 120 credits; if a 4-credit model, 128 credits; if a course model, 32 units of semester-long courses.

Most of the best and oldest colleges in America subscribe to either a 4-credit or 1-unit model with the preponderance of these institutions using a 1-unit model (see **Appendix B**). In either of these systems, credits are equivalent for almost all courses at a given school. A science course with a lab counts the same as a humanities seminar, even though the two courses are very different in terms of the time the student (and the instructor) spends in a classroom. Many schools with a 1-unit model or a 4-credit model also have courses which carry fewer credits than the standard, but such courses are few.⁵

B. Discussion

Overview

The recommendation to change to a 1-unit structure is in response to the current context of student and faculty strengths and needs at UMW, and is a way for us as stakeholders of UMW to develop and strengthen our institutional identity. More specifically, this change would allow for alignment with guiding principles of the institution; it would enhance possibilities for transformational teaching and learning; and it would afford UMW a distinctiveness in the state, as we would become the only public institution to use this model. Furthermore, Fredericksburg exists within a rich landscape of opportunities for students to engage with local, state, and national organizations; these provide ideal contexts for course enhancements such as internships, practica, and service learning, and the flexibility afforded by a 1-unit model would allow us to take much greater advantage of it.

Institutional guiding principles can be found in the current UMW Strategic Plan and mission statement. The Strategic Plan states, “The University of Mary Washington will be a *premier, nationally recognized, public liberal arts university*, providing undergraduate and graduate studies in a superior environment for learning, creating knowledge, and service. Building on our tradition of honor, teaching innovation, commitment to diversity and inclusiveness, and collaboration with our regional community, we will prepare our students for

⁵ For example, PE courses (if they are required) might count for ¼ of a course; certain independent study and research experiences might bear ½ credit. It is exceedingly rare for such schools to offer courses that are multiples of the standard— a 1½-unit course for example, or a 6-credit course in a 4-credit model. However, the Task Force representative from the natural sciences has indicated that the sciences at UMW might count some lab classes as 1.5 units if this proposed change is adopted.

intellectual, professional, and public leadership.” And according to the mission statement, “*UMW regards the provision of high-quality instruction as its most important function.* The University offers a wide range of undergraduate and graduate programs focusing on both disciplinary and interdisciplinary studies. These academic programs afford students opportunities to integrate and apply their knowledge within broad educational experiences, to develop their professional interests, and to practice the habits of mind necessary for lifelong learning. Through a professionally engaged faculty, the University supports ongoing research appropriate to the development of student abilities and faculty interests. *It especially encourages the participation of undergraduates in research*” (emphasis added).

One compelling reason to move from a 3-credit to a 1-unit model is that this is the prevailing system for the best liberal arts colleges, and we wish to strengthen our identity as one of these institutions. Sixteen of the top twenty liberal arts institutions in the *US News and World Report* ranking are on the 32-course model; 38 of the top fifty are 4-credit/1-unit institutions. Only six have a 3-credit system. It is also worth noting that a large number of the best research universities also have a 4-credit/1-unit model, possibly because such schools (to cite the most famous: Harvard) have a liberal arts college at their core (i.e., Harvard College). See **Appendix B** for a list of some schools using this model.

Indeed one of the distinguishing pedagogical features of most liberal arts colleges is that they follow a 32-course system, which means that students take four courses a semester across all disciplines. In general, students are expected to do more work outside of the classroom, to engage in self-directed research, to read more, and to write more. For these schools the debate about breadth versus depth in the liberal arts seems never to have been an issue. The implicit premise instead is that a well-defined core curriculum, coupled with the opportunity students have to engage deeply with peers in other majors, creates a liberal arts experience. The top liberal arts colleges are also the top producers of graduates who go on to certain Ph.D. programs⁶.

Obviously, each discipline will face its own challenges in transitioning its major program to a 1-unit model. But such a transition does not necessarily mean radical change, and disciplines should be given freedom to determine the parameters of their programs and to generate creative responses to the 32-unit curriculum. Some alternatives that departments may choose from might include:

1. Redistribute the major's content among a smaller number of (larger) courses. If, for instance, a major currently requires twelve 3-credit courses, that major's content might be repackaged and delivered instead as nine 1-unit courses. This is equivalent to the previous major in number of contact hours and/or amount of material, yet brings with it

⁶ Sources: a) The National Science Foundation “Survey of Earned Doctorates 2002-2011,” which ranks the Top 40 schools of origin for doctorates in all disciplines, of which 24 are liberal arts colleges. Liberal arts colleges from this list also ranked very highly (9 out of the top 20) in producing candidates for doctorates in science and engineering. b) The Oberlin Group began in the 1980’s as a group of 50 selective liberal arts colleges. An NSF report of Ph.D. enrollees from 2008 by Burelli, Rapoport, and Lehming found that “the Oberlin 50 colleges have a higher yield in the social and behavioral sciences [than other types of colleges and universities] and about the same yield in the natural sciences.”

the benefits discussed below. This option may be attractive for disciplines that have some flexibility in exactly how they partition and label their major's coursework.

2. Retain all of the existing required courses and add additional content or pedagogical features that would be necessary to make each equivalent to 1-unit. In this option, the "size" of the major effectively goes up, since what were formerly 3-credit courses become proportionately "bigger" in terms of content. This is partly why we recommend raising the limits on the size of a major, as described below. Overall, we see flexibility as the key here. Some departments may feel boxed in by accreditation requirements or other constraints, and will not think that removing specific course topics from their students' transcripts is viable. This option allows them to continue requiring students to complete the same list of distinct topics. In some cases, doing so may require an individual department to negotiate with the administration for more instructional faculty.
3. Reduce the number of required courses or electives in the major with the understanding that the depth afforded by 1-unit classes can provide an equally rich approach to some disciplines.

The following articulates what we understand to be the primary benefits of the change to a 1-unit course system as well as some outstanding concerns about such a change. Research support with data on student learning outcomes and other measurable criteria is lacking for either a 3-credit or a 4-credit/1-unit system.⁷

Perceived benefits

- **Increased student focus.** At its core, the 1-unit course system simply allows students to focus on fewer courses at once, and thus to divide their attention in fewer ways. Many faculty have observed that our students seem frazzled and distracted--juggling five or more courses in a semester means keeping track of more deadlines, handing in more (often smaller) assignments, and having less time to thoughtfully engage the material. The proposed change is a decisive step toward alleviating this split attention and allowing our students to focus on doing fewer things well.
- **Increased depth and/or strength of learning.** Going hand-in-hand with students' tackling fewer topics at a time is being empowered to investigate each more deeply. Students would have time to write richer papers, engage in more thorough projects, attempt more difficult texts, and explore more individualized themes. The student learning experience would become more robust and less superficial, and advanced students could have the flexibility to engage in more meaningful research.

⁷ As the Task Force solicited input on this change, a few departments asked for data to support the claim that it would be beneficial to student learning. Such data does not, to the best of our knowledge, exist, as the schools that have made this transition do not appear to have tracked it in relation to student learning and the majority of the best liberal arts schools have simply always used it and therefore assume it to be a best practice. *Importantly, of course, there are also no data that support a 3-credit system as the better alternative. The majority of this Task Force believes the benefits of the change would outweigh any disruption.*

Some faculty have shared with the committee a belief that our students may not have the prior preparation, or be intellectually ready, for this enriched mode of learning. We disagree, but also argue that the heightened focus allowed by this change would benefit not only our most advanced students, but also those who need time for reinforcement or even remediation. Small group study sessions with professors or peers, practice sessions, conversational hours in foreign language, peer writing workshops, and other forms of augmentation and supplementation could flourish under the proposed system.⁸

- **Opportunity for student research, creative production, and/or increased community involvement.** We believe that the pedagogical flexibility provided by this transition supports the charge in the Strategic Plan to “emphasiz[e] varied and effective teaching and learning environments informed by pedagogical research, theory, and best practices.’

The ability to carry out undergraduate research is one of the educational benefits that UMW most values about its curriculum and is something that the school regularly touts in advertising; the Provost’s web page, to cite one example, reads, “The undergraduate research program is one of the College’s strongest assets...[It] is a top priority for the College of Arts and Sciences. Through immersion in the creative process and intensive individual mentorship with faculty, research outside of the classroom uniquely prepares students for the challenges of graduate study and the professional world. Our research students represent a wide array of disciplines, and you can find them in archives, chemistry laboratories, environmental science field sites, and archaeological digs.” A 1-unit model would certainly enhance the opportunity for more students to be involved in research projects or to develop existing projects with greater depth, possibly yielding more representation at conferences, joint publications, or excellent credentials for graduate school applications.

UMW also remains dedicated to fostering service and community involvement for its students. In addition to restructuring instructional time in a way that is likely to allow for more flexibility, the enhanced design of some classes might include greater opportunities for service or experiential learning.

- **Better teaching and adherence to best practices.** UMW bills itself as a haven for “Master Teachers,” but it is difficult for any teacher to deliver the best educational experience when facing the demands of a 4/4 load. Handling fewer courses at a time would give faculty members opportunity to teach more creatively, incorporate state-of-the-art pedagogical methods and technologies, keep content current, mentor invaluable individual studies and internships, and give students more meaningful feedback. The benefit of that for meeting the university’s goals and encouraging the richest learning cannot be overstated.

⁸ Also, in materials prepared while transitioning to a 4-credit system from a 3-credit system, Gettysburg College includes the following: “Comments made by academic officers at both Portland State University and Portland Community College included the possibility for this system to better serve a more non-traditional, working class student population, who need the flexibility provided by four credit classes to better manage time.”

- **Enhanced UMW brand and distinctiveness; may attract competitive students.** UMW has nurtured, and pledged its dedication to, its identity as a liberal arts university, and indeed the change to a 1-unit system could reinforce or enhance that identity by more clearly aligning our curriculum with high-quality liberal arts institutions, most of which, as noted above, use the proposed model. Others, such as our neighbor The University of Richmond, have recently made this switch. Because no other public college or university in the state of Virginia currently runs on the 1-unit model, UMW could use the new curriculum to help frame its credentials as a strong liberal arts school; in doing so we may be able to attract distinguished students who seek that kind of education. This move would set UMW apart from its competitors and signal the experience that students can expect: rigorous courses, interdisciplinary learning, and opportunities to conduct research.
- **Workload relief.** The Task Force has not located any research that compares the workload of faculty under a 4/4 system with 3-credit classes and the proposed system of 3/3 with 1-unit (effectively 4-credit) classes. Anecdotal evidence supports the common-sense belief that decreasing the number of courses taught, which would also decrease the number of students each professor teaches and subsequently the amount of work to be graded, would somewhat alleviate our exhausting teaching load. For instance, faculty members who recently reviewed the ELC Department for its Ten-Year Review both came from departments in liberal arts colleges that use the 1-unit/4-credit system. Both external reviewers noted that workload was a critical problem for ELC and suggested 4-credit classes as a solution. Dr. Paul Schacht of SUNY Geneseo emphasized that the faculty's workload "may prove impossible to sustain" and suggested that "one solution to the courseload problem worth considering would be to make courses offered by English, Linguistics, and Communication worth 4 credits rather than 3." Dr. Megan Isaac of Elon University noted the faculty's clear need for relief and suggested that "the department should investigate the possibility of shifting to 4 hour classes....the workload problem is so overbearing in the department that I recommend taking action on your own to solve it."⁹
- **More competitive hiring of new faculty.** Prospective faculty are rightfully daunted by the 4/4 teaching load in most departments at UMW -- the highest in existence among 4-year universities, and not commensurate with most other schools who are courting our candidates. Restructuring our teaching loads to an average of three courses per semester would at least partially bring our workload in line with what new faculty can expect at schools of our caliber. This has been called for in the Strategic Plan, which aimed to "study and address the issue of faculty teaching loads, *bringing UMW undergraduate and graduate faculty teaching loads and practices for determining faculty effort more in line with those of other academically challenging, high-quality liberal arts institutions*" and to "create a working environment that attracts and retains an excellent, increasingly diverse, committed faculty and staff" (emphasis added).

⁹ While the faculty might have some workload relief under the proposed system, this Task Force urges that the UMW administration continue to review workload issues, since faculty will continue to teach the equivalent of 12 credits.

- **Increased time for faculty professional development.** The faculty of UMW understand that teaching is our primary responsibility, and a separate bullet above addresses the Task Force’s belief that teaching effectiveness and pedagogical creativity will be positively impacted by this change. However, we also recognize, as does UMW’s mission statement in its description of “professionally engaged faculty” and “support for ongoing research,” that professional production is also an essential part of UMW’s national reputation, of the revitalization of our classes and our wider disciplines, of our own morale, and of our individual professional profiles. Teaching fewer sections and students, even accounting for enhanced work in the remaining classes, should allow for greater allotment of time for professional development.

Perceived disadvantages

- **Loss of breadth or flexibility.** This is a primary concern articulated by faculty and is, at its essence, the simple trade for greater depth. Some departments might conclude that in order to benefit from a transition to the new system, and without a solid commitment to more instructional staffing, they will need to reduce the number of courses required in a major and/or the variety of elective classes offered. Such a narrowing is arguably in tension with UMW’s commitment to “broad educational experiences”; it could affect the variety of liberal arts fields that students experience and the development of our curriculum in vital ways. This problem may be magnified for majors that lead to professional licensure. Careful attention to the distribution of content and the structuring of major requirements would be essential to minimizing this loss but obviously might not wholly offset it.
- **Possible difficulty completing double majors, minors, and certificates.** Students who wish to pursue majors and minors in disciplines that cannot reduce the number of courses in their major could find it difficult, if not impossible, to earn a second major, or to add minors or certificates, unless they exceed the minimum of 32 units required to graduate. This is also true of our current system, but could be intensified by reducing the overall number of required courses.¹⁰
- **Complicated accreditation by external groups or inflexible major requirements.** A few programs have curricula that are dictated by professional societies or other agents which necessitate a fixed number of classes.¹¹ While the disciplinary examples

¹⁰ According to the UMW Office of Institutional Analysis and Effectiveness, the number of students with double majors is relatively small: 2011-12: 105 undergraduates; 2012-13: 104 undergraduates; 2013-14: 113 undergraduates. There are about 50-70 graduating seniors each year who are also enrolled in COE 5th-year programs, which act effectively like a second major during the students’ undergraduate years.

¹¹ The Task Force notes that COB presents a particular problem on this count, since 1) their accrediting guidelines seem to be based almost exclusively on a 3-credit model; and 2) the aspirational colleges that use the 4-credit or 1-unit system, and on which we have therefore drawn heavily in our research, very rarely have a Business major, let alone a College of Business. For those that do, Business usually requires far more courses than does any other major. Squeezing a business major into a standard liberal arts curriculum is no easy task. Representatives from COB to this Task Force are both in opposition to the recommended change. The Task Force has discussed the possibility that CAS and COE would transition to 1-unit or

of strong liberal arts colleges in **Appendix B**, which have high rates of placing their students in graduate study, will provide models for many programs, we recognize that accrediting guidelines may result, for a few disciplines, in an overrepresentation of major courses in the distribution of courses for graduation. Again, this is also true in our current system but could be intensified.

- **Uneven workload reduction.** Due to factors such as accreditation requirements, some departments may need to continue to teach a wide variety of classes. Departments that currently offer many 4-credit classes, most critically the natural sciences, simply may not experience a notable workload reduction.¹² Therefore, this transition would offer only a partial solution to faculty workload, which is a true concern. The Task Force reiterates that *the administration should continue to look for means to reduce workload across the board.*
- **No pure unit system.** Despite the seeming simplicity of the 1-unit system, our research indicates that .25, .50, .75 and 1.25 unit courses are used in certain circumstances at the institutions that employ it, suggesting that a variable credit system is still effectively in use. Though we do not anticipate or encourage that variable course units be used widely in the new system, their existence could mitigate slightly the argument that student focus will be increased.
- **Timing of change could complicate assessment.** Most of the schools the Task Force researched that undertook this curricular transition did so in order to improve the student learning experience. Many of their proposed benefits (increased retention and 4-year graduation rates, increased NSSE scores, and decreased suspension rates) are parameters we have targeted for improvement through the QEP. Attempting to implement these two different changes simultaneously, especially when both could require time and money, will make individual assessment of the changes difficult.

Other issues that will need to be negotiated for implementation

- **Cost, staffing, and class size.** Obviously there would be numerous costs in making such a major transition, from reprinting catalogs and marketing materials to reprogramming Banner.

More importantly, some schools who have made this transition have required additional staffing--for instance, Salisbury University predicted that a 6.7% increase was necessary if they opted to keep their class sizes at the same cap. *The Task Force does not believe that any transition of this kind can be cost neutral, and certain disciplines may indeed require extra staffing. In particular, we project that the natural sciences will need to increase staff to make this transition feasible.*

For most disciplines, the projected faculty increase at a school like Salisbury could be offset if we instead opted to slightly increase class size. Faculty would still see an

4-credit courses and COB may not. For an example of another school that has addressed this issue, please see section in **Appendix C** on Salisbury University.

¹² As noted above, the science classes with labs might be counted as 1.5 units to help move faculty toward and student workload relief. But without additional staff, it still will not be sufficient.

overall drop in FTE since they would, on average, teach one fewer course per semester.¹³ Reduced seats for students as linked to teaching load would be made possible through elimination or limited offering of certain electives or by reduction in general education course offerings. Predicting the required number of additional faculty needed is dependent on updating elective and/or General Education requirements (**see Section III: Curricular Overview and Transition Plan and Appendix D**).

- **Transfer issues:** Most four-year schools and all public institutions in the Commonwealth are on a 3-credit system. We have articulated agreements with students coming from our community college system, which runs on a 3-credit system. Switching to a 1-unit system could therefore introduce complexities for students who wish to transfer (in or out).¹⁴ Provost Levin has shared with the Task Force, based on his experience at a prior institution, that a generous and flexible transfer policy would make this disparity workable. The Task Force recognizes transfer issues as requiring more specificity and a clearly articulated set of guidelines.
- **Effect on summer courses, enrollment, and fees:** The Task Force has discussed a concern that a 1-unit course that is equivalent to 4 credits is difficult to teach in a five-week summer session. Additionally, enrollment in summer sessions will depend a great deal on how the issue of transfer credits is settled. For example, if a 3-credit course from a community college satisfied one of our 1-unit requirements, then students might have an incentive to take the 3-credit class at the community college if it were cheaper. Even if UMW's fees were fully competitive with the community college, students could still invest less time in a 3-credit community college class and might prefer that, which could impact summer enrollment and income. On the other hand, even in our current system students frequently perceive a community college course to be "easier," so a curricular transition may not create much change. Offering 1-unit courses to external students may actually increase our competitiveness and attract serious students.
- **Compensation for and costs of adjunct faculty.** Contingent faculty are currently compensated on a per-credit basis, which would need to be adjusted.¹⁵ The Provost has argued to the Task Force that an increased need for adjuncts, and of funds to pay

¹³ As one example, calculations now being used by ELC indicate that, for classes in the English major, if all enrollment caps in classes that are WI, SI, and senior seminars remain constant, other classes in the major will need to increase by 2-3 students apiece to offer enough seats under the new system. For faculty teaching three 1-unit classes as compared to four 3-credit classes, that would represent on average a decrease of about 17 students per semester.

¹⁴ For instance, the three schools we have found that made this transition and then subsequently switched back (see **Appendix C**) did so because of requirements by the state that their curriculum be consistent with the other state schools. This facilitates smooth transfer between state colleges and universities.

¹⁵ The Commonwealth's cost-saving policy of limiting workers to 29 hours of work per week to avoid having to provide health care benefits to workers uses a formula that considers a 3-credit course to be equivalent to nine hours of work per week; if the same formula were adapted to a 4-credit unit, it would limit contingent faculty to a maximum of two courses at any state institution in a given semester, which could represent a significant loss in earnings. Though not common, this situation will need a specific policy that ethically addresses the needs of contingent faculty.

adjuncts for enhanced courses, both of which have been of concern to some faculty, will be somewhat offset by the 20% decrease in courses offered as students' graduation requirements drop from 40 to 32 courses.

C. Commentary on a Hybrid Curriculum

As noted above, the charge that came to this Task Force from the Provost asked for a "report (that) would make a clear recommendation about adopting the 4/4 course system, or a hybrid system should that emerge as a preferred model, with a list of the pros and cons, or benefits and challenges, associated with the proposal." Although 8 out of 12 members of the Task Force eventually voted to endorse a 1-unit model for the curriculum, we did spend ample time discussing a "hybrid model" as well, and this option is preferred by the remaining Task Force members (from COB, Music and Chemistry). Here we attempt to summarize the "benefits and challenges" of such a system.

The Task Force does *not* see the hybrid model as equivalent to the status quo. Our current curriculum does have courses that vary from 1 to 6 credits, and so it is not uniform. But inarguably the typical course is 3 credits; courses that do not carry labs but are weighted at more than 3 credits are unusual.

A system that was more truly hybrid would have much greater variety in class credit. While the current administration "allows" departments or faculty to apply for 4-credit status for their courses, it has to date been unusual and has historically met some resistance at the level of the Curriculum Committees. Here we discuss a system in which departments or individual faculty proposing such a change, where it is desirable and appropriate, are fully supported at the level of the department, University Curriculum Committee, and administration. Some of the recommendations delineated in **Section III: Curricular Overview and Transition Plan** would therefore still be advisable.

Terminology

The majority of the Task Force has endorsed the weighting system in which each course is 1 unit. In a hybrid system, such terminology would be extremely awkward and would create greater confusion. Therefore, in the discussion that immediately follows, revised courses or curricula are instead labeled "4 credits."

Perceived advantages and disadvantages of a hybrid model

The benefits of using a hybrid credit system, unsurprisingly, offset some of the perceived disadvantages of the 1-unit system. It maintains **breadth of learning** as a primary goal since wide exposure to different subjects within General Education and the major may be easier to require or offer. It **empowers departments to determine the best organization of curriculum for their students** more so than would a universal transition, recognizing that departments have different needs due to graduate school preparation, student demand, and accreditation requirements. In line with this, it recognizes that considerable work and thought has already been invested into the curriculum design of the various majors, which would be honored. It could facilitate the **ease of transferring**, since most Virginia institutions (two- and

four-year) use a 3-credit system and a growing number of students are choosing to attend community college for the first two years.¹⁶

Again, some of the disadvantages of the hybrid system may also be predictable from the discussion above. A primary motivation of moving to a 4/4 course schedule for students is to achieve focus for better learning. A hybrid system **minimizes the effect and distribution of the potential benefit to student learning**. If only *some* departments change to a 4-credit course structure, then one of the primary benefits of the system is lost for all but the students who major in those specific departments and even then only for semesters later in their studies. A hybrid system **complicates scheduling**, for individual students who will be balancing a course load with many variable credits, and for teaching spaces, since some faculty opt to use the extra “time” of a 4-credit class in a traditional classroom setting. **Disparate and uneven strategies for dealing with faculty workload**, which characterize our current system, would persist, which increase a sense of unfairness across campus and found workload relief on informal and potentially vulnerable methods. Attendant upon this concern is **a continued struggle to complete research during the academic year**, as well as **continued low morale**. Lastly, choosing a hybrid system over a transition to a 1-unit system **leaves our distinctive “brand” and, subsequently or concomitantly, our trouble attracting the caliber of students that we desire, unaddressed**. Unless the university as a whole transitions to a uniform system, the change does little or nothing to make more visible the university’s commitment to a high-level liberal arts education similar to those at our aspirational schools.

III. Curricular Overview and Transition Plan

A. Curricular Overview

General education requirements, major requirements, and electives do, and should continue to, each comprise roughly a third of the total number of courses for graduation. We propose that our core curriculum/General Education requirements be comprised of eight 1-unit courses with a special focus on both in-depth disciplinary and interdisciplinary study, in courses such as the First-Year Seminar (FSEM). If General Education requirements are revised, faculty in the most-affected departments (those that teach many Gen Ed courses) may be able to offer more FSEMs or interdisciplinary courses, or to explore more co-teaching opportunities that are not possible in the existing system. Please see **Appendix D** for further discussion of General Education.

Our research shows that majors at 1-unit liberal arts colleges comprise on average about **10** courses, with **14** courses generally marking the high end of that range. Some programs also may opt to offer ½-unit courses if these suit the needs of their students and faculty. While the rare major that requires 14 out of 32 courses for completion does seem

¹⁶ Of course, if a truly hybrid system emerged with a robust offering of 4-credit courses, transfer issues would be equally or more complicated than under a 1-unit system, so this will require a clear policy regardless.

disproportionate, the Task Force notes that some majors under our current system also exceed one-third of the required 120 credits for graduation, sometimes by a great deal (chemistry is one example).

B. Transition Plan

What follows is a catalog of actions we have identified that would be necessary to effect a transition to a system of 1-unit classes with 32 classes required for graduation:

- **Adjust UMW “credit cap” policies.** This is necessary in order for some of the larger majors to transition to the new system. In particular, the current 60-credit cap on the size of a major (technically a 48-credit cap with up to 12 credits of type IV prerequisites), and the 60-credit cap on the number of credits in any one discipline that a student can count toward graduation, must be relaxed. We believe that setting both of these limits to **18** units is likely to be sufficient, but a firm policy change should be made only after a survey of each discipline’s constraints.
- **Revisit General Education and/or elective requirements.** Our current Gen Ed requirements or current allowance of elective credits for graduation may need to be reduced slightly, especially if we transition to a 1-unit model. Reducing Gen Eds will make it easier for students to complete majors that must retain a higher number of required classes and will enable students to continue to double major or pursue minors or certificates. SCHEV’s guidelines require that 25% of the curriculum be devoted to General Education, which would be eight class units in a 32-course unit curriculum. UMW’s current Gen Ed requirements include 10 courses, plus an experiential learning requirement and a language requirement that can take up to four courses to meet. These requirements *can* be fulfilled with as few as 31 credits, but can also take as many as 47 credits (or 15 courses) to complete, which is excessive for our current graduation requirement of 120 credits. A review of General Education requirements across the state and among aspirational schools can be found in **Appendix D**; we view the University of Richmond and William and Mary as useful points of comparison. Similarly, Christopher Newport provides useful comparison in that a change to slightly fewer Gen Ed courses would further distinguish us from this in-state competitor. The Task Force acknowledges that electives may also be a source from which courses may be reduced.
- **Establish guidelines for course enrichment and an expedited approval process for existing courses.** Our research indicates that the enhancement of 3-credit courses into course units in a 32-course system takes a variety of forms. The course units offered in the new model could, but would not necessarily, use an added weekly meeting of traditional class time to account for the heavier weight they would carry. We respect that each discipline would need to define appropriate ways to ensure that the new courses adequately met our shared expectations for such a unit. Any such transition would work within our existing, SCHEV-approved definition of a credit hour

(University Policy D.5.3).¹⁷ Courses of 1 unit would be equivalent to the work of a 4-credit course. The policy states: “Credit hour determinations at the University of Mary Washington shall be made by the faculty consistent with common practices in higher education, guidelines of professional bodies and accrediting agencies and federal standards. Faculty within the appropriate discipline determine the amount and level of credit awarded for courses as part of curricular and program development, planning, revision, and course approval processes.”¹⁸

In accordance with this policy, such a transition first would occur at the department level. In the interest of regularity, accountability, and ease, we recommend the following:

- Codes should be added to course listings to signal the kind of course that students should expect (e.g., E=enhanced time, X=extended time, P=practicum). Some course descriptions may signal additional meeting times; for example, studio art courses may state, “meets 6 hours per week.”
- A standard form should be developed that articulates likely methods for enriching courses that are currently 3 credits (see **Appendix E**). In consultation with their departments, faculty would use these forms to identify individual plans for enriching their courses.

It is reasonable to assume that a course that is currently 4 credits might become a 1-unit course with no changes required, though disciplines with labs or practica may need to refine their guidelines. Departments would submit a brief justification for each course to the Curriculum Committee explaining how the course would change in the new system. The Task Force recommends that the Curriculum Committee be charged with developing a clear, streamlined process, appropriate to all disciplines, to manage this transition at the university level.

- **Establish policies to accommodate transfers.** As an institution we must determine flexible transfer policies, including how to accept and credit classes from institutions that define a full time load as five 3-credit classes. Often 32-course institutions treat a course as a course, but there are limits on how many courses might be transferred in

¹⁷ This policy (<http://www.boarddocs.com/va/umw/Board.nsf/goto?open&id=8U2V557F04FE>) is also consistent with the standards articulated in the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), 34 CFR § 600.2. SACS offers the same definition here: <http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/Credit%20Hours.pdf>.

¹⁸ The policy offers the following definition for *credit hour*: “An amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates [1] Not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours out of class student work each week for approximately 15 weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or 10 to 12 weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time, or [2] At least an equivalent amount of work as required/outlined in item 1 above for other academic activities as established by the institution including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.” A *contact hour* is defined as “[a]n amount of scheduled time spent in the classroom or under direct faculty instruction equal to 50 minutes.”

for the degree. Departments would continue to have the ability to determine which transfer classes fulfill major requirements.

- **Determine a policy for summer school.** This plan must articulate at least the manner in which students will be charged for courses (e.g., at a flat rate per course or per credit, in which a 1-unit class is charged as 4 credits) and the transfer policy per course for non-UMW students (e.g., “course is a course” or one 3-credit course + 1 elective credit). Some of these guidelines would be determined in partnership with external institutions. Summer school may be an optimal time to offer ½-unit courses for four or five weeks, or 1-unit courses for 8-10 weeks. The policies we adopt should aim to increase summer enrollment to serve student and faculty needs.
- **Explore faculty and student interest in a January Term.** This would allow for more breadth of courses, additional electives, a defined study abroad period, and opportunities for visiting students. This could also increase faculty salary if it is optional, or reduce workload to allow for more time for research if faculty teach a 3-1-2 schedule, for example.

IV. Summary and Conclusion

At this point, an interdisciplinary team of faculty members from across the university has devoted hundreds of hours to research, debate, discussion, and writing about this topic. To summarize our recommendation and findings, the majority of this committee recommends a change to a 1-unit model for all undergraduate courses, with the expectation that a “normal” class load for students would be four courses per semester. Students would take a minimum of 32 courses to graduate. This change would have several benefits, but it would not be without its challenges. Critical and creative thinking about how best to serve our current and future students would be of paramount importance during the transition period. We believe that this change would be worth the risk and time, and that it will lead to a newly strengthened identity as a premier liberal arts institution with students and faculty who work together to conduct research, think critically about issues affecting our world, engage with our communities, and, perhaps most importantly, effect change when it is warranted.

As we move forward, we recommend that the next step be sharing this report and consulting the faculty and students. Many department chairs from across the university, though not all, have offered their opinions. However, there are plenty of faculty (many of them junior faculty) whose opinions we have not heard. We support the initial suggestion that the UFC review this report and then offer the full faculty the chance to read this report, review our research and peer programs at other 4-credit/1-course institutions (perhaps during a summer “reading period”), offer ideas and suggestions, and have a voice in determining whether this change would support their needs and their students’ needs. Open forums across campus might engage the entire faculty in this dialogue before a vote; we defer to the UFC for how they wish to address these next steps. Likewise, while a small group of students from the President’s workgroup gave input, and Task Force members have conducted informal polls in their courses, the student body has not provided substantive input. Now that the report is complete, we propose that students be given the chance to provide input as well. Finally, the

Task Force does endorse the step, articulated in our charge, that this issue be brought to a fully anonymous faculty vote, either University-wide or at the college level. This chance to make our voices heard is at the heart of our shared work and a great privilege.

Appendices

Appendix A

This motion originated in the CAS Senate with Senator Brad Hansen (Economics). In its entirety it read as follows:

Motion: I move that the CAS senate recommend to the UFC that it establish a university level task force to investigate the implementation of alternative course models.

Rationale:

At the meeting on August 18, President Hurley raised the issue of four credit courses with a standard student load of four courses a semester, suggesting that, at least in principle, he would support such a move. At the opening meeting of the faculty Provost Levin also stated his support for consideration of alternative course models. The CAS Strategic Plan that was produced at the request of Provost Harper considered the issue of alternative course models, e.g., 4 credit courses or courses rather than credits.

“Therefore, the Chairs of the College of Arts and Sciences recommend to the Provost that a University level taskforce, with representation from each of the three colleges, be established to investigate student course load. The task force could develop specific recommendations regarding the measurement of student course load, the standard number of courses per semester, and the relationship between student course load and faculty workload.”

Provost Harper never responded to this recommendation. Consequently, it seems appropriate for the faculty to take the initiative.

A university level task force could collect information from each department about how alternative course models would be implemented and the potential costs and benefits. The task force could then use this information to make recommendations to the UFC.

A recommendation from the CAS Senate to the UFC is an appropriate first step in this process because it can establish whether or not the majority of CAS departments still support consideration of alternative course models.

Appendix B

Examples of colleges and universities with a 1-unit, 32-course model

This is the predominant model among the best colleges and universities in the country. Among the top 25 national liberal arts colleges, courses are typically assigned one unit (Amherst, Williams, Swarthmore, Wellesley, Haverford, etc). Students are expected to take four courses a semester, to complete approximately 32 courses a year, and approximately 8 courses in their major. In addition, many of the best national universities in the U.S. use a similar model (all the schools in the Ivy League, as well as Emory, Berkeley, Michigan, etc.)

Albion College
Amherst College
Bates College
Beloit College
Berea College
Bowdoin College
Bryn Mawr College
Bucknell University
Claremont McKenna College
The College of New Jersey
Colorado College
Dartmouth College
Davidson College
Duke University
Hamilton College
Hampshire College
Harvard University
Haverford College
Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Kenyon College
Middlebury College
Pitzer College
Pomona College
Princeton University
Reed College
Roanoke College
Scripps College
Swarthmore College
Trinity College
Sewanee: The University of the South
Vassar College
Wellesley College

Wesleyan University
Williams College
Yale University

Variation: Examples of colleges and universities following a 4-credit course model
Most of these schools still require about 32 courses to graduate.

Boston University
Brown University
University of California, Los Angeles
University of California, Riverside
University of California, Santa Barbara
University of California, Santa Cruz
Connecticut College
Elon University
Emory University
Guilford College
Lehigh University
Macalester College
University of Maine at Farmington
Millsaps College
Mount Holyoke College
Salisbury University
St. Mary's College of Maryland
Smith College

Appendix C

A summary of colleges making a recent change to 4 courses a semester

Salisbury University: Salisbury University switched in 2007 to a 4-credit course model. The goal was to provide an “*enhanced, deeper, more focused, more engaged, and more rigorous learning experience*” than the School was able to offer via a more traditional 3-credit course model.” This was primarily done through “the menu of course enhancement options available to faculty.” Rather than compel Business to shoehorn its programs into a pedagogical model that was ill-suited to its requirements, only the liberal arts wing of the university made the switch (although Business majors experience the liberal arts in their first years at Salisbury). Seventy-seven percent of students reported that the new courses required “significantly more work.” Most indicators of student success remained unchanged; the only noticeable benefits were reductions in suspensions and probations. The primary negative result was an increase in students dropping below full-time status, whereas students in a 3-credit model can often drop a course and remain full-time. As of 2012, no NSSE data to assess the benefits of the transition were available. A survey of faculty indicated that they were able to assign more reading, and to make the reading assignments more challenging. Many faculty “however, even among the most positive, felt that the 3/3 load of four-credit courses was actually more work than the old 4/4 load with three-credit courses.”

- A draft of Salisbury’s switch to 32 courses:
<http://www.salisbury.edu/campusgov/ccs/PGdocdraft.htm>

University of Rhode Island: The University of Rhode Island, a public school (albeit one that offers far more masters degrees than most of the other schools discussed in this report) proposed that “offering courses in a four credit format rather than the existing three credit format will facilitate retention and reduced time to graduation.” This was in response to an observed high attrition rate at URI. To our knowledge no assessment has been attempted, or even proposed.

Ramapo College: Like most of the schools that have switched to a 4-credit or 1-course model, Ramapo also identified “enhancing teaching and learning without excessive costs to the College” as a goal; to do so, the faculty will “incorporate into the syllabus and class instruction extra class opportunities.” At Ramapo, 3.6 credits are earned in class, and 0.4 credits are earned outside of class. Students are required to spend 5 hours outside of class; this material must also be assessed by the faculty member.

University of Richmond: The driving force for Richmond’s transition was “increased focus”; students’ attention will be divided between fewer classes. No assessment or specific details about the transition were provided. Richmond requires 35 course units for graduation, which was a compromise with the Business program when they made the switch from a 3-credit system to a 1-course system: to accommodate the Business major they allowed for more

courses to be a requirement for graduation rather than, for example, reducing the core curriculum requirements.

Plymouth State University: Plymouth State University has a lengthy document describing the transition, but did not provide much detail as to how the transition took place, or any assessment of results. However, the report contains notes from their Task Force's visit to St. Joseph's College of Maine, who reported an increased first-year retention rate (the new level is 80%; the previous level was not given).

Schools that have transitioned to 1-unit/4-credit systems and then reversed course

The commonality among schools reverting to 3-credit models is that they are public schools whose states have forced them to do so to maintain congruence with other schools in the system.

Cleveland State: At the time of the switch, CSU was the only public school in the state of Ohio with all 4-credit classes, so the switch to 3-credit classes matched every other public school in the state.

Fort Lewis College: FLC reverted back for the same reason as Cleveland State, and added that 3-credit classes facilitated transfer, especially between other state schools. Furthermore, their accrediting agency was concerned that courses added credits without any justification. The report from FLC also expressed concern that switching classes to 4 credits did not provide any benefits to students.

Emory University: Although not a peer school of UMW due to its extensive graduate program, it is worth noting that Emory also reverted to the 3-credit system as per a request from the accreditation agency (SACS).

Appendix D

Trends and recommendations in General Education

Our research on aspirational institutions and other Virginia schools indicates that they require their students to take varying numbers of courses to fulfill the core curriculum/General Education requirements for graduation. Many institutions encourage their students to complete these requirements in the first two years of study, so that they can focus almost entirely on their required major courses during their final two years; in the case of majors in the sciences, students are told that they may spread some requirements over four years.

- Many of these universities require that their students take a foundation or first-year seminar, whereas only a handful of institutions offer a capstone experience.
- For graduation, many of the in-state institutions require that their students fulfill between 10-13 courses for the General Education requirement; many of the out-of-state, aspirational universities require approximately 7-12, clearly stating that many courses “double count,” or can fulfill more than one requirement at a time. Furthermore, at some of these institutions, AP credit can sometimes be used to fulfill part of a requirement.
- Frequently, writing- and speaking-intensive courses are required for, and offered by, each major, or are simply built in to the core curriculum courses. For example, at Bucknell University, students can satisfy the “Writing in the Major” requirement by taking one of many courses offered within their area of specialization.

Accounting for adjustments such as these, we might infer that such institutions require that students take between 7-10 courses on average within the core curriculum; however, this number will vary slightly from student to student. Interestingly, the schools that are ranked more competitively at the national level, such as Bucknell, the College of William & Mary, Hobart and William Smith Colleges, or the University of Richmond, tend to have fewer General Education requirements; instead, they offer more interdisciplinary courses that encourage students to make connections and reflect critically and meaningfully on varied content.

After reviewing many of our aspirational schools, **we propose that if we require our own students to complete a core curriculum comprised of eight 1-unit courses with a special focus on both interdisciplinary and in-depth disciplinary study, they will leave the University with a solid, intellectually rigorous public liberal arts education.** This course of action will prepare them for purposeful involvement with a rapidly changing global reality characterized by diverse individual perspectives, multicultural interactions, and scientific innovation. By implementing these changes, we will continue to provide the foundation for students to comply with the objectives proposed in our mission statement. Our goal is that with a focus on a flexible, interdisciplinary core curriculum, our students will be better equipped to compete adequately with those graduates from our aspirational schools, both in graduate school and the workforce.

Examples of General Education programs in Virginia and other liberal arts schools
 The General Education requirements of several schools are listed below in Table 1 (3-credit system schools) and Table 2 (1-unit system schools). *The tables do not include foreign language competency requirements.*

Table 1. General education requirements of some VA schools with 3-credit systems

School	<i>Minimum # of Gen Ed courses required</i>
*University of Mary Washington	11
*College of William and Mary	7
Virginia Tech	12
George Washington University	12
University of Virginia	12
*Christopher Newport University	13
James Madison University	13
Longwood University	14

Table 2. General education requirements of select schools which use a 1-unit model

School	<i>Minimum # of Gen Ed courses required</i>
*University of Richmond	8
Hobart and William Smith College	<9
Kenyon College	9
Reed College	9
St. Mary's College of Maryland	9
Ramapo College	10 (includes 4 WI courses)
Swarthmore College	10
Roanoke College	11
Bucknell University	7-14

*See below for expanded detail on the selected college/universities.

University of Mary Washington (11-15 classes total)

- 1 first-year seminar (1 course)
- Quantitative reasoning (2 courses)
- Natural science (2 courses)
- Human Experience and Society (2 courses)
- Global Inquiry (1 course)
- Arts, Literature, and Performance (1 appreciation course; 1 process course)
- Experiential Learning (1 course or 1 credit)
- Language proficiency (completion of up to 4 classes or equivalent)

College of William and Mary (new, revised curriculum = 7 courses)

- 2 first-year seminars (with “deep readings and group discussion of texts, data, or methods of inquiry” and the exploration of “concepts, beliefs and creative visions, theories and discoveries that have shaped our understanding of the world”)
- 2nd year experience (these courses examine various academic disciplines and how they approach knowledge)
- 3rd year experience (connecting theory to practice and placing student’s work in a global or cross-cultural context)
- 4th year, or capstone, experience (create original research and share work with others)
- writing and digital literacy requirements are built in to core curriculum courses
- language proficiency requirement (can be satisfied by a demonstration of proficiency upon entrance to University)

University of Richmond (8-12 courses total)

- 2 first-year seminars
- historical studies (1 course)
- literary studies (1 course)
- natural science (1 course)
- social analysis (1 course)
- symbolic reasoning (1 course)
- visual and performing arts (1 course)
- language requirement (up to 4 courses; can be satisfied by a demonstration of proficiency upon entrance to University; language courses carry variable credit)

*Oral communication is a requirement for graduation, but it is not attached to any credits on its own. This requirement can be fulfilled by taking any number of courses.

Christopher Newport University (13+ courses; 40 semester hours minimum):

Liberal Learning Foundations (21 hours minimum):

- Written Communication Literacy (6 credit hours with a grade of C- or better)
- Second Language Literacy (3 hours minimum)

- Mathematical Literacy (6 hours minimum chosen from mathematics courses above MATH 110)
- Logical Reasoning (3 hours minimum)
- Economic Modeling and Analysis (3 hours minimum)

Liberal Learning Areas of Inquiry (19 hours minimum)

- Creative Expressions (3 hours minimum)
- Civic and Democratic Engagement (3 hours minimum)
- Global and Multicultural Perspectives (3 hours minimum)
- Investigating the Natural World (7 hours minimum)
- Western Traditions (3 hours minimum)

A continuation of this General Education requirement analysis can be found at the following link:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1izTOn-XWGFglauticlrP1kmWdJZkgr1_PkIAHS5q4k/edit?usp=sharing

Appendix E

Proposed categories for course enhancements, with limited examples

Extended Time (X)

- additional contact hour(s)
- online component, in which students and faculty engage regularly outside of the classroom
- language tutorials

Enhanced Time (E)

- extended research project
- writing or speaking workshops
- field trips/study trips in Fredericksburg, DC, Richmond
- faculty-student conferences
- collaborative web projects
- blog or discussion-board dialogues
- group projects
- film series
- creation of annotated bibliography through weekly reading of scholarly article
- (inter)disciplinary lecture series
- peer mentoring (e.g., advanced language or science students in lab or tutorial supervision of introductory work)

Practicum (P)

- internship
- service learning
- field work