

To: Williams College Faculty

From: The Committee on Educational Affairs

Date: February 2017

Subject: Translating Course Units into Credit Hours

Dear Colleagues:

The CEA wishes to bring to your attention that the College will be henceforth and retroactively changing how it recommends translating our course units into credit hours. The current language on the Registrar's website explaining the equivalence between our course units and the credit hour metric required by many employers, granting organizations, graduate schools, and federal agencies is as follows:

#### Credits

The semester course is the unit of credit.

Prior to 1967-68, 40 semester courses were required for the degree. Each course may be considered the equivalent of three semester hours. The 401-402 course and certain other courses carried double credit.

Starting with 1967-68, 32 semester courses and four winter study projects are required for the degree. If it is necessary to convert course unit credits to semester hours, we suggest that each semester course be considered the equivalent of 3.25 semester hours and the winter study project 4.00 semester hours.

Science course weekly labs should have one-half the weekly lab time added to the semester hour equivalent. Labs are usually three or four hours per week.

The revised language is as follows:

#### Credits

Prior to 1967-68, 40 semester courses were required for the degree. Each course was considered the equivalent of three semester hours. The 401-402 course and certain other courses carried double credit.

Starting with 1967-68, 32 semester courses, four winter study projects and four units of physical education were required for the degree. Our course system considers all full semester courses to have equal weight toward completing the degree requirements. Full semester courses typically meet for a minimum of three hours a week, with the expectation that at least an additional ten hours of academic engagement be spent in class, lab, discussion, studio, film viewing, reading, research, writing, and/or other forms of intellectual and creative work related to their class.

The winter study program enhances the breadth of our traditional liberal arts curriculum. The four unit requirement encourages students to explore topics both within and outside the traditional liberal arts curriculum, provides opportunities for domestic and international travel, and allows students to participate in research and fieldwork that will enrich their education and that may lead to possible careers.

If it is necessary to convert course units to credit hours, we suggest that each full semester course be considered the equivalent of 3.75 credit hours.

*In addition, we recommend that faculty include language in their syllabi indicating to students that they can expect to spend a specified minimum number of hours in an average week on work outside of formal class meetings. In order to meet federal guidelines, weekly formal class meetings and work outside of class should total at least 13 hours. For a typical course this would mean 3 hours in class and 10 hours out of class, though the breakdown could vary depending on the format of the course.*

### **Rationale for this change and recommendation:**

As you probably know, Williams is up for reaccreditation by NEASC's Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (CIHE) in Fall 2017, a process we go through every ten years. The Accreditation Self-Study Steering Committee, led by Professor Steve Fix, will submit a comprehensive self-study report to the Commission at the end of the summer, in advance of multi-day campus visit by a visiting team, chaired by Bob Zimmer, President of the University of Chicago.

One requirement of the self-study is that we demonstrate that we are in compliance with federal regulations on credit hours which were put into effect in 2011. While this may seem straightforward, this has been a sticking point for some of our peers. During Tufts' 2013 reaccreditation, they failed to substantiate their claim that each of their courses was equivalent to 4.0 credit hours. As a result, Tufts is now transitioning to a variable credit hour system. Harvard is also currently moving to a similar system, partly due to concerns around this issue.

The federal requirement is that a student earn at least 120 credit hours for a bachelor's degree and 30 for a master's degree. A credit hour is defined as one hour of direct faculty instruction per week and two hours out of class work over the course of a fifteen-week semester OR at least an equivalent amount of work for other academic activities, including lab or studio work, office hours, and independent work. This works out to an expectation of at least 45 total hours of academic work per credit hour, or an average of at least 5,400 hours of academic work for a bachelor's degree. Williams requires 32 semester-long courses for a degree, which means that each course must be equivalent to 3.75 credit hours and require at least 168.75 ( $3.75 * 45$ ) total hours of work. Over the course of a 13-week semester, this means that students must do at least 13 hours of academic work per week, per course. In other words, for the typical course, students will spend three hours in class per week and work for ten hours a week out of class. In other formats, such as tutorials, students might have one hour per week in class and do partner or individual work for at least another 12 hours per week.

You may wonder why we're not assigning any credit hours to Winter Study. Our current conversion policy, in fact, assigns *more* weight to Winter Study courses than to regular semester courses. One problem we encounter here is that Winter Study courses take a wide variety of forms, and imposing a minimum number of work hours on them could be limiting and difficult to document. Another challenge is that we typically offer two intensive Winter Study courses, which have been extremely valuable to the

college in supporting students with academic deficiencies. These courses count as both a Winter Study course and a regular semester course. If we were to assign credit hours to Winter Study courses, this would mean requiring an impossible number of hours of work over the course of a three-week term for these intensive Winter Study courses.

In the accreditation process, the burden of proof is upon the institution to show that students are in fact spending the requisite amount of time on course work. Typically, the visiting team will look to make sure that we have a well-documented policy that can be found online and that is widely publicized to faculty. Then they will gather a representative collection of syllabi and someone on the visiting team will make a determination about whether or not these syllabi seem to meet our definition.

While the recommendation that all faculty include information about the number of hours of work expected in and out of class each week on the course syllabus is by no means a requirement, it will help establish documentation of our practices, and it's a relatively simple approach several of our peers have adopted. In addition, it will provide students with clear expectations about what is expected of them.

We wish to make it clear that, other than this adjustment in how we convert our course units into credit hours, we are not recommending any change to the degree requirements, nor are we proposing to change to a credit-hour-based system. By clearly articulating our conversion policy and documenting our expectations of students, we intend to avoid a difficult transition to a variable credit system.