**Final Report Summary**

**Approval Threshold Committee**

**February 23, 2017**

This committee was formed at the direction of President Leebron and Provost Miranda, following the Faculty Senate’s approval of new rules governing the number of credit hours undergraduate students are permitted to take in a semester. The President and Provost charged the committee as follows:

*The Committee will address implementation of the proposal passed by the Faculty Senate on April 20, 2016, concerning the 18 credits per semester limit for undergraduates. Specifically, the Committee will:*

1. *Develop guidelines for the approval of petitions from individual students to enroll for 19-21 credit hours in a semester. The Committee will identify both reasons for exceeding the 18-hour load that should generally be treated as strong arguments for granting approval, and the attributes of students that should strongly dispose the advisor to grant or refuse overload approval.*
2. *Consider whether certain types of courses should count differently, or not at all, in determining course load.*

The Committee included representatives from the Faculty Senate, Student Association (SA), Committee on the Undergraduate Curriculum (CUC), Dean of Undergraduates Office, Office of the Registrar, college masters, and Rice University student chapter of the American Society of Mechanical Engineers (ASME). Associate Vice-Provost Matthew Taylor chaired the Committee.

The Committee met six times between October 12, 2016, and January 31, 2017. Meeting summaries can be found in the Appendices.

Mr. Avila and Mr. Metcalf appeared before the Student Association on three occasions (the Chair attended the third such meeting) to seek input and answer questions. Student input was also solicited by college presidents and senators during college government meetings, and then shared with the Committee by Mr. Avila and Mr. Metcalf. Mr. Metcalf, on the Committee’s behalf, also solicited student input by email.

Introduction

From the beginning of work together, it was clear Committee members shared a common approach to carrying out their charge. Above all, we agreed our recommendations should help establish and facilitate a collaborative process in which students and their advisors work together to determine whether enrollment in more than 18 hours in a given semester is beneficial and appropriate. We agreed on the primacy of guidelines over strict criteria for approval or rejection of overload requests, and an educational process over a bureaucratic one. We believe significant responsibility in the process rests with the student: A petitioning student should be required and able to clearly articulate reasons for exceeding the 18 hour threshold, as well provide his/her advisor with a detailed academic plan. We also believe in our faculty and professional advisors, and in the important role advising can play in the undergraduate program. Accordingly, our recommendations were composed with the expectation that advisors will confer carefully and respectfully with students to assess the reasonableness of individual requests, rather than quickly determine an outcome based on an inflexible list of requirements.

To support this approach, among our recommendations are that advisors be provided with training and other resources to facilitate an effective and holistic discussion that will lead to an informed decision by the advisor.

Training and a shared set of objectives are also essential but not determinative to processes that strike a balance between consistency and flexibility. Students told us again and again that such a balance was their foremost concern with the new policy. To alleviate that concern, we recommend an appeals process for students who believe their petition has been unfairly rejected, as well as periodic reviews to assess the efficiency and consistency of the petition process and outcomes.[[1]](#footnote-1)

Recommendations

I. ***Documents, workflow, and timelines:***

The Committee has drafted forms that provide important information for students and advisors, as well as the means for recording and tracking process and outcomes. The Petition Form is based on the existing overload form employed by the Office of Academic Advising (OAA). The two-part Advisor Form is new. The first part of this new form is to be completed by the advisor to record the advisor’s decision on a petition. The second part provides guidelines and questions to facilitate the advising meeting.

1. **Process**: Students who wish to seek approval to enroll for 19-21 hours must:

* Complete a petition, including a written rationale for the overload, the proposed class schedule in the form of a week’s calendar (i.e., a daily class schedule and significant extra commitments), and an academic plan for completion of a degree.
* Meet with an advisor to discuss the petition
* Students who have **not** declared a major must meet with a staff advisor in the Office of Academic Advising.
* Students who **have declared** a major must meet with a faculty advisor in the major department.
* Students who have declared **two or more majors** must secure the approval of both major advisors.
* Advisor reviews petition and supporting documents, asks questions necessary to complete the Advisor Form, and signs petition.
* If petition is approved, advisor notifies Registrar via email. Email includes signed petition, Advisor Form and supporting documents as attachments.
* Registrar adjusts Esther student system access to allow for overload registration.
* Student manages registration and updates their course registration as needed.

1. **Deadlines/timeline:**

* Fall courses/registration: Petition process must be completed--including student-advisor meeting and advisor approval and email to Registrar--by the last class-day of Week 1 of fall classes.
* Spring courses/registration: Petition process must be completed--including student-advisor meeting and advisor approval and email to Registrar--by the last class-day of Week 1 of spring classes.

1. **Appeals:**

* Students whose petitions are rejected by the advisor may choose, in consultation with the advisor, to submit a revised petition for reconsideration ***by the advisor***.
* Students who ***have not declared*** a major and wish to appeal a decision by their advisor may submit an appeal to the Director of the Office of Academic Advising. The Director is the final level of review.
* Students who ***have declared a major*** and wish to appeal a decision by their advisor may submit an appeal to the Dean of Undergraduates. The Dean is the final level of review.
* To be considered, an appeal must be submitted *by noon on Wednesday of Week 2* of the appropriate semester. Appeals must be resolved before noon on the last class-day of Week 2 of the appropriate semester.
* The Director of Academic Advising and Dean of Undergraduates will be responsible for notifying the Registrar by email of each appeal and appeal decision.
* The Associate Vice-Provost for Academic Affairs (or other Provost’s designee) and the Director of Academic Advising should review appeals’ outcomes by department and major, and submit a report annually to the Provost on consistency/fairness of those outcomes.

II***. Guidelines for approval or rejection of a petition to exceed 18 hours:***

The approval threshold advising meeting, though mandatory for petitioning students, is intended to be an opportunity for open discussion in which a student can share academic and personal goals, and the advisor can determine whether enrollment in more than 18 hours is beneficial and appropriate given a student’s academic record, course of study, and outside commitments. Students should be strongly encouraged to initiate petitions and schedule advising meetings well in advance of deadlines. Similarly, advisors should be strongly encouraged to reserve adequate time for thoughtful discussion and assessment of each student’s petition and academic plan.

The two lists that follow are **illustrative, rather than exhaustive**, and meant to help both students and advisors to identify circumstances that should be considered both before a student seeks approval for more than 18 hours and when advisors evaluate petitions for merit and potential impact.

***Circumstances or reasons that would lead to approval of a petition to exceed 18 hours:***

* A student petitions to exceed 18 hours because her/his past, current, or anticipated extracurricular activities and commitments require(d) a reduced course load (e.g., college or university student positions, varsity or club sports, internships, research project or position, job, family obligation).
* Change of major, with clearly articulated rationale and proper documentation.
* A plan to study abroad results in a student missing certain required Rice courses offered only in sequence or during the semester the student is abroad.
* A plan to study and take courses abroad that Rice will not accept for full or partial transfer credit.
* Curricular restrictions such as:
  + 19-21 hours are required to stay on sequence in one, primary major
  + 19-21 hours are required to enroll in course(s) offered only during a fall or spring semester
  + Faculty leaves/sabbaticals restrict course availability

***Circumstances or reasons that would lead to rejection of a petition to exceed 18 hours:***

In general, an advisor will reject a petition when he/she concludes that the student will not be able to successfully balance the proposed course-load with their other commitments, when the advisor concludes that the student has not adequately considered alternative paths to achieving his/her academic goals, or judges that the course-load proposed is unreasonable or unrealistic.

The following circumstances or reasons **automatically disqualify** a student for a course overload:

* A student petitions to enroll for more than 18 hours for the purpose of improving the grade for a course already completed.
* Prior academic suspension or probation
* University policy limits students returning from academic suspension to a maximum of 17 credit hours during their first semester back at Rice.
* Students who have been suspended for academic performance during their time at Rice, or who completed a semester of academic probation in Good Standing in the immediately preceding semester, should be approved for more than 18 hours only in exceptional circumstances and with appropriate supporting documents.
* University policy limits students on academic probation to a maximum of 17 credit hours.
* GPA is below 3.0 for the last two completed semesters
* Petitions may be approved only in exceptional circumstances and with appropriate supporting documentation.
* Previous failure to complete 19-21 hours[[2]](#footnote-2)
* A student who has received approval for but failed to complete 19-21 hours once may receive approval again in exceptional circumstances and with appropriate supporting documentation.
* A student who has received approval for but failed to complete 19-21 hours more than once should be prohibited from additional petitions.

III***. Selection and Training for Advisors***

* School deans and department chairs must ensure each degree-granting department and program designates a sufficient number of **major advisors** to handle student petitions efficiently.
* All staff and faculty members with authority to approve/reject petitions should receive training on the new guidelines and processes, and the philosophy that informs them.
* School deans and department chairs should mandate that advisors participate in training on the new rules and processes.

IV. ***Record-keeping and assessment:***

* It is imperative that the university carefully monitor and track the petition process and outcomes (e.g., by student class-year, major, department, and student demographics) to allow for assessment of implementation and impact, as well as for refinement of processes and guidelines. Assessment should include collection and review of student feedback on the advising and approval processes.
* The guidelines, processes, and impact should be reviewed annually for three years by an *ad hoc* working group that includes representatives from the Office of Academic Advising, Office of the Registrar, Faculty Senate, and Provost’s Office, as well as at least one representative from the Student Association. The results of the review should be submitted to the Provost, who will provide an update to the Faculty Senate.

V***. Other recommendations:***

* Beginning fall 2017, the approval threshold of 18 credit hours should also apply to Transfer students. Transfer students should be eligible to petition under this system in their first semester at Rice, based on their academic record at their previous institution.
* All credit-bearing classes—including LPAP and student-taught classes—should count towards the 18 credit-hour threshold.[[3]](#footnote-3)

1. The Committee reminds readers of this report that Architecture and Music students are exempt from the 18-hour approval threshold. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. “Failed to complete” means that the student failed to earn passing grades for all courses during the overload semester or dropped below 19 hours during the overload semester. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This recommendation resulted principally from the conclusion that all such courses require a commitment of a student’s time and energy. To omit them from a student’s total enrollment hours would encourage students to overestimate their ability to carry a course-load exceeding 18 hours. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)