

## IN CONSIDERATION OF REVISING THE MINIMUM GRADUATION REQUIREMENT AT WILLIAM PATERSON UNIVERSITY

As we move forward with an aggressive enrollment management strategy, it is important and timely that we critically review all parts of our recruitment, enrollment, retention, and graduation policies at the University. As we have witnessed over the last few years, the competition for highly-qualified students has increased significantly, and our enrollment goals have not been fully achieved as a result. This competition will only increase, as the number of high school students decreases in the next few years. As our academic community attempts to find common ground on a revised General Education program, we should also re-examine the minimum number of credits we are requiring of our students to graduate. The goals of general education can best be identified and achieved within the context of an established minimum number of credits.

This re-examination of credits is grounded in several core assumptions about an undergraduate education at William Paterson University, in conjunction with the *Student Success Plan* and embodied in the proposed *Academic Plan 2007-2012*:

- we will offer our students high quality academic preparation
- we will provide the necessary support services to aid them with their studies
- we will prepare students for the rigors of graduate education
- we will make our students highly marketable in a difficult job market
- we will provide our students with the ability to complete their coursework in a logical and effective progression and to complete their degree in a timely manner.

As the minimum degree requirements have evolved at William Paterson over the years, it is important that we, as a community of scholars and educators, renew our collective commitment to the rationale for our current level of 128 credits, or propose an alternate model. This paper constitutes such a proposal, to consider revising the minimum graduation requirement for a baccalaureate degree from 128 credit hours to 120 credit hours.

**Historical Perspective.** The “traditional” graduation credit load model for a liberal arts degree, working within a semester system, is 120 credits, or approximately 15 credits or 5 three-credit courses per semester. A minimum of 120 credits is required by law in New Jersey. This model is still prevalent throughout the United States, although institutions have modified the model based on particular degree requirements, external accreditation requirements, or institutional prerogative and values. The minimum graduation requirement at WPU grew beyond 120 credit hours approximately 20 years ago. During this period, the General Education component remained relatively unchanged as well. Various academic programs raised GPA requirements and programs in the College of Education have been modified in accordance with state certification regulations, but the required minimum number of graduation credits has remained unchanged.

**Competitiveness.** Our closest competitor, Montclair State University, has lowered its minimum coursework requirement to 120 semester hours, with the caveat that some majors require more than 120 hours, and others require a higher GPA for graduation. The College of New Jersey requires 120 graduation credits (except for Engineering), as does Rowan University and Seton Hall University. Kean University requires 124 credit hours, and Ramapo College, New Jersey City University, Richard Stockton College, and Fairleigh Dickinson University require 128 credits.

As the state economy continues on a downward trend, students and their parents or caregivers are increasingly aware of the costs associated with a college education, and are forced to balance value with prestige and name recognition. William Paterson would be in a better competitive position if the University could be marketed as a relatively affordable state institution with 120 hours required for graduation.

**Transfer Students.** Changing the minimum degree requirement to 120 credits will increase our competitive advantage, particularly with the transfer student population. Enrollment is up considerably at New Jersey's two year schools, particularly at our largest feeder schools (since 2005, Bergen up 4%; Morris, 1%; Passaic, 10%; Essex, 18%) and we should position ourselves to be the most attractive four-year option in the region. With the statewide implementation of New Jersey Transfer, students have the ability to "shop" for the four-year institution that accepts the most credits into the major and as electives. For example, some private institutions, with much higher tuition rates, have become more liberal in transferring credits and courses, as one means of making themselves more attractive to transfer students.

As a first step to enhance our competitive edge with transfer students, we have signed into effect program-to-program articulation agreements with County College of Morris and Passaic County College, and we are pursuing similar agreements with Bergen, Essex, Union, and other two-year schools in the state. Program-to-program articulation agreements exceed the parameters of the statewide transfer agreement, providing students with a course-by-course match, either within the major or as elective. Program-to-program articulation agreements also give students the feeling that WPU is in partnership with the two-year school, easing their transition to a four-year school.

Coupling program-to-program articulation agreements with 120 graduation credits would enhance our attractiveness with the most prepared and most academically desirable transfer students. With the implementation of the 120 credit minimum requirement, we should reconsider the number of credits we allow for students transferring with their associate degrees. The recent statewide transfer agreement states that campuses with a graduation requirement of 120 credits for completion of baccalaureate degrees are required to accept 60 credits and can require that an additional 60 be taken after transfer. Currently we are accepting as many as 70 credits.

**Financial Burden.** The obvious correlation between greater graduation credits and larger tuition bills is not a conclusive argument here, as flat rate tuition goes into effect at 12 credit hours. The financial burden on students is more apparent, however, when students take additional semesters and summer or winter session courses in order to achieve at least 128 credits or to complete major or other graduation requirements. Financial Aid is limited; it may cover summer session courses, but it does not cover Winter Session courses.

It is apparent that the longer students stay in school, the higher their indebtedness becomes for ancillary costs, such as books, fees, supplies, transportation, food, etc. As our students incur relatively large debt to attend WPU – 69% of our students receive some form of Financial Aid -- lowering the number of credits required for graduation may have a significant impact on overall college costs. For families struggling with tuition bills, the difference between 128 and 120 credits required for graduation may be a primary deciding factor in choosing to attend William Paterson, or equally important, to transfer out of William Paterson to one of our competitors. Nevertheless, as can be inferred from the table below, students are spending way beyond the cost of 128 credits and beyond their initial expectations.

**Number of Credits Attempted.** Recent statistics reveal that our students are taking far more credits than needed to fulfill their graduation requirements. The average number of credits earned at graduation, irrespective of entry status – FTFTFT, transfer, etc., is presented in Table 1. The same data are broken into FTFTFT in Table 2, and for transfer students in Table 3. For some programs, the number of graduation credits exceeds 128 (for example, B.F.A. in Art, B.M. in Music). Further, as our students wrestle with choosing the correct major, there are often credits lost as majors change late in students’ careers, but it could be argued that the fewer graduation credits required, the proportionately fewer number of credits attempted beyond the requirement.

Table 1. Average Number of College Credits Earned at the Time of Graduation for May 2008 Undergraduates – ALL STUDENTS			
College	Number of Graduates	Average # of Credits	% of students with 128-130 credits
Arts & Communication	164	135.77	66.87%
Business	139	141.64	19.28%
Education	144	150.59	1.98%
Humanities & Social Sciences	254	133.69	80.23%
Science and Health	162	140.47	30.0%

Table 2. Average Number of College Credits Earned at the Time of Graduation for May 2008 Undergraduates – FTFTFT ONLY			
College	Number of Graduates	Average # of Credits	% of students with 128-130 credits
Arts & Communication	99	137.25	26.26%
Business	73	139.34	12.33%
Education	78	147.60	1.28%
Humanities & Social Sciences	124	134.31	21.77%
Science and Health	93	137.13	23.66%

Table 3. Average Number of College Credits Earned at the Time of Graduation for May 2008 Undergraduates – TRANSFERS ONLY			
College	Number of Graduates	Average # of Credits	% of students with 128-130 credits
Arts & Communication	63	133.26	52.38%
Business	58	144.94	8.62%
Education	62	154.45	1.61%
Humanities & Social Sciences	126	132.93	56.35%
Science and Health	66	144.69	10.61%