

Report of the
TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD
University at Albany, State University of New York
September 18, 1996

FOREWORD

Discussions in the Council on Educational Policy (EPC), its Resource Advisory and Long Range Planning Committees, and other fora in academic year 1995-1996 relating to the campus thrust to improve and sustain areas of academic excellence coupled with discussions on the New York State budget and the anticipated cuts and FTE shortfall to be experienced at Albany led to a revisiting in those bodies of an idea advanced on the campus some years ago: the advantages, given both the campus academic plan and the budget situation, of moving undergraduate programs from the current 3-credit standard to a universal 4-credit standard. In Spring 1996, EPC voted to form a faculty "Task Force on the 4-Credit Standard" with the charge to investigate and report to EPC, and through EPC to the larger University community, on options available to the University at Albany as this Fall EPC deliberates and, if appropriate, moves the adoption of a 4-credit standard to be applied across the University's undergraduate programs. The Task Force, formally constituted and charged in May, consisted of the following voting members: Bonnie Carlson (Social Welfare), John W. Delano (Earth and Atmospheric Sciences, and Chair, UAC) Jon W. Jacklet (Biological Sciences), Karyn A. Loscocco (Sociology), Ernest Scatton (Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literature), Paul H. Schurr (Marketing), Bonnie B. Spanier (Women's Studies), and Ronald A. Bosco (English), who was appointed Chair. With the assistance of Robert D. McFarland (President's Office) as staff support and Madelyn Cicero (Senate Office) as secretary, the Task Force met throughout Summer 1996, and in fulfillment of its charge, now submits this Report to EPC. For the record, the following narrative and recommendations developed therein are forwarded with the **[indicate Task Force vote here]** endorsement of all voting faculty on the Task Force.

NARRATIVE

HISTORY OF THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD

Nationally, the concept of a 4-credit standard is neither radical nor new. The case for either a 3-credit standard or a 4-credit standard often rests upon a faculty's perception of what works for their campus given the nature and duration of local pedagogical practices, available faculty resources, administrative supports (or constraints), and student body demographics. Many private and public colleges and universities -- some among the country's most prestigious -- have adopted the standard, where it has been tried, tested, and found successful since World War II. These institutions include Harvard, Princeton, New York University, Boston University, University of Rochester, Brandeis University, Colgate University, University of New Hampshire, Williams College, and Binghamton University (SUNY). Presently, RPI is mid-way through a five-year plan for the complete transformation of its undergraduate programs from a 3- to a 4-credit standard; an administrative and faculty Task Force at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, recently recommended the campus adopt the 4-credit standard, and that recommendation is before the faculty this academic year; and an administrative and faculty Task Force at University of Minnesota, which is steering a complete revamping of undergraduate instruction to be implemented in 1999, is at the same stage we are: weighing the pros and cons of the credit systems against each other. Thus,

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 2

there is a certain timeliness to Albany's current revisitation of the 4-credit standard, and it is evident that a decision on Albany's part to adopt that standard would place this university in rather impressive institutional company.

POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES ATTRIBUTED TO THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD

Consistent with the findings of a prior EPC Task Force at the University at Albany which studied the question of the 4-credit standard and recommended its adoption in 1989, a recommendation that failed at the time,¹ institutions contacted by the present Task Force advanced a remarkably uniform set of arguments in favor of the 4-credit standard. Regardless of the mix of factors cited above for the case in favor of one system or the other, all advocating the 4-credit standard stated that standard's principle advantage is *academic*. The major academic advantages claimed for 4-credit standard are these:

_ Curricula developed out of the 4-credit standard allow students more time to devote to academic work outside the traditional classroom (eg. in labs and in courses that extend the classroom experience through research, writing, and the inclusion of current informational technologies in course requirements).

_ A narrowing of student focus in fewer courses together with an expansion of learning opportunities with increased course requirements that enhance that focus, both of which result from the 4-credit standard, enable professors to demand and expect more of students in terms of overall academic performance.

_ A 4-credit standard, whether implemented universally or partially, simplifies curriculum and encourages senior (research) faculty to engage in basic undergraduate instruction.

_ With a "decoupling" of contact hours from credit hours, the 4-credit standard allows for more flexible curriculum in terms of course content and scheduling than does the 3-credit standard.²

_ Implementation of a 4-credit standard at institutions that previously subscribed to the 3-credit standard compels faculty across a campus, *first*, to undertake a comprehensive reconsideration and revision of undergraduate curriculum, and, *second*, to adopt procedures for periodic and systematic comprehensive review of undergraduate programming.

_ Finally, the transformation in a campus's culture which follows from the above and is required to implement the 4-credit standard successfully may serve as an otherwise unavailable occasion for that institution to reaffirm the primacy and seriousness of teaching and course work among students, faculty, and administrators, and to improve external perception of that institution's academic quality.

While perhaps technically not academic, institutions cite the following as fiscal and work-related advantages to the 4-credit standard which complement the standard's academic advantages:

_ The flexibility of curricula and scheduling which results from the 4-credit standard has the potential to save money, and especially at public institutions, but at some privates as well, enables administration and faculty to cope responsibly with the increasingly negative realities of faculty size and dwindling state and federal appropriations for higher education.

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 3

_ At research institutions where historical conditions have created the situation that teaching load as a component of overall work-load is unevenly distributed across disciplines, the 4-credit standard facilitates a more uniform and thus more equitable distribution of teaching load which, in turn, results in improved working conditions for teaching faculty.

_ At institutions where FTE or an equivalent formula drives the budget of the campus as a whole, the higher yield of student credit hours which results from the 4-credit in contrast to the 3-credit standard can be devoted to improving the academic caliber of an institution's student body by reducing the need for high or excess enrollments to meet enrollment shortfalls and consequent budget cuts.

POTENTIAL DISADVANTAGES ATTRIBUTED TO THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD

To be sure, consistent with the findings of the earlier Task Force at Albany which surveyed local faculty opinion during the course of its deliberations, institutions recently shifting to the 4-credit standard or presently contemplating the shift report a number of potential academic disadvantages to the 4-credit standard. Principal among these are the following:

_ There is a widely-held fear among faculty that a reduction in the total number of courses required for graduation in the 4-credit system will lessen opportunities for students to achieve educational breadth through electives, because a reduction in numbers of courses disproportionately disadvantages General Education (some refer to it as "core") programming and student access to academic programs that are new, interdisciplinary, small in size, or more generally experimental.

_ As a significant and related concern, there is also a fear among faculty that out of a kind of "last to come, first to go" bias, recent successes in incorporating multi-cultural and diversity perspectives and requirements into undergraduate programming will be undermined by a reduction in the number of courses required for graduation.

_ In science programs as well as programs in professional schools of business, social welfare, and education, there is concern about the ability of programs currently accredited by external professional bodies to continue as accredited programs -- despite the example of like programs in institutions which have a 4-credit system which are accredited by professional societies.

As above, where several fiscal and work-related advantages to the 4-credit standard are said to complement the standard's academic advantages, the earlier Albany Task Force as well as institutions surveyed by the present Task Force identify the following two potential fiscal and work-related disadvantages:

_ The 4-credit standard has the potential to be used by campus administrations and state legislatures as a rationale to increase faculty teaching-load at the same time as it may be invoked to favor faculty "downsizing" -- two potential disadvantages associated with administrative implementation of the standard.

_ Without careful planning, implementation, and openness to public scrutiny and discussion all along the way, establishment of a 4-credit system, with the number of courses required for graduation less than in a 3-credit system, may create the impression in the public that a university is lessening its commitment to education.

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 4

TASK FORCE POSITION

In its review of positions expressed by 4-credit institutions, through information supplied to the Task Force at its request during its interviews with University at Albany officers including the Vice Presidents for Academic Affairs and for Finance and Planning, the Director of Institutional Research, the Dean of Undergraduate Studies, campus advisement specialists from ASC/US, and others, and in its own committee discussions and debates, the present Task Force has found itself ultimately retracing the steps of other institutions and the earlier EPC Task Force at Albany which lead to the partitioning of the 4-credit standard's advantages and potential disadvantages as enumerated above. Seen in the light of that partitioning, the advantages of the 4-credit standard appear compelling, while the disadvantages appear to be academic, administrative, or collective bargaining matters that can be addressed and, as appropriate, negotiated over time. This Task Force would not want that last remark to be read as our trivializing the potential disadvantages of the 4-credit standard as they have been expressed: those concerns, whether understood as academic, fiscal, work-related, or matters of a university's public relations, are *not* trivial as raised at Albany or at other institutions. Yet the example of so many institutional sites where the 4-credit standard has been implemented and sustains academic programs of the highest caliber nationally leads us to believe that, through careful planning, full and open consultation across academic and administrative, administrative and collective bargaining, and campus and external community lines, and a process of implementation with consistent academic checks on the integrity of programs and procedures along the way, Albany or any comparable university has the capacity to implement responsibly, and have its students profit from, an undergraduate preparation developed out of the 4-credit standard. As a minor, but for this campus significant, illustration of the point, it is worth observing that even as faculty in professional programs at campuses contemplating a move to the 4-credit standard express concern over accreditation of their programs by external bodies, they also acknowledge that programs such as theirs are accredited at 4-credit institutions. What this implies for the process here or elsewhere in practical terms is that, rather than being stymied at the prospect of a potential disadvantage, campuses with administrative support that facilitates individual program consultation with 4-credit institutions clearly have the capacity to effect a successful transition from 3-credit to 4-credit curricula *and* retain professional accreditation in programs where that accreditation is the discipline's national norm.

Whether balancing between the reported academic advantages or disadvantages of the 4-credit standard, debating the reasonableness of faculty fears, or trying to construct a responsible scenario for the implementation of a 4-credit standard at Albany should this university's faculty deem that appropriate, a frustration for this Task Forces has been the lack of higher educational research and publication on the relative merits of 4-credit systems in contrast to 3-credit systems which can be invoked to confirm the reported advantages or dispel fears over the potential disadvantages of the 4-credit system. Rather, almost all evidence arguing for one system over the other received by or reported to the Task Force tends to be anecdotal (and, at times, counter-intuitive) in nature, or, to put the matter more bluntly, comes down to the argument advanced by both 3-credit and 4-credit institutions, "System `X' works (or will work) for us." While in the long run it may be that Albany's decision to keep its current 3-credit standard or to move to a 4-credit standard will come down to a faculty vote and institutional decision based on comparable evidence and argument, members of this Task Force believe it would be irresponsible and out of the character of past institutional practice for the University at Albany community to simply jump to one conclusion or the other without hard evidence and considered local discussion and debate among faculty and administration respecting the relative merits of the 3- and 4-credit standards *and* a clear understanding among faculty of pedagogical practices that can be invoked to justify a decision one way or the other. That said, in what follows the Task Force

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 5

will outline a procedure it is confident will both yield such evidence and encourage considered discussion and debate on the Albany campus.

RECOMMENDATION

This Task Force recommends that the University at Albany move to a universal 4-credit standard across its undergraduate programs. However, unlike the recommendation of the earlier Albany Task Force (or the recommendations of like bodies at other institutions) which advocated that implementation be wholesale and immediate, our recommendation is that Albany's move to the 4-credit standard be partial and progressive in the format suggested below. We advocate partial and progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard so that evidence -- especially the academic evidence and an evidentiary understanding of the nature of our undergraduate population and the impact of such a move on their educational opportunities -- invoked in any quarter to support this decision will be, first and foremost, derived from the experience and pedagogical principles and practices of Albany's faculty, and, second, consistent with the terms of an articulated strategic plan for Albany's continued success as a site of academic excellence which also recognizes and advances Albany's aspirations as a research university. We recommend that partial and progressive implementation begin this academic year and extend over the next three-to-four years, with a universal 4-credit standard in place across Albany's undergraduate programs no later than the beginning of academic year 2000.

RATIONALE AND PLANNING PROCESS

With the President's recent announcement of her intention to establish a strategic planning process this academic year, we believe this recommendation is both timely and appropriate to the University at Albany's particular situation; because there will be bodies on the campus charged to orchestrate the President's strategic planning initiative, these, together with already established governance bodies including EPC, the Undergraduate Academic Council (UAC), curricula committees in colleges and schools, and the General Education Committee, will be in a unique position to oversee the process embedded in our recommendation and, more particularly, to support individual faculty and departments as they initiate the partial and progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard we advocate. This Task Force strongly believes that at each and every stage of implementation, the successful development and adoption of the 4-credit standard is primarily the responsibility of the faculty and, to be genuinely successful and lasting, assumes consistent and open discussion across the university's professoriate, between the professoriate and administration, and, as statistical and like evidence is generated, between governance bodies and the campus Office of Institutional Research. Indeed, most crucial to the academic integrity of the process whereby the 4-credit standard will be universally adopted is that the consultation, oversight, developmental support through governance bodies and local offices such as the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) must represent a total, integrated community effort.

The process whereby the Task Force arrived at the foregoing recommendation was long, but not unduly complicated. Indeed, in consideration of the previous history of this topic on the campus, it is fair to say that the length of time required for the Task Force to see its charge through was a function the prevailing mood in the Task Force at the outset of its work: a mood of healthy skepticism. Without prejudging the outcome, early in its deliberations, then, the Task Force divided its study and discussion of the 4-credit standard into three separate but ultimately overlapping areas of inquiry: the *academic*, the

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 6

administrative, and the *fiscal*. As these areas have been taken up and revisited in turn, the Task Force has given special attention to the extent to which the advantages and potential disadvantages usually cited for the 4-credit standard are justified. Our independent discussion and debate invariably replicated the positions cited above, but with this important difference: in contrast to the earlier EPC Task Force and to the public statements of other 4-credit institutions, we have extensively considered the administrative and fiscal implications for Albany of a move to the 4-credit standard.

ADMINISTRATIVE AND FISCAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD

While perhaps overwhelming to persons first entering the discussion, as members of this Task Force eventually found, the administrative and fiscal implications of the 4-credit standard are actually the easiest parts of the decision-making process with which to dispense. On the administrative side, we have identified no impediments to the implementation of a 4-credit standard at Albany, as long as the faculty wishes to implement the system, and as long as faculty work-load and related concerns are appropriately negotiated. In fact, as we were, we suspect many of our colleagues will be surprised to learn that there are no administrative or governance impediments to individual academic programs moving today to a 4-credit system across all or part of their undergraduate curriculum should the faculty of those programs wish to do so following, as necessary, revision of their curricula and, with respect to the major and minor, academic requirements. Similarly, but on a more limited scale, there are no institutional or governance impediments to faculty in individual courses moving from 3- to 4-credits should current or proposed course content and requirements justify that change. While many have already done so, as a result of our investigations, many more faculty may be encouraged to give serious consideration to the possibility of increasing from 3 to 4 the number of credits for courses they presently teach now that they will know this option is available to them. This should be very welcome news to individual colleagues as well as to department faculties who believe, and have evidence for the belief, that courses they are currently teaching for 3-credits actually deserve 4-credits, but until now have mistakenly assumed they are constrained from proposing to college or university governance bodies changes in the credit value of those courses.

On the fiscal side, in a system such as SUNY's, where student head-count and FTE represent separate accounting structures, where FTE are determined on the basis of a student's enrollment for credit hours (15 undergraduate credits = a full time student), and where a campus's state allocation is based upon FTE, the ideal fiscal situation is that in which all undergraduate students register for and complete 15 or more credits in a semester. At Albany, which this academic year will experience a significant financial shortfall because of SUNY's funding formula, any effort to increase FTE should be welcomed and, if successful, considered advantageous to the campus. According to the Task Force's calculations, even the partial implementation of the 4-credit standard will yield significant fiscal advantages for Albany. For reasons that range from the necessity to work during the academic year to a desire to increase their undergraduate averages, many of our undergraduates fall below the ideal of 15 credits because they need or wish to take fewer courses; yet in a 4-credit system, a reduction in the number of courses a typical student takes actually yields higher FTE. At Albany, a typical student dropping from five courses to four, takes 12 credits (importantly, the minimum necessary to qualify for financial aid); in a 4-credit system, a typical student registering for and successfully completing four courses takes 16 credits -- with an accompanying FTE advantage for the campus as a whole. To put the matter in perspective: if all matriculated Albany undergraduates currently taking 12, 13 or 14 credits in a semester increased their loads (by any device) by one credit, the campus would realize an additional 67.8 FTEs.

4-CREDIT STANDARD AND STRATEGIC ACADEMIC PLANNING

For all members of this Task Force and, we trust, for our colleagues on the University at Albany faculty, the deciding factors governing Albany's transition from the 3-credit to the 4-credit standard must be an *academic* advantage coupled with this institution's strategic vision of its future. The Task Force is in unanimous agreement that neither the ease of administrative implementation nor the advantage of numbers -- taken alone or taken together -- should be allowed to drive a decision for or against a move to a 4-credit standard here or at any other institution. When the Task Force arrived at this position, it did so fully appreciating, in the words of individuals with whom the Task Force consulted on its charge, the "heroic" work effort such a move would require on the part of the faculty as well as the "revolution" in campus culture against the recent negative fiscal and related realities with which the campus has had to cope that would have to accompany such a move. For indeed, during the last eight years, fiscal conditions have resulted in an 11% decline in full-time faculty at Albany. Assessments about the fiscal climate into the next and succeeding years suggest that each current fiscal year can be viewed as "average": "worse than last year, but better than next." With these sustained pressures and the palpable challenge to faculty morale that accompanies them, the ability of the University to accomplish its academic mission is being continually strained, and the academic mission itself is believed by many faculty to have been actually eroded in consequence.

Bold academic challenges demand bold academic initiatives; the consequences of not acting boldly carry the risk of even greater slow, inevitable decline. Believing that, this Task Force has examined the 4-credit standard for its potential as a bold and responsible *academic* initiative which, by its very nature, contains elements of both significant risk and significant benefit. In tandem with constructive, rigorous, and uniform interim assessment of its effectiveness, the progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard we advocate provides a very real opportunity for enhancing the academic reputation of the University at Albany through a thorough review of course offerings and program requirements by faculty from across the campus. Progressive implementation of a 4-credit standard over the next three-to-four years will indeed also create an opportunity for the University to examine, discuss, and appropriately redefine academic culture on this campus across a broad front. As do many of our colleagues, we look forward to the forthcoming strategic planning process as an occasion for effecting a new campus reality of cooperation, shared commitment, and mutual respect across the campus community as strategic planning accelerates and sustains Albany's continued strides toward institutional excellence. In that context, partial and progressive implementation of a 4-credit standard presents the academic community as a whole with the opportunity

first, to reaffirm the primacy and seriousness of course work and teaching among students, faculty, and administrators;

second, to identify and implement ways for increasing and enhancing the quality and frequency of faculty/student interaction both inside and outside the classroom; and

third, to redress imbalances in course requirements versus credit value that has developed over time in the current 3-credit standard.

Furthermore, since reductions in the size of University faculty have left some departments approaching critical mass for offering courses essential to their degree programs, a progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard has the capacity to support faculty within

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 8

those departments in mounting competitive programs and in identifying productive programmatic alliances with faculty outside those programs as they are currently constituted.

STEPS RECOMMENDED FOR PARTIAL AND PROGRESSIVE IMPLEMENTATION OF THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD

While the Task Force is reluctant to insinuate certain of its own pedagogical values in the ultimately consultative process it is advocating but which has not yet begun, we believe that however strategic planning and implementation of the 4-credit standard unfold, General Education and Human Diversity requirements must not be allowed to be construed as expendable in a 4-credit environment. To that end, we recommend in the strongest terms that the campus commit itself to preserving the number of courses a student needs to satisfy these requirements, even as the number of courses that student needs for graduation declines in an increasing 4-credit environment. At the same time, we strongly recommend that, if our proposal to move to a 4-credit system is approved, immediately the Undergraduate Academic Council, in concert with EPC,

first, develop and implement a time frame for increasing the total number of credits required for graduation (from the current 120 to, say, 128) in order to ensure that students continue to have a range of opportunities for electives and breadth in a 4-credit system;

second, conduct the external research necessary to initiate broad-based discussion of the undergraduate minor as it is presently constructed at Albany and the extent to which the minor is necessary or desirable to retain as a requirement in a 4-credit system; and

third, undertake a review of all undergraduate policies to ensure (a) their consistent application for students necessarily moving between 3- and 4-credit courses during the progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard, and (b) their appropriateness to the students matriculating under a universally applied 4-credit standard.

Recognizing that a significant amount of time, considerable effort across the university community, and hard academic evidence consistent with its faculty's pedagogical principles and practices and appropriate to what will emerge as the campus's strategic plan are required to implement a universal 4-credit standard responsibly and well, this Task Force, as already noted, advocates partial and progressive implementation of a 4-credit standard at Albany. Evidence gathered from the progressive implementation of items listed below will put Albany faculty in a position to instruct fellow faculty on the academic merits or pitfalls of instruction carried out in a 4-credit environment. At the same time, partial and progressive implementation of selected components of a 4-credit standard as outlined below have the benefit of immediately answering concerns over Albany's FTE/fiscal shortfall by recognizing areas such as writing intensive courses, General Education courses, and upper-division courses in the major as among the most instruction-intensive sites in Albany's undergraduate programming, and by acknowledging that intensive instruction with appropriate credit hours. Finally, a partial and progressive move toward a 4-credit standard as advocated here leaves questions of how and when over the next three-to-four years individual programs change to the 4-credit standard to faculty providing instruction in those programs to answer.

The sites this Task Force would identify for partial and progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard follow; these, of course, may well be modified during the consultative process that preparation of legislation governing implementation of the 4-credit standard requires. The first, second, and fourth categories we identify include a recommended timetable; the timetable for the third category we defer to the judgment of departments and programs.

WRITING INTENSIVE COURSES

The Task Force recommends that individual departments, college and school curricula committees, and the General Education Committee in consultation with the Undergraduate Academic Council immediately move forward to effect universal implementation of all writing intensive courses as 4-credit courses no later than the Spring semester 1997.

Implementation of this recommendation should already have been effected, but for whatever reasons has not. In academic year 1994-1995, the University's General Education Committee, Undergraduate Academic Council, and Office of Academic Affairs approved a proposal that charged departments to reevaluate the awarding of academic credit in writing intensive courses following appropriate review and revision of course requirements in new (proposed) or existing writing intensive courses. This directive, summarized in a memorandum on March 7, 1995, from then Vice President Hitchcock to all deans, department chairs, and program directors, recognized writing intensive courses as intensive instructional sites and, consistent with contact/credit hour requirements (*see note 2 above*), recommended that departments select from one of two models for implementing the 4th credit for writing intensive courses: *either* reevaluate academic credit from 3 to 4 for new and existing courses after they are reviewed for content and requirements *or* introduce 1-credit "writing modules" to be attached to existing non-writing intensive courses. While this directive has been variously and successfully implemented in the departments of Biological Sciences, History, and Communication, it has yet to be implemented across all the University's academic programs -- but should be at once. In light of the overall plan advanced here for the progressive implementation of a 4-credit standard at Albany, there is a certain logic to departments constructing all writing intensive sites as 4-credits, with the actual practice of writing instruction (as a module, for example) left to departments or individual instructors to decide. For the record, it might be noted that were all writing intensive courses offered at Albany this Fall brought into conformity with this already approved directive, the campus would have realized approximately an additional 150 FTEs.

GENERAL EDUCATION COURSES

As indicated above, the Task Force recommends in the strongest terms that the campus commit itself to preserving the number of courses a student needs to satisfy General Education and Human Diversity requirements, even as the total number of courses that student needs for graduation declines in an increasing 4-credit environment (*see note 3 above*). We further recommend that all such instructional sites on the campus be brought into uniform 4-credit practice effective the Fall semester 1997.

Although several sites of general education and human diversity instruction identified by the Task Force already merit in the estimation of faculty teaching in them 4-credits rather than 3 because of laboratory, research, information literacy, or independent study components included in them, all such instructional sites should be revisited this academic year with two goals in mind: *first*, to recognize general education and human diversity requirements will be actually performing under our proposal *increased* academic service in a 4-credit environment, and *second*, to ensure that the variety of learning opportunities for undergraduates through course topics and content as well as course requirements responsibly accommodate the loss of learning opportunities available to students through electives in a 4-credit environment. Though some may initially read this recommendation as placing undue pressure on faculty primarily involved in general education and human diversity instruction,

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 10

this Task Force rather understands the appropriate and successful implementation of general education and human diversity requirements *as currently on the books* as crucial to maintaining the ideal of liberal education in a 4-credit system -- or in a 3-credit system for that matter. This, then, is in our estimation a very important instructional site for department review and, as appropriate, revision of course variety, content, and requirements. We recommend these reviews be undertaken immediately, and that under the auspices of the General Education Committee in consultation with the Undergraduate Academic Council, campus discussion and support to individual faculty and departments be provided to successfully implement all General Education courses as 4-credit courses no later than the Fall semester 1997.

LOWER-LEVEL COURSES

UPPER-LEVEL COURSES

COURSES IN THE MAJOR AND MINOR

ENTIRE DEPARTMENT CURRICULUM

At the risk of complicating what need not be a complicated set of alternatives, we have collapsed several potential steps in the partial and progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard under one heading which culminates in what we advocate be universal campus practice by the beginning of academic year 2000. The more this Task Force has thought through the process of universal 4-credit standard implementation, a department's or program's wholesale revisiting and revision of its curriculum *now*, including general education offerings, requirements for the major and, if continued, requirements for the minor, makes most sense given the prospect of a universal 4-credit standard in place by the end of the next four years. Yet, regardless of our individual or collective opinion on the Task Force regarding this matter, because we recognize that faculty best understand the nature of their respective disciplinary requirements, we believe the question of how to implement the long-range change we are advocating is best, and in that most responsibly, decided by faculty in individual departments and programs.

Assuming the writing intensive and general education steps advocated above are implemented as proposed, all scenarios included under the present heading will contain significant instructional sites at 4-credits by this time next year. Concurrent with those changes, an individual department or program may decide that the most manageable approach to the universal 4-credit standard for them is to begin implementation at the lower level: in 100- and 200-level courses that are electives or are prerequisites for upper level courses in the major or minor. Some departments, such as Biological Sciences, Chemistry, and the foreign languages which already have labs for 1 or 2 credits associated with lower level instruction or already award 4 (in some instances, 5) credits for lower-level courses, are effectively teaching in this pattern at present.

Instead of initiating the 4-credit standard at the lower level, other departments may decide to concentrate on electives and courses required for the major or minor at the upper level. One advantage the Task Force has heard for this particular step toward universal implementation of the 4-credit standard is that some courses in the major at the 300- and 400-levels, and especially capstone courses with their significant research or portfolio requirements, may already qualify for 4-credits, though they presently award only 3. Another advantage of this particular step we have heard expressed from several quarters is that should a department begin revision of the curriculum at the upper level, revisions will be concentrated in those areas faculty believe require depth and are essential for successful preparation in the major. Here, there is even an immediate and tangible advantage from a student's point of view, for through additional research, writing, or technological literacy

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 11

requirements in courses at the upper level, majors may more convincingly feel they are actually working in their disciplinary fields.

We cannot emphasize enough our belief that the actual decisions on how to proceed with these possible scenarios and which they ought to adopt must belong to departments. At the same time, whether considering implementation at the lower level, or at the upper level, or in requirements for the major and minor, in effecting revision of their undergraduate programming, departments must be provided support and access to the means necessary to effect those revisions thoughtfully and responsibly. Earlier in this Narrative we spoke of the difficulties feared by programs that may require accreditation from external professional societies or agencies in order to keep their programs competitive nationally. In the course of implementing the 4-credit standard, such programs ought to be provided institutional support for consultation with peers at 4-credit institutions where the standard has been effectively implemented and accreditation retained. Similarly, all departments must have open access to the full range of institutional academic governance and support services currently in place at the University at Albany, and these must understand their role during the implementation of the 4-credit standard as that of *resource* in the broadest sense. We recognize this will place certain unprecedented and at the moment many unanticipated pressures on college and school curriculum committees, the Undergraduate Academic Council, EPC, and offices such as Institutional Research and the Center for Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) which will undoubtedly be approached by individual faculty and departments for technical, informational, and pedagogical support during the period of transition. Yet we have every confidence that our colleagues at these sites possess the expertise and good will to provide any and all necessary assistance in what we have argued must be a total community effort.

NEW OR PROPOSED PROGRAMS

UNDERGRADUATE PROGRAMS CURRENTLY UNDER REVISION

Though it could pass without notice as a matter of good sense, it seems to this Task Force worth remarking that any undergraduate program at the University at Albany currently in the process of revision, newly proposed, or even in the early stages of implementation should immediately give serious consideration to shaping curriculum and requirements under the 4-credit standard. Regardless of the campus's response to the overall recommendation of this Task Force or the timetable it proposes for implementation of the universal 4-credit standard, the advantages of 4-credit programming should certainly not be overlooked or dismissed out of hand by faculty engaged in any of these activities. As we note directly above in another context, the full range of Albany's governance and academic support services should immediately be made available as resources to faculty engaged in any such programmatic initiatives.

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 12

CONCLUSION

In the preceding Narrative, this Task Force has presented a full and cogent a case for the universal application of a 4-credit standard at the University at Albany. Readers will notice that throughout we have made no provision for the expansion of University academic, administrative, or governance structures to oversee the process of implementing a 4-credit standard at Albany. This is a conscious decision on our part, for we believe that there are currently in place all the academic, administrative, and governance structures necessary to see implementation through to successful completion. To be sure, if our recommendation is endorsed by the University faculty, primary responsibility for coordination of implementation efforts will have to be charged to selected bodies at the University-wide level. Following review of the University at Albany *Faculty By-Laws*, in our estimation the most appropriate governance candidates for this charge are the Council on Educational Policy and the Undergraduate Academic Council, while given the forthcoming strategic planning initiative, primary administrative responsibility for implementation of the 4-credit standard should be undertaken from the Office of the President.

To restate our position, then: We recommend that the University at Albany move to a universal 4-credit standard across its undergraduate programs, and that this move be partial and progressive, with a universal 4-credit standard in place across Albany's undergraduate programs no later than the beginning of academic year 2000. We advocate partial and progressive implementation of the 4-credit standard so that evidence invoked in any quarter to support this decision will be, *first and foremost*, derived from the experience and pedagogical principles and practices of Albany's faculty, and, *second*, consistent with the terms of an articulated strategic plan for Albany's continued success as a site of academic excellence which also recognizes and advances Albany's aspirations as a research university. As with the forthcoming strategic planning initiative, we believe the successful implementation of a universal 4-credit standard at Albany requires total University commitment, and that all levels of this University community, from the academic and administrative to all levels of support services, must be provided access to the process and must view their respective roles in the process as that of resource to the total endeavor.

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 13

NOTES

¹ In reports to EPC (March 1996) and the present Task Force (July 1996), Professor Kendall Birr, who chaired the earlier EPC Task Force on what was then called "4 x 4," indicated these as some reasons for the failure of the earlier Task Force's recommendation that Albany institute a "4 x 4" system: (1) the decision to advocate "4 x 4" in both the Task Force and EPC occurred too late in the academic year for governance action; (2) the proposal lost momentum after Spring 1989 because of the perception among faculty that "4 x 4" represented an administrative imposition, rather than a faculty initiative; (3) the Task Force's recommendation that Albany institute the "4 x 4" acknowledged the sustained level of work and oversight necessary for successful implementation, and faculty on the whole were unwilling to cooperate; (4) faculty were convinced that "4 x 4," however implemented, would result in increased work-load.

² Following review of the ways in which the 4-credit standard is applied at other institutions, including Binghamton University, SUNY, the present Task Force believes that the traditional relation between contact hours and credit hours should be decoupled in a universally applied system of 4-credit instruction. As defined in SUNY documents,

A semester credit hour is normally granted for satisfactory completion of one 50-minute session of classroom instruction [per credit granted] per week for a semester of not less than fifteen weeks. This basic measure may be adjusted proportionally to reflect modified academic calendars [eg, add minutes to weekly instruction in order to include final examination period during the fifteen week semester] and formats of study [eg, seminars, discussion periods, laboratories, workshops, group studios, supervised individual activity as an extension of course requirements]. (See Vice Chancellor for Academic Programs, "Memorandum to Presidents on 'Credit/Contact Hour Relationship'," June 30, 1976)

What this means in practical terms for the recommendation being made by this Task Force is that the actual class meeting times of courses which include intensive instructional activity both within and outside of traditional classroom time (eg, those courses with a significant [and demonstrable] writing, or information literacy, or research requirement) can be variable from a *base* of 150 minutes to a level deemed appropriate by instructors concerned with those courses. In Albany's case, and as assumed in the recommendation of the present Task Force, current Writing Intensive courses and General Education courses with a significant writing or information literacy component may already be appropriately adjusted according to the above-cited formula; furthermore, the decoupling of credit hours and contact hours must be an integral component in all departmental and campus-wide discussions of programming incrementally or completely adjusted to a 4-credit standard.

³ The following illustration may help readers put the numbers this Task Force is using in manageable perspective and also appreciate the centrality of General Education, in our estimation, to the successful implementation of a universal 4-credit standard.

Assuming the case of a current typical undergraduate major requiring 36 credits, implementation of the 4-credit standard would require that student adjust down from twelve 3-credit courses to nine (or ten) 4-credit courses in the major, and from six 3-credit courses to four or five 4-credit courses for the minor. We suggest that a major of ten 4-credit courses (40 credits total) would be a strong major and would minimize potential negative effects of course reductions in the major for the student. The minor could then require four courses (16 credits) or five courses (20 credits) -- assuming that after UAC reports to the faculty on the matter, a minor constructed after the current model at Albany remains a necessary and desirable requirement once the campus moves to the 4-credit standard.

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 14

As we project them, the relationship between courses and credits currently and under a universal 4-credit standard (4CS) would be these:

Major: NOW: 12 courses (36 credits)
4CS: 10 courses (40 credits)

Minor: NOW: 6 courses (18 credits)
4CS: 4-5 courses (16-20 credits)

GenEd: NOW: 8 courses (24 credits)
4CS: 8 courses (32 credits)

Electives: NOW: 14 courses (42 credits)
4CS: 9-10 courses (36-40 credits)

Total: NOW: 40 courses (120 credits)
4CS: 32 courses (128 credits)

⁴ The following concrete illustration of how one 100-level, 3-credit General Education course is poised to become a 4-credit course may underscore the Task Force's plan for General Education courses and clarify the evaluative process to which the Task Force believes all General Education courses should be held in departments and in the General Education Committee.

Biology 102N is a general education course that has long been in transition. It is presently offered as a 3-credit lecture course with enrollment up to 200 (the capacity of LC 25, the high-tech LC). In the past two years, the instructor has required students to engage in a "campus nature survey." They follow a sheet of directions and visit sites to collect a leaf or observe something particular in the local surroundings. This is a popular requirement for students because it awakens them to things otherwise unobserved in the campus landscape, but they receive minimal credit for it now.

Bio 102N could reasonably and fairly be increased from 3- to 4-credits by instructors requiring and evaluating more demanding participation by students in a more elaborate campus nature survey. The current instructors of the course have begun to develop such an elaborate campus nature survey, and they are developing WEB pages for the "Campus Nature Web" and for a number of courses in Biology with an ecological emphasis, including Bio 102N and Bio 110F. The courses and Campus Nature Web will be linked, with information on short and long term changes in the nature environment of the campus gathered by students in all appropriate courses, graduate and undergraduate, tabulated and made available on the WEB.

⁵ As the following example from Sociology suggests, the typical 3-credit capstone course in the major which presently includes writing intensive, research, independent study, and other forms of requirements is an appropriate candidate for 4-credits, regardless of the long-term fate of this Task Force proposal.

The Department of Sociology requires that each major take a writing intensive capstone seminar, which offers an intensive examination of a specialized topic. These courses are usually structured like graduate seminars, and typically the syllabus is organized around research literature from major sociological journals along with seminal books. Requirements often include: class presentations based on reading and/or research outside the classroom; a series of written papers that address topics that come out of reading and

REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE 4-CREDIT STANDARD, P. 15

lectures; essay exams; and a research paper. The research paper, in particular, requires additional time on the part of instructional staff, with some instructors and their TAs scheduling additional class sessions on writing a research paper. In addition, the emphasis on analytic and critical writing usually necessitates considerable one-on-one work with students outside the classroom. In sum, because there is far more work required of students and instructors in such a capstone course than is true of many lower- or upper-level courses that award the same 3-credits, 400-level capstone courses such as those described here could reasonably and fairly be changed now from 3- to 4-credits.