

OBJECTIONS TO A FOUR-COURSE LOAD FOR WILLIAM AND MARY UNDERGRADUATES—AND SOME RESPONSES

At the December faculty meeting, members offered arguments for and against moving to a system under which the typical student courseload would be four per semester rather than five. Here is a brief summary of the main objections that were raised, along with an almost equally brief reply to each.

OBJECTION: To reduce the student courseload campus-wide would be to assert that “one size fits all,” when in fact different disciplines impose varying needs and constraints.

--Maybe so. But we *currently* have in place a “one size fits all” requirement that every undergraduate complete 120 credits. Whether W&M should maintain such a uniform requirement is a question that might bear discussion—though it’s hard to see what the alternative to a unified credit-hour requirement would be. For the current discussion the point is that some people’s discomfiture with “one size fits all” does not disadvantage the four-course load as compared with the five-course system.

OBJECTION: In actual fact, most students do not currently average five courses per semester, but rather four-point-something; the courseload problem, if it ever existed, has cured itself. If the system ain’t broke, don’t fix it.

--After this argument was made at the December meeting, no one was able to produce any report or hard figures to document the assertion. In any case, even if some students, by dint of AP credit or otherwise, manage not to take five courses every semester, the argument for not spreading students’ attention too thinly over an excessive number of courses would still apply for the many students who *are* taking five courses per term.

OBJECTION: The argument that students do not have ample time to do justice to five courses is untenable; the only justification for shifting to a four-course load might be that taking five classes leads to inefficient “thrashing” or shifting of intellectual gears among too many courses.

--The argument for the four-course load has never been that we’re asking students to devote too much time to studies. Rather, the issue is one of *allocating* time and intellectual energy. It is possible to direct one’s attention in so many different directions that some courses don’t get the concentration that would do them justice. Anyone who advises students attentively has noticed what Arthur Knight pointed out at the December meeting—that the typical student chooses a “fifth course” that will be the runt of the lot, receiving little attention so that the student can come close to doing what needs to be done in the other four. This fosters neither respect for the fifth subject of study nor achievement in it.

And yes, the inefficiencies of “thrashing” among five courses *are* another argument for the four-course load.

OBJECTION: Under a four-course system, (a) students will not have sufficient space in their schedules to complete a pre-med program or a nationally accredited science concentration, or (b) if they do manage to accomplish those things, they won't have time to acquire the well-rounded liberal arts exposure that W&M prides itself on. (c) No one will have space in his or her schedule to complete a double concentration—another valuable expedient for broadening one's intellect. Moreover, (d) the typical student will spend half his or her time satisfying GER requirements.

--There seem to be both a misstatement of fact and a logical inconsistency here. In the first place, universities that have the four-course load—let Princeton stand as our example—turn out pre-meds and science majors all the time, and in fact seem to do a pretty good job of it. I went through Princeton with people who completed English/chemistry double majors and every other combination one might think of.

Furthermore, it seems inconsistent to complain both that the four-course load will deprive students of a liberal education *and* force them to fill up half their schedules with GER courses. The whole idea of GER is precisely to ensure that students pursue a well-rounded course of study, yet to offer them a large element of choice in doing so (GER requires courses in various categories, not specific, prescribed courses). Why would it bother us, then, if courses meeting GER requirements constituted a somewhat higher fraction of the typical courseload than they do under the current system?

OBJECTION: Learning to budget one's time and energy is a crucial part of growing up. Why do we want to relieve students of the obligation to make choices and meet challenges?

--Well, we *don't* want to do that. Under the four-course load, the overall amount of time and effort demanded of a student would not be reduced at all; some, perhaps many, courses could become even more challenging than they are already. A four-course load in a demanding academic program does a good job of forcing people to grow up and make choices; Princeton graduates don't seem to emerge less mature and resilient than those of W&M do.

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There are many positive reasons for exploring the four-course student load—above all, the opportunity to require better, more intensive effort in four courses rather than a less intensive effort in each of five. As for the criticisms of the four-course load that we heard at the December meeting, the response largely boils down to this: Princeton, with a four-course system (three plus senior thesis in the final year), manages to fulfill all the goals that some speakers in December said would be imperiled if W&M shifts to the Princeton model. If four courses work there, why can't they work here?

Respectfully submitted,

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