

9 April 2004

**TO: The Rhodes College Faculty**

**FROM: The Educational Development Committee  
Marsha Walton, Chair, Social Science Representative  
Ellen Armour, Secretary, At-Large Representative  
Emily Costarides, Student Representative  
Brent Hoffmeister, Natural Science Representative  
Jim Lanier, Humanities Representative  
Shira Malkin, Fine Arts Representative  
Steve Wirls, At-Large Representative**

*Ex officio members:*

**Tom Barr, Chair, Curriculum Committee  
Glenn Munson, Registrar  
Robert Strandburg, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs for Undergraduate Research and Service  
Katheryn Wright, Associate Dean of Academic Affairs for International Education**

**RE: Proposed Curriculum Revision**

The attached proposal to revise the curriculum is motivated by three goals:

- We want our students to take greater responsibility for their education and to understand the goals of a liberal arts education. We want a curriculum that gives them the freedom to follow their interests and aspirations.
- We want a curriculum that creates space for faculty to offer more courses connected to their scholarly interests and to develop innovative courses that respond to the shifting currents in contemporary thought.
- We want our students to bring greater focus to the courses they take and to recognize that their activities inside and outside the classroom should be mutually informative and energizing.

To achieve these goals we believe that it is necessary to provide a more transparent and streamlined curriculum.

This proposal achieves greater **transparency** by reframing the general degree requirements in terms of skills and content areas. Students will thus gain a clearer understanding of the rationale behind the curriculum, which will enable a more deliberate and focused approach to course selection. In addition, faculty will be able to design courses that more closely align with their scholarly interests and, in some cases, reflect the increasingly fluid boundaries between disciplines. Moreover, the opportunity to create courses which satisfy more than one foundation requirement will stimulate innovation, and underscore the fact that a liberal arts education is fundamentally cross-disciplinary.

This proposal **streamlines our curriculum** by reframing our graduation requirements and changing the way we credit courses. Currently, our general degree requirements exceed those found at most of the top fifty liberal arts colleges. This limits our students' ability to direct their studies in a way that reflects their individual interests and career aspirations. Consequently, their sense of responsibility for their education is diminished. In

addition, staffing such a large number of required courses constrains the variety of courses that the faculty can offer.

Two elements of this proposal have raised particularly serious questions: **the portfolio** and **the crediting system**. Extensive discussion of these concerns has brought us to the conclusion that these are key elements in our effort to shift the curriculum from focusing on what we teach to what we want students to learn.

Focusing on student learning requires that we encourage students to think more carefully about what they do outside the classroom as well as inside it, to reflect on the whole of their college experience as preparation for a productive and fulfilling life after graduation. **The portfolio** provides a vehicle that we think supports that goal.

Our reasons for proposing a **32 course/128 credit curriculum** where each course is equally weighted go well beyond the simple observation that the majority of the top fifty liberal arts colleges (particularly those at the top of the list) follow this practice; indeed, they most likely reflect the reasons why this is the case. While we acknowledge that many of our students can divide their attention across more than four courses, we do not feel that it is pedagogically wise to ask them to do so.<sup>1</sup> Dividing some students' attention across five courses limits the depth of involvement that we can ask from all of the students in each course. Establishing four courses as the standard load per semester would allow for a more focused educational experience for all of our students.<sup>2</sup> Because this proposal would reduce the overall number of courses that we would need to offer, it promises to yield a more focused and less fragmented experience for faculty, as well. Two years ago, the FEC recommended that the College consider as part of its strategic plan moving from a 3/3 to a 3/2 faculty teaching load. At the time, the FEC's proposal noted that curriculum reform was essential to realizing this goal. Changing to a 32 course/128 credit curriculum moves us forward toward that goal.

We are proposing a curriculum that **weights each course equally** regardless of the kind of activities involved. It is our conviction that every discipline in the liberal arts curriculum represents a comparable intellectual challenge. Although the actual amount of time required to meet the challenges in a particular course will vary from student to student, we want to set the expectation that every course – regardless of discipline or division – demands rigorous work.

Hence, this curriculum is an appeal to the faculty to reconsider the challenges and goals that we are setting in all of our courses. Each course will be a four credit course. We hope those of us teaching three credit-hour courses under the current system, in particular, will find this to be an opportunity to challenge our students in new ways. The change in the general degree requirements presents an opportunity to rethink the boundaries of our courses. We encourage the faculty to consider the potential of the students' experience outside of the classroom to engage the student in the content of our courses and to guide the students to a deeper understanding of the value of the life of the mind.

There is no such thing as a perfect curriculum; any curriculum will be the outcome of numerous compromises. Based on months of give-and-take among the members of the committee as well as our numerous discussions with the faculty, it is our judgment that this proposal represents the best set of compromises. We believe that it best advances the goals of curriculum reform. However, the ultimate decisions on these matters are now in your hands. We encourage the faculty not to attempt to remedy problems with the proposal without weighing the impact of such changes on other elements of this proposal. We recognize that this proposal represents a dramatic change in the curriculum and, as such, presents an enormous challenge to the faculty. We hope that the faculty will be inspired by this challenge.

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<sup>1</sup> Students must petition to take five courses.

<sup>2</sup> Moving to this crediting system brings us into compliance with the policies of our accrediting body, SACS. The current SACS standards require its schools to offer 120 credit degrees (or the equivalent). Staying with 3 credit-hour courses will mean requiring 40 courses (or the equivalent) of our students. This would set the normal course load at 5 courses per term.