Update from the Academic Credit Compliance Committee

The Academic Credit Compliance Committee, a faculty sub-committee of the Educational Policy Committee, has been investigating the unit of academic credit for courses in the Schools of Arts & Sciences and Engineering for the past calendar year and would like to inform the faculty of the committee’s progress, recommendations, and next steps. Early in Spring 2015, the committee will propose a system in which the Schools of Arts & Sciences and Engineering will assign course credit in a way that better reflects the amount of time students are expected to be in class and the amount of work they are expected to do outside of class. Before submitting its final recommendations to the EPC, the committee would like to have conversations with a wider range of faculty to inform them about the proposed changes and to solicit their feedback. These conversations will happen in mid-December and early in the spring semester. Meanwhile, more information about the committee, its charge, its research, and its initial proposal can be found at Trunk: Search Public Courses, selecting the Project Site labelled Academic Credit Committee.

More Information:

Why are we talking about changing the way we assign credit to courses?
Tufts’ accreditor, NEASC, informed the University that our credit unit (in which 1 Tufts credit is equivalent to 4.0 credit hours) does not appear to conform to the federal standard used to calculate academic credit hours, and some of our degree programs do not appear to reach the required minimum of 120 credit hours for the baccalaureate and 30 credit hours for the master’s degree. NEASC has asked Tufts to submit a formal report in Fall 2015 to clarify how we will bring our unit of credit into compliance with the policies established by NEASC, which conform to the federal “credit hour.”

What is the “credit hour”?  
The credit hour is a formula that equates a certain amount of in-class learning and out-of-class learning with an expected learning outcome. The federal credit hour assumes that over a semester of roughly 14 to 15 weeks, for each hour spent in class, students will spend a minimum of two hours out of class studying. Thus, a 3-credit course will require approximately 3 fifty-minute hours per week in class with approximately 6 hours of homework or out-of-class study each week. A minimum of 120 credit hours is required for the baccalaureate degree and a minimum of 30 credit hours is required for the master’s degree. There is some flexibility to account for different course structures (such as online courses, hybrid courses, and flipped classrooms) and for internships, independent studies, and practica, as long as the university has a consistent process for awarding credit, in line with commonly accepted practices.

Why is this important?
Alignment with the federal definition of the credit hour is important for setting minimal standards for graduation and for establishing each student’s full-time status or part-time status in order to be eligible for federal financial aid. Overall, Tufts’ accreditation and eligibility for federal financial aid are at stake.

When will Tufts change its credit system?
We hope to have a new system in place for Fall 2016. This will require a new course credit assignment policy and process to be in place by January 2016 so the Registrar can prepare SIS for registration in March 2016.
What is being proposed?
The Academic Credit Compliance Committee (AC3) is proposing a system in which 1 Tufts course will continue to be assigned 1.0 credit, but the value of the credit will change (from 4 credit hours to 3 credit hours). This will allow us to assign additional credit to courses that require more work in class or out of class, so that many courses will be worth 1.5 Tufts credits (equivalent to 4.5 credit hours). Undergraduates will need 40 Tufts credits to graduate.

How will this affect future undergraduate students?
A system in which credit is assigned to each course based on the amount of work required for that course will allow students to more easily balance their course-loads each semester. The new system should not significantly change the typical student course load each semester nor change any major requirements. Undergraduate students will be expected to take four or five courses (equivalent to 5 credit hours) each semester to graduate with the equivalent of 120 credit hours within 8 full-time semesters.

How will this affect future graduate students?
A few of Tufts master’s degree programs will shift to a model that requires a minimum of 30 credit hours (generally 10 courses or some combination of coursework and thesis, practica, or qualifying examination adding up to the equivalent of 10 courses). There will be no change to doctoral programs or the way credit is determined for full-time continuation or part-time continuation for doctoral students.

How will this affect current students?
Students will graduate under the degree requirements in place when they matriculated.

How will this impact faculty?
Faculty may be asked to add a statement to the syllabus indicating the amount of time students are expected to study for the course, in proportion to the credit-value of the course.

Who will determine how to award credit to each course?
The Educational Policy Committee will draft a detailed set of guidelines for determining the credit value of a course and various course components such as labs and recitations. The Curricula Committee will then create a process for reviewing courses that may merit more credit than is apparent from the scheduled amount of time spent in class each week. Credit will be assigned to each course (not to individual classes or sections, which may be taught differently by each instructor).

Why is this such a big deal?
Any change to our unit of credit will require changes to SIS and the transcript, so these changes will need to be made with great care. Careful consideration also needs to be given to the academic records and degree progress of students already enrolled when the transition occurs. Changing the credit value of our courses will require us to change the wording of numerous academic policies (including those about distribution requirements, pre-matriculation requirements, dean’s list, academic probation, course-load limits, full-time study, and the like). Changes to the credit system will also require Tufts to adjust the way it bills per credit (so as not to over-charge students) and may change the way Tufts determines full-time and part-time status for purposes of financial aid. Changing the way we “count” credits will be confusing for students, their parents, and their advisors. Academic departments and programs will need to review requirements for their majors and minors to clarify whether a certain number of courses are required or a certain number of credits are required for the major or minor. These changes will be discussed with faculty in greater detail in Spring 2015 and then determined by the appropriate faculty committees.