

Commentary

A Check on Expansion of the Major: Potential Positive Impact of a Limit on Total Hours for New Degree Programs

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One of the most important goals of someone who has administrative responsibility for an institution's general education program is to expand the typical focus on an institution's majors to include the general education and elective portions of the curriculum. John Hinni, Dean Emeritus of University Studies of Southeast Missouri State University, once told me that the major has become "synonymous" with undergraduate education. In fact, after asking where someone is attending college, the second question is, inevitably, "What is your major?" The purpose of this article is, by way of one example, to suggest that a limit on total hours for degree programs can decrease the pressure that the major can have on general education by calling attention to the expanding nature of the portion of the curriculum devoted to the major.

Shawnee State University in Portsmouth, Ohio is a four-year regional state university located in southern Ohio. Shawnee State has a history as a community and technical college until 1986 when it began offering four-year degree programs. As Shawnee State established itself as a four-year institution, the period of the 1990s involved considerable growth in the number of four-year degree programs. We were building a four-year institution. In this quickly-changing environment, faculty members were hired to cover missing sub-disciplines with the expectation that they would develop new courses for both existing and new four-year degree programs (including me...I was hired in 1994 to develop an environmental chemistry course). By the year 2001, requirements in the majors had grown to the point that roughly half of the four-year degree programs had no electives. In the decade of the 1990s, the total number of hours required in the four-year degree programs that had no electives increased from an average of 195 quarter hours (130 semester hours) to 203 quarter hours (135 semester hours), based on a comparison of the 1989-1990 and 1999-2000 catalogs. The nature of the rapid growth was such that faculty members were so busy

building new curricula and policies appropriate to a four-year institution that the increase in the size of the majors went unnoticed.

As director of general education at Shawnee State from 1997-2008, the expansion of the majors became apparent to me since the majors were beginning to put pressure on the general education program, with informal proposals to include support courses for particular majors as courses that would count toward the general education program. To call attention to the expansion of the majors, I submitted the following proposal to limit total hours required in new degree programs; existing degree programs were exempted (at that time, Shawnee State was on the quarter system but is now, like the vast majority of higher education institutions, on the semester system...hence, both quarter and semester hours are provided):

Effective upon approval of this policy, new degree programs will not exceed 200 quarter hours (133 semester hours) required for graduation. Students may complete hours beyond this limit of required hours due to developmental courses or courses not used due to a change of majors. EPCC [Educational Policy and Curriculum Committee] and UFS [University Faculty Senate] will consider requests to exceed the stated limit. Both bodies must approve the request, followed by approval by the Provost. The justification must document the need for hours beyond the limit and provide examples of similar curricula at other universities. If a professional accrediting body does not require a certain number of total hours, the justification must include a matrix that documents the manner in which guidelines are met by individual courses.

As part of making the case for this proposal, it was helpful to provide evidence to suggest this was a problem not particular to Shawnee State (although the problem seemed more pronounced at Shawnee State, perhaps due to the rapid development of four-year degree programs and courses). One study by the United States Department of Education found that, from 1972 to 1993, the average number of credits completed to earn four-year degrees increased from 129 to 135 semester hours, the equivalent of 194 and 203 quarter hours (The Office of Educational Research and Improvement's *New College Course Map and Transcript Files: Changes in Course-Taking and Achievement, 1972-1993*, Second Edition, September 1999). Some universities and states responded to this trend by placing limits on total hours required for degree programs and increasing tuition for credits taken by students in excess of stated numbers of hours. Much of the motivation

was financial since taxpayers were paying for increasing amounts of credits to complete four-year degree programs. An article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (v. 42, Aug. 16, 1996, p. A27), indicated that Utah had increased tuition for hours that exceeded 133% of required hours and North Carolina had increased tuition for hours that exceeded 115% of required hours. Also, in response to a question posed on an e-mail discussion group (of the Council for the Administration of General and Liberal Studies), Cynthia Margolin of San Jose State University stated that the California State University System of 23 campuses had a limit of 132 semester hours (198 quarter hours) as the maximum and, if a campus wanted to exceed that limit, the campus must get approval from CSU's Chancellor's office. According to Steve Bowen of Michigan Technological University, they had a limit of 120-128 semester hours (180-192 quarter hours) as the maximum, yet engineering was allowed to go up to 131 semester hours (197 quarter hours).

The debate over the proposal at Shawnee State was lively. Faculty members who supported the proposal pointed to a desire to design curricula such that students could complete a baccalaureate degree in four years. Proponents of the proposal argued that the burden of proof for justifying additional required hours was the responsibility of the proposer and that governance of the curriculum was shared by the entire faculty. Opponents to the policy viewed it as an arbitrary, bureaucratic limit, a limit that the institution was responsible for justifying. Opponents also suggested that faculty in particular disciplines were the most knowledgeable regarding what students needed in order to graduate with particular majors. In the end, ideas of departmental burden of proof and shared responsibility for the curriculum seemed to prevail and the proposal passed the multi-stage approval process in the fall of 2000, with a narrow vote in favor of the proposal at the senate level.

Curricular proposals were monitored for three years following approval of the proposed policy. The following evidence suggests that, even though the proposal applied to new degree programs, the proposal led to discussions, and subsequent actions, about the total hours required for graduation and the size of the majors of existing degree programs:

- Of the 32 proposals that altered total hours required for graduation, 26 proposals decreased total hours, with only 6 proposals that increased total hours.

- Changes in total hours ranged from -25 quarter hours (-17 semester hours) to +5 quarter hours (+3 semester hours).
- The average change in hours per proposal was -5 quarter hours (-3 semester hours).

Although concern was expressed by some of my colleagues in general education that a limit on total hours in degree programs might result in a decrease in the size of the general education program and/or the proposed inclusion of majors' courses in the general education program, this proposal, at least for the three-year period that followed its approval, appeared to cause the university's faculty to decrease requirements in their majors. During this time period, there were no proposals submitted to decrease the size of the general education program or to add courses designed for majors to the general education program.

Requirements for majors often grow by the process of accretion, with courses being added to the major without eliminating or modifying existing coursework. Proposals for new courses are rarely questioned at the level of the university-wide curriculum committee, particularly when a professional accrediting body is used to justify the requirement. The events at Shawnee State University in the early 2000s suggest that a limit on total hours required for graduation, whether put in place at the federal, state, system, or institutional level, has the potential of encouraging faculty members to evaluate the size of requirements in their majors and acknowledge a shared responsibility for the curriculum as a whole.