

March 18, 2003

To: President Burish

From: Provost Boetsch, Chair  
President's Advisory Committee<sup>1</sup>

Re: A summary of the discussions related to course-load and calendar issues

The following is a chronology of events and decisions that have led us to the current situation regarding the undergraduate calendar, faculty course-loads, and curriculum reform. This summary attempts to illustrate the factors that have contributed to the present circumstance, and to provide guidance for how to proceed.

In the academic year 2000-01, the administration charged a faculty committee led by Barbara Brown to undertake a study of two calendar models and to accumulate data for a faculty discussion and decision on calendar to take place in the spring of 2001. One calendar was a two-semester, fourteen-week calendar modeled on our current law school calendar, and the other was the current 12-12-6 model. The committee completed its work in February of 2001, and Deans Peppers and Boetsch submitted its report to President Elrod on behalf of the committee. President Elrod received the report and authorized its release to the full faculty for its consideration and for the purpose of the discussion that was to lead to a decision either to renew the current calendar or to change to a two-semester calendar. At that time, he also informed the deans that, regardless of the outcome of the calendar issue, he was authorizing a one-course reduction in the annual teaching load for undergraduate faculty. He did not anticipate that significant additional resources could be made available to implement the reduction. After discussion, he accepted the recommendation of the deans that the reduction take place over a two or four year period during which faculty would teach 13 courses over two years.

The calendar report and the authorization of the reduced course-load reached the faculty simultaneously and became linked inevitably to the deliberations over the calendar. Discussion of the calendar report took place at a regularly scheduled faculty meeting and at a special faculty meeting. Explicit in the discussion was the fact that a decision on the calendar would permit the faculty to undertake the now overdue review of general education requirements as well as examination of current major requirements. The faculty were asked to vote either for the proposed two-semester calendar or for the current

---

<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of these discussions, the President's Advisory Committee was composed of its regular members (Provost Boetsch (Chair), Deans Partlett, Peppers and Williams, Professors Murchison, Evans, Sessions, Keen, Pleva, Brown, and West-Settle), plus the newly elected members who will join the regular roster in the fall of 2003 (Professors Beckley, Goldsmith, and Strong), and the three associate deans (Millon, Oliver, and Stewart). Throughout the document, reference to the Committee or shall be taken to mean this entire group.

calendar with the provision that, if the current calendar were approved, an ad hoc committee would be charged to study the weaknesses of the spring term as presented in the calendar committee's report, and to make recommendations to the administration by the end of the 2001-02 academic year for improvement of the short term. The faculty voted by an approximately two-to-one margin to retain the 12-12-6 calendar and the Spring-term Renewal Committee was created and charged with examining the spring term.

For the 2001-02 academic year, Acting President Boetsch authorized, and the Board approved, an expenditure of \$200,000 to be used in 2002-03 by the College and the Williams School for adjunct faculty in order that the transition to a six course load could begin. He also requested that the undergraduate deans provide guidelines to department heads and faculty regarding the scheduling of course reductions during the 12-week terms only. Budget projections for the period of transition were made for the following four years with the hope that the adjunct funds might then convert to additional tenure-track lines, but no commitment was made to guarantee those lines.

At the February, 2002 meeting of the Board of Trustees, Dean Peppers and Acting Dean of the College Sessions presented data to the full board on the implied consequences to the curriculum based on the calendar vote and the one course reduction. Using comparative models from peer schools, rough classroom utilization figures, registration and average class size numbers, their report concluded that, in order to maintain the breadth of the undergraduate curriculum, average class sizes, and graduation requirements at the current level, the University should consider the addition of a significant number of new faculty lines in order to compensate for the 1/7 reduction in the faculty teaching load. It was understood that this number might include new adjunct and permanent lines and/or the conversion of current adjunct lines to permanent. The report was presented to the Board in order to inform them about the course of discussion that the administration thought was inevitable given the calendar vote and the course reduction. The Board was also informed of the charge of the Spring Term Renewal Committee and the deans made it clear that no specific recommendations would be forthcoming until that committee had completed its work.

In the spring of 2002, the Spring Term Renewal committee submitted its recommendations to Acting President Boetsch who declined to respond for the administration at that time owing to the fact that President Burish was scheduled to assume office on July 1.

Upon assuming office in the summer of 2002, President Burish examined both the Calendar Committee report and the Spring Term Renewal recommendations. He was also briefed on the deans' presentation to the Board. At the senior staff retreat in early August, the President expressed reservations about the feasibility of requiring students to take two courses in the spring term (as recommended by the Spring Term Renewal Committee), while also reducing the faculty teaching load to six courses per year, avoiding major increases in faculty positions, and sustaining the 12-12-6 calendar. Moreover, he expressed the view that the calendar as well as other critical decisions should be

discussed within the context of stated academic priorities. The President asked the staff to suggest ways to seek additional advice on the matter. Several members of the staff recommended that he ask the Advisory Committee, chaired by the Provost, to study the issue and to make recommendations.

In the early fall, President Burish presented to the faculty a summary of the University's current financial status and clarified what steps would be necessary to ensure our continued progress. Soon after, he charged the President's Advisory Committee (whose membership was augmented with those who were elected to serve next year, and the three associate deans) to study these issues and to propose ways that the University might effectively deal with them.

The President's charge to the committee included the following parameters within which to frame the discussion:

1. The teaching load will be no more than 6 courses per year.
2. We should seek to enhance collaboration among the College, Williams School, and Law School.
3. We should seek to strengthen interdisciplinary and international education.
4. The current student/faculty ratio will be maintained (assume up to 5 additional permanent faculty hires).
5. Resource reallocation is probable, but there will be no significant infusion of new resources for the addition of faculty.

Documentation provided for the discussion included the Calendar Committee report, the Spring Term Renewal Committee report, a summary of the deans' presentation to the Board of Trustees regarding the consequences of a reduced faculty teaching load, and a statement of principles regarding the University's commitment to liberal arts education prepared for the committee in order to serve as an orientation for productive discussion.

In addition to the stated parameters, the Committee chose to examine three calendar alternatives in terms of the ability of each to enhance (or tendency to impede) the goals of a liberal arts mission and the President's parameters. The group agreed upon the features that characterize a quality liberal education, and noted that all aspects of Washington and Lee, including its Law School and pre-professional programs are grounded in the liberal arts.

Committee members agreed that no action should be taken in restructuring the academic calendar if those actions would threaten the mission of providing a liberal education to our students. Specifically, the Committee attended to the goal of nurturing in our students the capacity to think freely, critically, and humanely, via use of pedagogical models that support education as sustained conversation, writing as thinking, viewing the world as text, and inter-disciplinarity.

Three different academic calendar models were analyzed by the committee in terms of adherence to, or deviation from the principles and parameters enumerated above:

- **Option I** – the current calendar with a 6 course teaching load, and a requirement of 40 courses to graduate.
- **Option II** – a 2-semester calendar with a 6 course teaching load, and a requirement of 32 (or 36\*) courses to graduate.
- **Option III** – a 2-semester calendar with a 5 course teaching load, and a requirement of 32 (or 36\*) courses to graduate.

\*There was some discussion of the possibility of instituting an optional May term, and/or requiring students to enroll in 9 courses per year to permit the completion of more than 32 courses in 4 years.

The Committee determined that all three of the combined calendar/teaching load/course load options it reviewed could exist without violating most of the assigned parameters, but each would be accompanied by a unique set of costs. A summary of that analysis follows:

For **Option I.**, maintaining the 12-12-6 calendar

- Parameter 2 is violated - the mis-match between undergraduate and law schedules provides a disincentive for collaboration among the divisions of the University.
- Parameter 5 is challenged - resources must be spread over 3 terms instead of only 2.
  - The Committee acknowledged that significant start-up and close-down costs accompany the third term we currently run.
  - When the teaching load shifts from its current 6.5 courses to 6 courses annually, the difficulties we face in terms of adequately staffing all three terms will increase.

It was suggested that we might maintain the 12-12-6 calendar, but require only 32 courses to graduate (instead of 40), so that we might staff all three terms adequately, but:

- Students enrolled in fewer than 4 courses per 12-week term could diminish the learning environment, as the Committee did not feel confident that the students' extra free time would be devoted to scholarly pursuits.
- A number of federal programs mandate full time status for student participants (e.g. financial aid recipients and international students) as do many health insurance programs, and our inability to provide a full-time academic program for all students in all terms would put those who are affected by certain federal or insurance policies at risk.

For **Option II.**, the two-semester calendar with a 6 course load

- Parameter 2 is supported – there is a close match with the Law School, creating less of an impediment to collaboration between members of the law and undergraduate faculty.
- Parameter 5 is less challenged - if the faculty teaching load is 6 courses over 2 terms, then we will be able to concentrate teaching effort in 2 terms (instead of 3) and hire a minimum number of adjunct faculty annually.

- Parameter 3 is partially supported – the 2 term calendar provides more opportunities for our students to take advantage of high quality international educational opportunities during the regular semesters.
- Parameter 3 is partially challenged - this model places interdisciplinary programs at risk for two reasons:
  - 1. as the faculty teaching load is reduced to 6 courses per year, departments will be less able to release faculty from teaching obligations in the major areas, leading to fewer interdisciplinary offerings (this is true for Option I with a 6 course load as well); and
  - 2. students will be taking fewer courses before graduating, potentially leaving them with fewer opportunities to take elective courses in interdisciplinary areas (unless modifications to the Gen Ed system and to many majors are made).
- A 6 course load spread over 28 weeks of teaching requires the same number of contact hours as a 7 course load with our current calendar. Some members of the Committee expressed concern that the 6 course load may not be perceived as a true reduction versus the status quo (especially considering that we are actually employing a 6 ½ course load presently – moving to 6 over 28 weeks is actually an increase in annual contact hours). Others noted that a two semester model is much more efficient than a three term model, and that this greater efficiency would offer faculty some time savings.
- Some committee members noted that a 3-3 teaching load would fail to provide increased opportunity for productive scholarship versus our current 3-3-1 load .
- As we seek a student body of greater socioeconomic diversity, it benefits many students to be finished with school in mid-May, so that they may compete earlier for summer jobs.

For **Option III.**, the two semester calendar with a 5 course load, the pros and cons are similar to Option II, with the following additional notes:

- As the teaching load is reduced Washington and Lee stands to gain in terms of faculty productivity and hiring competitiveness, which would support and enhance the academic reputation.
- Parameters 3 and 5 are more challenged than for Option II
  - interdisciplinary courses would become more scarce, unless resources are reallocated to provide increased support for interdisciplinary programs.
  - the number of adjunct faculty and the size of many classes would increase (both of which could threaten a number of the hallmarks of a high quality liberal education – see appendix).

Many members of the Committee agreed that we cannot sustain our current calendar nor can we make significant improvements without many more resources – specifically in terms of numerous additional permanent faculty.

Many members of the Committee viewed Options II and III as the viable options – recognizing that Option II mitigates the strain on our personnel resources, while Option III offers W&L the best opportunity for enhancing its academic reputation by providing

more time for faculty to engage in scholarly activity during the school year and best addresses the issue of competitive hiring. While respecting the limits set by the original 5 parameters, several members of the Committee suggested that we would be best served by setting a goal of creating a substantial number of new permanent faculty lines, tying that goal to those of the University's next capital campaign, and phasing in those new hires over the coming years.

In reviewing the means by which we might sustain the curriculum following teaching load reductions without a significant infusion of additional resources, the Committee then discussed the following:

- The average class size would have to increase, with introductory-level courses being the most obvious choice for expansion. NOTE however that this modification will be problematic for two reasons:
  - Freshmen are likely to experience a disproportionate number of these large courses, which may be undesirable as they are adjusting to college. Some discussants proposed that a freshman seminar program could mitigate this risk.
  - We have relatively few (approximately 10) classrooms that can seat 50 or more students.
- We will be pressured to hire adjunct faculty and perhaps other temporary teaching staff (e.g. postdoctoral associates), and while some members of the Committee pointed out that we are regularly served by outstanding adjunct faculty in a number of departments, others expressed concern that a number of the pedagogical goals that support our liberal arts mission (e.g. education as sustained conversation, or writing as thinking; see appendix) could not be well served with large numbers of part time or temporary teaching staff.
- Our varied curriculum is also at risk, as faculty pare back their offerings and retain those courses that most closely support the disciplinary majors.
  - This has implications for recruitment and retention, as faculty desire the opportunity to teach a variety of specialized courses.
  - As noted above, interdisciplinary teaching will also become a luxury, and those programs will be placed at risk.
  - More students will be forced to register for courses they do not want, as the number of offerings per term is reduced.

In discussing the implications of reducing graduation requirements from the current 40 courses to 32, a number of committee members expressed concern that students would have less opportunity to explore the curriculum, beyond satisfying general education and major requirements. Remedies proposed were:

- requiring 9 instead of 8 courses per year for a total of 36 to graduate, and
- offering a May term to give students the opportunity to take additional courses.
- reducing the proportion of general education and major requirements.

Having reached preliminary conclusions regarding the available options, the Committee examined an extensive data set for each model on the number of places available to

students at class registration as a function of faculty teaching load. The data were focused on the potential consequences for class size, numbers of sections, and faculty required to teach them for each calendar option. As a result of this analysis, it was clear to most of the members of the committee that the current 12-12-6 calendar cannot be effectively sustained within the parameters and constraints defined by the President.

The Committee prepared a summary report of its discussions and its conclusions which was submitted to the President. After review, the President met with the Committee to discuss the pros and cons as well as the viability of each of the calendar models. As a result of that discussion the Committee formally voted (12-0-2, 2 absent) to recommend that the undergraduate unit adopt a two term calendar. The President thanked the Committee and asked that this report be prepared describing the process that led to the recommendation.