

UW-Madison
AAC/Admissions Sub-Committee on
Transfer Credit Evaluation

Report

March 31, 2003

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Charge

To examine the undergraduate transfer credit evaluation process at UW-Madison and make recommendations to the AAC for improvements in the process, in systems, in staffing, in resources, or other areas of concern. AAC will forward such recommendations, as appropriate, to the Provost.

Meeting Schedule and Agenda Items

February 25, 2003: Reviewed charge and agenda; reviewed trends in transfer credit evaluations; began review of Transfer Admissions activities and procedures.

March 3, 2003: Continued overview of operational scope of Transfer Admissions office; discussed expectations for principles and standards of service. Reviewed PeopleSoft consultant reports from 2000 and 2001.

March 11, 2003: Reviewed rules and policies governing transfer credit evaluations.

March 17, 2003: Reviewed rules and policies governing transfer credit evaluations.

March 28, 2003: Devised final recommendations. Reviewed draft report.

April 1, 2003: Presentation to AAC

SUMMARY

Transfer Admissions (TA) is unable to improve transfer credit evaluation services to prospective, new, and continuing students under the current circumstances. The ability to sustain the current level of service to students and staff is also compromised. Contributing factors include: 1) an increasing workload, which is 6-fold higher than 10 years ago; 2) new transfer initiatives, for example UW Connections, UWS/WTCS initiatives, Miami-Dade Technical College agreement; 3) a smaller and less experienced staff compared with 5 years ago; 4) an accumulation of cumbersome rules and policies, many of which are outmoded and expensive to implement; 5) tools and technology that are neither well designed nor optimally implemented; 6) numerous processes that require duplicate “re-work”.

Transfer Admissions has a professional, dedicated, and effective staff. They are stretched to the limit to handle the increasing volume and complexity of credit evaluations with the available tools and technology. The struggle to provide quality service to students and staff under these conditions is demoralizing, and staff members are likely to suffer burnout as the situation continues. Experienced staff members are highly valued. Replacing them is costly and inefficient; training takes at least a year and takes the time of existing staff.

This sub-committee was established because AAC and the Office of Admissions agree that timely transfer credit evaluations are essential for new and continuing students to make informed academic decisions, and they are essential for advisors to provide the best possible advising. Improved service in this area is a priority for student service support.

Primary Recommendations

Recommendation 1. Review Rules and Policies

Review all policies associated with transfer credit evaluations to streamline and rationalize policies. Eliminate or modify rules that do not have a sound academic or policy rationale. As much as possible, move the work associated with rules to where the rules are made. University-wide rules are the priority for TA. The subcommittee already started this review and the value of this work had been demonstrated.

Recommendation 2. Increase Staff and Resources

Current staffing levels are insufficient to accomplish all that is required. Based on our review and two previous consultant reports, up to five additional staff positions are needed to fully staff transfer admissions – two transfer counselors, two functional/technical staff, and one trainer. We recommend that a minimum of 2 FTE be added to transfer admissions, which would return transfer admissions to the pre-ISIS staffing level with an additional 0.5 FTE to begin to address the increased demand for transfer credit transactions.

Recommendation 3. Improve Tools and Technology

The PS Transfer Module is seriously deficient, as implemented. Data entry is more complicated than necessary and many tasks must be repeated. Additional functionality is essential for this to become a robust and mature transfer credit system. AAC and Admissions should appoint a working group to explore UW-Madison’s options for transfer software. The working group should press for improvements to the PS Transfer Module, should evaluate the DARS Transfer software as an alternative, and should prepare an impact and cost analysis for both options.

Recommendation 4. Establish a working group on Transfer Credit Issues

The Admissions Office should establish a campus-wide working group to focus on systems, processes, and technology associated with transfer credit. The working group should have representation from functional offices, schools and colleges, advisors, and technical areas.

A. The Context and Charge of the Sub-Committee

Transfer Admissions established and published a priority order for students seeking transfer credit evaluations as a way to distribute service despite severe resource constraints¹. AAC and Admissions have been dissatisfied with how long it is taking for all priority groups to receive their credit evaluations. AAC and Admissions appointed this sub-committee to investigate.

The sub-committee was charged with “examining the undergraduate transfer credit evaluation process at UW-Madison and with making recommendations to the AAC for improvements in the process, in systems, in staffing, in resources, or other areas of concern. AAC will forward such recommendations, as appropriate, to the Provost.”

B. Workload and Range of Operations in Transfer Admissions

We reviewed the workload and range of operations that Transfer Admissions supported for the University community. We also reviewed two PeopleSoft consultant reports, one from 2000 and one from 2001, on this topic. We conclude that Transfer Admissions staff are working heroically to support the campus in this area, but the transfer credit system is unsustainable given the staffing levels and the available technology and tools. To summarize what we learned²:

1. More than 80% of UW-Madison undergraduates have some transfer credit work, and are thereby impacted by the delays in transfer credit evaluations (Appendix 2).
2. In the last couple of years, more than 50,000 transfer equivalency transactions per year have been processed, most of them by Transfer Admissions. There has been a 6-fold increase in transfer equivalency transactions in the past 10 years.
3. In addition to transfer apps and credit evaluations, TA work includes support for UW System’s Transfer Information System and new initiatives such as recruiting and liaison activity with 2-year colleges, UW Connections, UWS/WTCS policies, the Miami-Dade Community College agreement, the College of Menominee Nation agreement, and SEVIS.
4. University and school/college rules and policies related to transfer applications and transfer credit evaluations are astonishingly complex and costly to implement. TA is implementing many rules that were established by individual schools and colleges.
5. TA staff has lost staff and expertise in recent years— 5 years ago there were 1.5 FTE more staff, with an average of 12 years experience compared with an average of 4 years of experience now.
6. Pre-ISIS, the transfer credit software was specifically designed for efficient transfer credit evaluations using the UW-Madison business processes.
7. The transfer equivalency rule tables are out of date. These rule tables, which underpin any course-to-course credit equivalency system, are a pivot point. Since the tables can’t be trusted, this adds additional work for all staff. A key feature, the ability to create transfer equivalency rules from a student record entry, is not available in PeopleSoft.

¹ See Appendix 1

² See Appendix 2 and Appendix 3.

8. In 2000, a consultant's assessment of the ISIS implementation recognized that "more robust transfer credit functionality" was needed and should be part of the on-going implementation process. The features identified by the PS consultant, for example the ability to create transfer equivalency rules from a student record entry, have never been added. The system, as implemented, has appalling inefficiencies that require long and costly training and duplicative work to overcome.
9. There is minimal on-going staff support for the efforts associated with patches, fixes, and upgrades. These changes in PeopleSoft require considerable time for pre-testing and post-analysis and diagnosis of problems. A 2001 PeopleSoft consultant report recommended the addition of two permanent staff members to manage the functional/technical responsibilities and work associated with enhancements, patches, fixes and upgrades.
10. The need to focus on the day-to-day needs of doing transfer credit evaluations are taking all the available staff time. Although the Transfer Admissions staff have a vision for enhanced student service, there is no staff time left over to invest in development of new initiatives, for example the self-service functionality or other efficiencies.
11. UW-Madison's mandatory participation in the UW System -wide Transfer Information System (TIS) requires a significant staff commitment by Transfer Admissions. Some problems with the TIS extract program date back to the 1999 ISIS implementation and have not been resolved.
12. A smaller and less experienced staff is contending with an increasing workload and a system that is inefficient and too slow.

This analysis convinced us that the underlying problems with the transfer credit evaluation processes fall into three general categories, all of which need to be addressed to achieve an acceptable standard of service:

- Rules and policies that cause unnecessary work and re-work (section C, below)
- Insufficient staff and staff resources (section D, below)
- Inefficient tools and technology (section E, below)

We describe these three aspects of the problem in more detail below.

C. Rules and Policies³

Recommendation 1: Review rules and policies.

Many rules and policies governing transfer credit cause unnecessary work and re-work. They need a major review and overhaul.

The sub-committee began to review the rules and policies that apply to transfer credit evaluations. The rules we reviewed with recommendations and action items are listed in Appendix 4. Based on those discussions, we offer several specific recommendations.

³ See Appendix 4.

Recommendation 1A. In general, enter all the courses a student has to transfer on the record and use the degree audit system to sort out how they apply to specific degree requirements. This will reduce “re-work” associated with students switching from one school/college to another. Several applications of this recommendation were identified.

Recommendation 1B. Following on recommendation 1A, establish uniform definitions for the use of elective course numbers to allow DARS to apply transferred electives appropriately.

Recommendation 1C. Mary Schey, or her designee, should attend the DARS encoders meetings to ensure that the transfer credit evaluations and DARS are optimally linked.

Recommendation 1D. Wherever possible, the responsibility for and work associated with implementing rules and policies should reside with the unit that made these rules and policies.

Recommendation 1E. Where appropriate, apply the same rules and standards to transfer students and to the transfer credits of continuing students as to UW-Madison courses. A specific example of this is courses with a “D” grade, described below (1J).

Recommendation 1F. Review concurrent enrollment rules with academic units. This should be handled via DARS if possible.

Recommendation 1G. Review with academic units the rule that courses failed in residence may not be repeated for credit off-campus. Exceptions are granted liberally to this rule. Instead, accept all transferable credits and use DARS to apply degree rules.

Recommendation 1H. For course repetition, give all transfer credit for returning students, students with study abroad credit, and continuing students and use DARS to apply degree rules. TA will manage course repetition for new first-year and new transfer students.

Recommendation 1I. Review with academic units the course overlap rules. When transferred courses have a direct UW-Madison equivalency, accept all transferable credits and use DARS to apply degree rules. TA will handle if electives.

Recommendation 1J. TA will provide equivalencies for all courses with a grade of ‘D’ or better as long as the student is admissible or a continuing student. Schools and colleges will add academic action re: probation if applicable.

Recommendation 1K. Review the rules for second-degree candidates with the schools and colleges and identify strategies to reduce the work associated with these students. Recommend that second-degree candidates follow regular undergraduate application process. They will be provided with an information sheet describing the school/college considerations and who to contact for permission.

Recommendation 1L. Continue the review of rules and policies.

Additional actions and recommendations in Appendix 4 require follow-up discussions with specific academic units before they are brought to AAC as specific recommendations.

D. Staffing and Staff Resources

Recommendation 2: Increase Staff and Resources

The review of Transfer Admissions' responsibilities, activities and workload convinced us that this unit is understaffed. Our conclusions repeat those documented in two separate PeopleSoft consultant reviews of the transfer credit system⁴. Based on the consultant reports and our review, sufficient staffing would require the addition of at least 4.5 FTE; 1.5 FTE to bring TA back to the pre-ISIS staffing levels, plus two permanent staff on the technical/functional side, and a full-time trainer. Consultants offered extensive advice for streamlining processes and using the technology more effectively, but all of their advice was predicated on having enough staffing to support the effort.

The evidence is clear. More staff is essential for Transfer Admissions to achieve a satisfactory level of service.

Recommendation 2A. Based on our review and two previous consultant reports up to five staff additional staff positions would be needed to fully staff transfer admissions – two transfer counselors, two functional/technical staff, and one trainer. We recommend that a minimum of 2 FTE be added to transfer admissions, which would return transfer admissions to the pre-ISIS staffing level with an additional 0.5 FTE to begin to address the growth in workload associated with increasing student demand for services and the functional/technical requirements of the software.

E. Technology and Tools

Recommendation 3: Improve the tools and technology.

Let's imagine that all the rules and policies that influence transfer credit evaluations are cleaned up and that two additional full-time staff are put to work updating the transfer equivalency rule tables and implementing and testing enhancements, patches, fixes and upgrades. Would this be enough to get timely transfer credit evaluations? No.

The PS Transfer Module, as implemented, lacks essential functionality and costs us real money in terms of duplicated effort and rework. A three-year old consultant's report lists nine features that are missing in ISIS and that are expected of a "mature and robust transfer credit system". Both the 2000 and the 2001 consultant reports specify that on-going and routine functional and technological support are what's required for doing business with this software. Gaps in functionality identified shortly after ISIS was implemented remain.

We still have many questions. Can we make the PeopleSoft Transfer Module work for us? What will it take? Can we get a commitment from PeopleSoft to redesign the transfer module? If so, how much would it cost? Is that the best way to go? Would we be better off abandoning the PS Transfer Module and converting to the DARS transfer software, which we also own? How much would it cost? What would be the impact? A detailed proposal to accomplish the investigation of these and other questions is described in Appendix 5.

Recommendation 3A. AAC and Admissions should appoint a working group to explore UW-Madison's options for transfer software. The working group should press for

⁴ UW-Madison PeopleSoft Implementation Assessment, Nadine Warner, April 2000; UW-Madison PeopleSoft Transfer Credit Analysis, Kathye Rosel, April 2001.

improvements to the PS Transfer Module, should evaluate the DARS transfer software as an alternative, and should prepare an impact and cost analysis for both options.

F. Next Steps

Recommendation 4. Establish a working group on Transfer Credit Issues

Recommendation 4A. The Admissions Office should establish a campus-wide working group to focus on systems, processes, and technology associated with transfer credit. The working group should have representation from functional offices, schools and colleges, advisors, and technical areas.

We identified several principles and ideal standards of service that were useful in our discussions. They may also be useful to the working group.

G. Principles

1. The Office of Admissions is responsible for transfer admissions to the university and transfer credit evaluations that meet university-wide rules. Schools and colleges should, where possible, handle program admission requirements and transfer credit rules that apply specifically and uniquely to their academic programs.
2. Wherever possible, the responsibility for and work associated with implementing rules and policies should reside with the unit that made these rules and policies.
3. Processes and procedures should always avoid “re-work”. Reduce or eliminate duplication of effort and computer entry.
4. In general, enter all the courses a student has to transfer on the record and let the degree audit system sort out how they apply to specific degree requirements.
5. Students should receive accurate transfer credit evaluation information in a timely fashion.
6. All students should have adequate information about their academic record for enrollment/registration decisions.
7. Complete, updated transfer tables are an essential foundation for all other service goals.
8. Adequate staff resources should be available for workload, professional development, etc. In the absence of sufficient staff, the campus community should expect and accept reduced service.

H. Future “Ideal” Standards of Service.

1. The standard of service should be comparable for all undergraduate students (for example, new versus continuing, first-year versus transfer).
2. Official transfer credit evaluations should be completed for every admitted transfer applicant and provided with the offer of admission. When this is not possible, credit evaluations should be provided before the registration period.

3. Continuing students should receive timely transfer credit evaluations (within 6 weeks of providing transcript).
4. Complete, updated transfer tables are available as an essential foundation for all other service goals.
5. The transfer credit evaluation technology should interface optimally with the degree audit technology.
6. Self-serve transfer credit evaluations should be available to all students and prospects. A priority for self-service is courses from UWS and WTCS institutions, followed by other institutions from which students transfer large numbers of credits.
7. Self-service evaluations should include the capability to run "what if" degree-audit scenarios.