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To: A&S Faculty Council

From: Martin Rapisarda

Subject: Requiring 30 Credit Hours for MLAS Degree

Since its beginning over 15 years ago, the Master of Liberal Arts & Science (MLAS) program has required either 27 graduate credit hours or 21 hours with a thesis. MLAS students pursuing the thesis option would enroll in six hours of Thesis Research after having completed 21 hours. The thesis would be submitted according to the Academic Regulations stated in the Graduate School bulletin.

The current SACS re-accreditation effort has brought into focus discussions a number of us have had about realigning the MLAS credit-hour requirement with many other degree programs at Vanderbilt. With many VU programs requiring at least 30 hours for the Master’s degree in the non-thesis option, the MLAS program stands as an outlier. Below is an extended quotation from p.53 of the Graduate School Bulletin, 2006/2007.

Non-Thesis Programs

Non-thesis master’s degree programs offered in anthropology, classics, computer science, economic development, environmental engineering, French, geology, German, hearing and speech sciences, Latin American studies, liberal arts and science, mathematics, political science, Portuguese, religion, sociology, and Spanish specify additional course work up to at least 30 hours. Some programs also require an examination in addition to the 30 hours in lieu of a thesis. Not later than fourteen days prior to the end of the term, the student’s department will verify that all degree requirements have been completed.

Proposal to Increase the MLAS Degree Requirement to 30 hours

For students admitted in the next academic year by the Graduate School into the MLAS program, we propose requiring 30 hours in the non-thesis option or 24 hours plus six hours of thesis research culminating in the thesis. The change in credit hours required for the MLAS would be effective for the students admitted in the academic year following all the necessary A&S and Graduate School faculty approvals.
By way of added background as we move toward the potential a 30-credit hour MLAS degree, I would like to note four additional enhancements to the program’s design.

1) **Course Pre-View Event:** Invite the next semester’s faculty and current/new MLAS students to an information session about upcoming courses. Included would be Q&A with the faculty about the course, syllabus, assignments and requirements—before the students have to register. For the faculty it may also serve as a peer group and to build cohesion in the program. Our first Pre-View Evening is scheduled for November 29th in Wilson Hall, with seven courses being offered for Spring 2007.

2) **MLAS Introductory Course:** A course on a topic that is also designed to familiarize new MLAS students with research methods, graduate work, and the distinction between disciplinary and interdisciplinary/multidisciplinary study. One course at Stanford examined the “plague” in history, literature, biology, international politics and sociology. A course at Johns Hopkins used the *DaVinci Code* as a pretext to examining art history, intellectual property, religion, secret societies, the Grail legend in history and literature, the biblical canon, among other topics teased out of the novel and movie of that name. Because the MLAS student is one who has been out of school on average 15 years, this course would be a proper way to (re)-orient our students to the liberal arts and to graduate work.

3) **MLAS Capstone Course:** A final course for all MLAS students, which would culminate in a thesis or capstone project, a document or project that would synthesize or take off from their coursework in the program. Rather writing a thesis in isolation, the students would have the benefit of a course structure, the guidance of a faculty mentor, and interaction with a peer group.

4) **Dean’s MLAS Scholarship:** Create two scholarships per year earmarked for either underrepresented minorities or individuals in non-profit organizations. The scholarships would be contingent on an enrollment of around 100 students in both fall and spring. In other words, we need around 200 enrollments per year. And the amount of the scholarship would be equivalent to the 70% tuition benefit already enjoyed by Vanderbilt faculty and staff. These scholarships would be attractive to individuals in the community who might otherwise not be able to afford the MLAS tuition.

Part of the reason for the move to 30-credit hours in MLAS was to ensure parity with many Master’s programs across campus. It was reinforced by the re-accreditation team’s requesting that we revisit the current 27-hour requirement.

Items two and three above serve as pedagogical justification for the move to 30-credit hours, and the rationale for incorporating these enhancements is reinforced in a survey of 26 analogous MLAS programs from across the U.S. There are approximately 125 such programs nationwide. See the document entitled “MLAS Program Research” for data on the 26 surveyed programs. Most of the surveyed programs require both an introductory and a capstone course. Details on how these courses would be structured will be worked out in the future. These changes moreover remain well within the spirit of the MLAS program, where students can enroll in a broad set of liberal arts courses. Even though we would be mandating two required courses (the introductory and the capstone courses), the students could still take eight courses of their choosing from among those offered each semester in the program.