To: Gregg Horowitz, Chair of A&S Faculty Council
From: George Becker, Chair of Ad Hoc Joint CASP/CEP Committee
Date: February 8, 2010
Re: Recommendations to the Faculty Council

The A&S Faculty Council created an Ad Hoc Joint CASP/CEP Committee and charged it with reviewing the minimum and maximum number of credits required by A&S academic majors and interdisciplinary majors. Existing regulations stipulate that A&S major programs must require between 27 and 36 credit hours and that A&S-based interdisciplinary programs must require between 36 and 48 credits.

The Faculty Council identified two issues that needed to be addressed: 1. Several departments require courses that do not count toward the major and/or require courses that have prerequisites in the major department that do not count toward the major (so-called “hidden prerequisites of the major”). 2. A number of interdisciplinary programs have developed to the point that they are indistinguishable from regular departments in the sense that they have their own faculty members, major and minor programs, offices, and administrative staff. In light of these developments, the question being posed is whether or not these advanced interdisciplinary programs should continue to be held to the minimum 36 credit-hours rule?

As indicated in the charge, the Committee’s recommendations would have to be in line with an important accreditation principle. This principle stipulates that a university’s requirements for undergraduate programs conform to the commonly accepted standards and practices used by universities considered peer institutions.

The Committee (consisting of Professors Karen Campbell, David Cliffel, M. Shane Hutson, Arleen Tuchman, and George Becker) conducted its business over the course of two meetings, on Friday, 12/09 and Friday, 2/10. We are indebted to Dean John Sloop’s support and the able services of Deloris Stephenson for securing data from our peer institutions and compiling the information on a flow chart to facilitate comparisons. The eight peer institutions are: Duke, Emory, Northwestern, New York University, Princeton, Stanford, University of Virginia, and Washington University.

Examination of the flow chart allows for some conclusions. While it proves often difficult or impossible to locate the regulation that speaks to the minimum/maximum number of hours allowed at a given university, the existence of such a regulation can be roughly ascertained by identification of the range of the minimum number of hours mandated by departments at that university. For example, at the University of Virginia the Russian and the Religious Studies majors have the lowest number requirement with 24 hours. The Physics major, by comparison, has the highest requirement with a maximum of between 50 to 63 hours in addition to a possible 8 to 12 “hidden” prerequisite hours, leading to a total of a possible 75 hours. Similarly, at Emory University the range of minimum hours is equally wide. Whereas the Political Science major
requires a minimum of 32 hours, the Neuroscience major ranks highest with a 76-total hours requirement, of which 20 hours are “hidden” requirements. With the exception of Duke University, there typically exists a fairly wide range in the minimum program requirements at our peer institutions (see flow chart for details). It should be noted that the high number of hours required in some programs of study are the result of “hidden” requirements and/or “hidden” prerequisites of the major.

Another finding relates to the number of hours required for interdisciplinary programs of study. While it appears that some of our peer institutions require a higher number of hours for such programs (e.g., Emory University), other institutions (e.g., Duke University and the University of Virginia) operate without such a requirement.

The peer institution whose regulations most impressed the Committee is Stanford University. Its regulations were deemed most compatible with the needs and requirements of the different programs of study. Stanford stands alone among the peer institutions by allowing the faculty of each department to set the hour requirements. In other words, there are no minimum/maximum credit hour regulations with which all departments must comply. As a result, one finds that whereas the Women and Gender Studies Program requires a mere 18 hours, the programs in Classics, Physics, and Chemistry require a minimum of 60 hours, 56 hours, and 52 hours respectively. While unimpressed with the lack of a College-wide minimum hour requirement, the Committee was unanimous in its support for a policy that would allow the faculty of each department to set the maximum number of credit hours for majors. It was argued that, minus a College rule that specifies a maximum number of hours, each department was free to insure academic rigor deemed appropriate for a given program of study without the need to circumvent a more or less arbitrary rule by way of “hidden” requirements.

In light of these facts, the Committee proposes the following unanimous recommendations:

1. The requirement of a minimum of 27 hours should be retained.
2. The regulation requiring a maximum of 36 hours should be eliminated.
3. All prerequisites should be accurately and clearly stated in the Catalog.
4. Established interdisciplinary majors should be treated the same as regular majors.
5. The College should follow the Stanford University model of allowing the faculty of each department (including the faculties in established interdisciplinary programs) to determine the maximum number of hours for its major.

It should be noted that the above recommendations are within the limits of practices at our peer institutions (i.e., they involve nothing novel).

The Committee members concluded their deliberation with discussion of a concern raised by Professor Michael Bess. As noted in the charge to the Committee, Professor Bess was concerned
that the elimination of a “36-credit maximum requirement for majors would diminish or eliminate the third component of a liberal arts education, which is an exploration of subjects in elective courses beyond what is required by the general education component (AXLE) and the major component.” The Committee members, while sensitive to this concern, came to the unanimous conclusion that there is sufficient room within the existing AXLE and the major program requirements (with often numerous cross-listed courses) to allow students exposure to a sufficient range of courses outside the narrower confines of their areas of concentration. Importantly, also, the Committee feels strongly that the proposed recommendations provide the needed degrees of freedom to enable individual departments to insure academic rigor and/or satisfy certification requirements without the need to circumvent College regulations.