Curriculum Committee

TO: Jack Shea, Chair – All College Committee
FROM: Jim Carabetta, Chair – Curriculum Committee
SUBJECT: Recommendation Regarding CTAG Proposal
DATE: October 28, 2008

Pursuant to our previous conversation, and your request, please find attached the recommendation of the Curriculum Committee with regard to the Commonwealth Transfer Advisory Group proposal regarding transfer policy.

As should become apparent from your reading of our report, the Curriculum Committee had little to no support for the proposal as written, and in fact found almost all the objective aspects that were proposed within it to be problematic. Several meetings' discussion within the Committee concluded that we should not be accepting grades of D in transfer credit (whether as called for in this proposal, or as is currently the case for students entering via the Commonwealth Transfer Compact that mandates such), that the 34 credits of core and potentially 6 additional credits allowed by the proposal were insufficient, that College Algebra should not be accepted as a course fulfilling our (Traditional) Mathematics category of our core, that the second course of the English Composition area of our core should not be allowed to be fulfilled by a “writing intensive course that may be found anywhere within the curriculum”, that financial incentives offered to transfer students should not differ from that which might be offered to our native students, and that state-level committees that are to provide “implementation and oversight” are not assented to.

In general terms, we feel that the implementation of the CTAG proposal would represent “false advertising”, and would be an undesirable step in the direction of removing the identity of the individual state colleges. Additionally, it attempts to term that which we refer to as “standards” for our institution as “barriers” for transfer students. It represents an attempt to bring everybody to a lowest possible shared standard, rather than highest possible goal. It also deprives students of “choice” within the state college system, mandating “sameness” of all, rather than the uniqueness and differentiation of the colleges that provide students with choices that they would not otherwise have given the provisions of this proposal.

This CTAG proposed policy provides nothing of benefit for our students, our potential students, our campus, or the academe at large. It is the opinion of the Committee that, as written, it should be resoundingly rejected.

Please feel free to contact me if you should have any questions with regard to these materials.
Curriculum Committee Recommendation Regarding the CTAG Proposal  
(October 28, 2008)

This memo contains the response and recommendation of the Curriculum Committee to the Final Report from the Commonwealth Transfer Advisory Group (CTAG), dated June, 2008.

Westfield State College’s mission statement tells us that its “primary mission is to assist its students to develop intellectually and to use their knowledge and skills to improve the social and economic conditions in their communities.” Its purpose being to serve the people of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts thus, one cannot conceive of the college having any legitimate interest in erecting barriers to its students’ progress toward their degrees. Surely, then, we at Westfield can only assent to the conviction, which animates CTAG’s recommendations, that transferring between the state’s institutions of higher education should be as easy as possible. For its part, the Curriculum Committee unreservedly concurs with CTAG that there is nothing to be said for, say, duplicating a course whose equivalent one has already been passed elsewhere, or for decisions on acceptance of credit being delayed because the guidelines available to administrators are unclear. Any disagreement we have with CTAG is certainly not on matters such as these.

WSC has a long history of accepting community college students to work toward Baccalaureate degrees. Professionals from WSC and the community colleges work collaboratively to make transitions from one institution to the other efficient. Regular communication between colleges through and about the transfer compacts/articulation agreements is a good example of these efforts. When transfer students are unable to count community college credit toward a program of study at WSC, it is important to recognize that this is so because the vital mission served by our colleagues in the community colleges is that of transmitting foundational knowledge. Non-transferable courses are not, therefore, simply wasted effort. College Algebra, for instance, is taught at several community colleges, and can prove essential to a transfer student’s success in some of the mathematics courses that fulfill WSC’s core requirement in Traditional Mathematics. But, because one of the goals of such WSC courses is not only to learn but to apply algebra and other aspects of the discipline to concrete problems, it is not in any student’s best interest for College Algebra to be substituted for any of the latter. For this reason, WSC, in the name of its mission to provide the most effective preparation for the student’s academic and pragmatic endeavors, should insist that transfer students take courses that are the same as or equivalent to those native students take. No one is served by excusing transfer students from acquiring academic knowledge or applied skill associated with later success.

In the light of such considerations, and much as we applaud the spirit of the Final Report, the Curriculum Committee has some deep reservations about the recommendations made therein. To put it bluntly, we fear that CTAG’s laudable ambition to make transfer seamless to the extent that it is possible may have led to its failing to distinguish adequately between genuine barriers to transferring credit and the academic standards by which we measure the success of our programs of study for our students. These programs are carefully designed to ensure that our students develop intellectually and creatively, achieve effective skills, and progress successfully in our academic programs. Barriers, we oppose as sincerely as CTAG. Standards, we have a duty to maintain. There are far too many specific problems for us to address here, and so we shall
limit ourselves to stating, first, our broadest objections to the report and, second, a set of principles that we would propose to define WSC’s response to the CTAG report. Our broad objections are that CTAG’s proposals, if implemented, would institutionalize a double standard for native and transfer students and would deprive WSC of much of its discretion, identity, and autonomy in matters regarding transfer.

I: General Objections to the CTAG Report

(A) To standardize general education requirements in the form of the “general education transfer block” described in the CTAG report would be to institute a statewide double standard for native and transfer students, most clearly in respect of core requirements but also with respect to requirements for major programs. There seems to be great scope for serious discrepancies, in both number of credit hours and the characters of individual courses, between any transfer student holding CTAG’s proposed “transfer block” and any student native to WSC. Under the present common core requirements, all native WSC students would complete more credit hours than any transfer students holding the transfer block alone. Also, given the categories named in the transfer block that go undefined, the possibility exists that the transfer block held by a transfer student might differ considerably in content from the common core completed by all native WSC students (as in the case of the College Algebra, explained in our introduction).

To the objection that such double standards are already in effect at Westfield under the Commonwealth Transfer Compact (CTC), we would say, first, that mere precedent does not make good policy; second, that the precedent itself is, historically, a result of the Commonwealth’s fiat rather than of WSC’s wholehearted acceptance of the policy; and, third, that the impact of the CTC is much narrower – in terms of the numbers not only of transfer students but also of programs affected by it – than the CTAG report’s recommendations would be if implemented. In short, WSC has lived – and probably could go on living – with the limited impact of the double standard that the CTC instituted; but CTAG’s recommendations would, in principle and in practice, extend the double standard to every student in Massachusetts. Since we are not convinced that the CTC itself was a good idea inasmuch as it instituted a double standard for any students, we can hardly be expected to approve of extending a very similar double standard to all students.

(B) The same recommendations that give rise to the concerns described in I(A) above would have extremely deleterious effects for WSC’s discretion in matters of transfer. In fact, we worry that WSC would be left, in effect, with little or no such discretion. This is perhaps easiest to see with regard to the strict limitations placed on the requirements that WSC would be entitled to impose on transfer students over and above the transfer block itself. The following are what seem to be the most obvious applications of this objection.

(i) The CTAG recommendations would make it impossible for WSC to ensure that any transfer student holding the transfer block would complete as many credit hours as any of its native students.
(ii) CTAG’s recommendations would make it extremely difficult, perhaps impossible, for WSC to make adjustments in cases in which the courses that a transfer student had completed for any particular categorical core area of the transfer block differed significantly in content from those which WSC’s students may take to satisfy the similar core categorical requirements.

(iii) The proposed requirement to accept all D grades for transfer purposes would make it harder, perhaps even impossible for WSC to reject students whom it considered academically unfit. (To the objection that the CTC already requires WSC to accept D grades, we would make the same response, *mutatis mutandis*, as we would to the objection addressed in 1[A], above. To the further objection that it is another double-standard for us to refuse to accept D grades for transfer students when we can assign D grades to native students, we would say that, when we accept native students, they have not yet earned any D grades in college, and a sufficiently-frequent acquisition of D grades could put any native student’s academic career in jeopardy. The assignment of grades for a course is part of the process of academic discovery, the assignment of poor grades no less than that of good grades. It is unwise for us to ignore what our colleagues at transferring institutions claim to have discovered about the academic aptitudes of putative transfer students – in much the same way that it would be for our colleagues elsewhere to ignore what WSC claims to have discovered about those of our native students, should they seek to transfer.

(C) The creation of statewide standing subcommittees on appeals and transfer alignment (and, perhaps, also that of an office of ombudsperson) would deprive WSC of much of its autonomy with regard to transfer issues. This is to say nothing of the fact that the CTAG report leaves open the possibility of there being more standing subcommittees than these two, with each extra one perhaps having yet further effects on WSC’s autonomy. The autonomy and unique character of the individual Massachusetts state colleges and universities are valuable assets of the system of public higher education in the Commonwealth and should be preserved. In the current system, students from all over the state are able to compare and contrast the characters of different institutions’ programs in their attempts to find the best fit for their academic and professional aspirations. We know that the right fit is essential to students’ subsequent success in their Bachelor’s degrees. Attempting to homogenize these college’s unique and varied programs and experiences, which would be a logical consequence of the implementation of the CTAG Report’s recommendations, is therefore deemed counter-productive.

II: Proposed Principles for WSC’s Response to the CTAG Report

Westfield State College should inculcate, and henceforth proffer, that it does:

1. require transfer students to meet the same standards as native students with respect to WSC’s core requirements;
2. retain its discretion with regard to satisfactory transfer credit both in terms of number of hours and the character of courses;
3. refuse to accept any “D” grade for credit;
4. preserve its autonomy from proposed state-level subcommittees;
5. be permitted to require more than six extra discretionary credits proposed by the CTAG proposal, above and beyond the Report’s proposed “general education transfer block” to ensure that transfer students fulfill WSC’s core requirements, and further not allow core transfer credit to courses transferred into WSC that would not meet the standards established for the respective WSC categorical core area;

6. support communication between the institutions of higher education in Massachusetts so that transfer students can be alerted to WSC’s requirements (e.g., for admission, general education, majors and graduation), so as to forestall the risk of “false advertising” and so that their transfers are successful and efficient;

7. uphold its academic integrity, uniqueness, and distinctiveness; and

8. in no case, support financial incentives for transfer students that are not available to WSC’s native students.