

University of Minnesota and Minnesota State Colleges and Universities

Joint Report on Common Course Numbering and
Minnesota Higher Education • May, 1998

Common Course Numbering and Minnesota Higher Education

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PREFACE

Concerns about the fair and efficient transfer of credits for college-level coursework are common throughout higher education, particularly within and between publicly-supported institutions. These issues have received sustained attention for several years in Minnesota. One suggested mechanism for facilitating better transfer results is a common course numbering system for public colleges and universities. The State of Minnesota has asked Minnesota's public higher education systems to study the advantages and disadvantages of instituting such a system, and to report its findings and recommendation.

We share the concerns that led to the suggestion of a common course numbering system. Many Minnesota college students transfer between units in a college, between colleges, between campuses, and between systems. Faculty and staff devote considerable time to the policy and administrative mechanisms that facilitate transfer of credits, so that equal attention is paid to academic quality, mission differentiation, and the elimination of artificial barriers to students' progress. Any added approach that might improve the transfer process and, therefore, students' ability to plan their educational programs, deserves serious consideration, in the interest of stewardship of public resources.

ISSUE

A system of common course numbers assumes that post-secondary courses with identical numbers and titles are interchangeable between cooperating institutions. On this assumption, students who complete courses at one institution are assured of being granted credit toward comparable requirements at other institutions for courses with common numbers.

Below, we summarize our study of similar initiatives in other states and salient conditions in our systems. Next, we address two primary areas of concern: impact on students, and expense.

BACKGROUND

In 1987, the Minnesota Higher Education Coordinating Board appointed a Task Force on Common Course Numbering to study common course numbering schemes. The Task Force comprised 25 members, including students, from the (then) four public post-secondary systems and from the Private College Council. After a series of six meetings and considerable study, the Task Force produced a report (1987), one of the few substantive documents on this issue in the nation.

The Task Force discovered that twenty-one other states had undertaken no special efforts to articulate courses at the level of detail suggested by common course numbers. Another twenty-four states reported attempting alternative schemes to common course numbers. Only Florida and Puerto Rico have had common course numbering systems in place for a significant period of time; only Florida's involves multiple post-secondary systems.

According to the Task Force's Report, one of the principal reasons there are so few common course numbering systems in use is the complexity of such systems and the high costs of developing and maintaining them. A 1987 cost estimate for implementation across Minnesota's four-year and community colleges (excluding technical colleges, and including no estimates for computer programming, data entry, maintenance, or system-level coordination) concluded it would cost \$2,800,000 to identify equivalent courses across the three systems. To date, several states (e.g., Maryland) have based their decisions not to pursue common course numbering schemes partly on the Task Force's Report.

Florida's "Statewide Course Numbering System" (SCNS) began to operate in 1976, after an extensive three-year implementation. The system, which does not list graduate or vocational-technical courses, includes over 70,000 discrete course entries in over 150 subject areas. However, *less than 10% of the courses listed are equivalent* with some other listed course. Meanwhile, the system office in Tallahassee requires six staff and a non-trivial budget to maintain the system.

In 1983, California began developing the "California Articulation Number (CAN) System." CAN is not a common numbering system; each campus retains its own numbering scheme. However, CAN is an alternate system providing structure through development of identification numbers for cross-referencing commonly-taught courses on two- and four-year campuses. It is based on faculty-approved articulation agreements. Annual costs for central administration of this system were in excess of \$250,000 in 1989.

The California effort, and other limited systems such as that launched by the Maricopa Community College District of Arizona, are comparable to Minnesota's current efforts. Many years ago, Minnesota's post-secondary institutions developed course transfer tables for use by students, faculty, and advisers. These tables were created by faculty and advisers to help transfer students plan efficient courses of study toward the baccalaureate degree. These transfer tables have been consistently updated, as new college bulletins were published, and are now being converted to digital formats.

Other efforts at common course numbering, such as those in Florida and California, have not addressed graduate level courses or vocational courses. Minnesota's current system, however, does allow for transfer of technical college courses when their content is appropriate for the receiving institution and the intended degree.

Since 1986, an agreement between the (then) Minnesota State University System and the Minnesota Community College System stated that community college students completing the Associate of Arts degree would satisfy the general education requirements of the state universities. Since 1991, all colleges of the University of Minnesota have followed the terms of a similar 1981 agreement between the College of Liberal Arts (Twin Cities) and the community college system.

More recently, the Minnesota Transfer Curriculum has provided even more comprehensive ease-of-transfer between all of Minnesota's higher education institutions. During recent preparations for conversion to semester-based curricula, Minnesota's public colleges and universities have renewed their commitment to a common course numbering *convention* that distinguishes between remedial, lower division, upper division, and graduate-level course work. This convention adds considerable functionality to transfer systems while adding virtually no cost and preserving campus autonomy and flexibility.

IMPACTS

How would students be affected by our systems' attempting to implement a common course numbering system?

- Because many students take little notice of course numbers, it would have little effect on their conscious behavior. Students identify courses and choose between them on different bases than administrators do; they would be unlikely to perceive or receive any benefit. Other states have also found that common course numbering systems were of limited benefit, partly because of low student awareness and utilization.
- Because transfer evaluation processes are now extensively digitized, and will become more so, all courses are uniquely identifiable to our computer systems, regardless of their course numbers. New courses with dissimilar numbering systems take no longer to enter into a system than courses with a common numbering system. The best possible solutions to past transfer problems were intercollegiate communication and paper transfer guides. The appropriate solutions now are continued robust communication and the application of leading-edge technology. Conversion to a master numbering system adds no value for students, staff, faculty, colleges, or the state.

What would be the magnitude of the institutional expense of such a common course numbering initiative? Here, expense is a function of complexity. Such an initiative would be extremely complex, at many levels, and therefore prohibitively expensive. For example:

- In order for the system to function, (a) every pair of courses with substantially the same content must have the same course number, and, (b) all courses that do not have the same content must have different course numbers. Satisfying both conditions would require elaborate staff time and other resources to check scores of thousands of course numbers across campuses and systems, in order to set up the system initially. Furthermore, every new or revised course proposal in any college on any campus, far into the future, would have to be checked against existing courses on all campuses for similarity of number and content.
- In states (such as Florida) that have set up such systems, experience has shown that, after this elaborate procedure, relatively few courses are found to be "equivalent" (as noted above) and therefore to share course numbers. If the cost were low, this meagre outcome might be acceptable, but the costs of monitoring and checking have turned out to be very high.
- In order to produce a high proportion of identical course contents across campuses, institutions would have to act against (a) the state's mandate of mission differentiation, and (b) higher education's tradition of intellectual freedom.

RECOMMENDATION

The Task Force on Common Course Numbering concluded that Minnesota should not create a common course numbering system because it would not achieve a measurably better result than existing arrangements for students wishing to transfer. Such a system would be prohibitively costly, cumbersome, and confusing without adding value to the transfer process. After re-examining this issue, we have come to the same conclusion.

The institutional opportunity costs of such an initiative now would be greater than in the past. Both systems are fully engaged in the conversion to semester calendars, and we have begun a landmark partnership with IBM to create the next generation of student services softwares, in concert with system-wide solutions to "the Year 2000 Problem." These systems are not only important competing projects; they will make major contributions to further improving and automating the transfer process. To divert funds and expertise to a common course numbering plan now would be a crippling blow, and would rob students of many educational benefits they deserve.

We have found the results of this study instructive, and appreciate the opportunity to share our findings with you. If you should have any further questions on these topics, please do not hesitate to contact our staffs.

Sincerely yours,

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