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Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities—Assembly Bill 371
Testimony provided by
Steve Hahn,
Vice Provost for Enrollment Management
University of Wisconsin-Madison
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Chair Murphy & Members of the Assembly Committee on Colleges & Universities,

Thank you for the opportunity today to testify on Assembly Bill 371. My name is Steve Hahn and I am the Vice Provost for Enrollment Management at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In this role, I oversee recruitment, admissions, and enrollment processes. My division incorporates the Offices of Admissions, Financial Aid and the Office of the Registrar.

While UW-Madison shares the same goals, as I'm sure do all members of this committee, of improving transferability and making the process easier for students and families, we do have concerns about the changes being proposed by Assembly Bill 371, in that the proposal has the potential to add bureaucracy and administrative burden, create large technical challenges, and require significant fiscal and human resources for our campus and our UW System campuses. But most importantly, it would not necessarily improve the transferability of courses that its language intends. Let me address transferability first.

Transferability

Every year, many students transfer many courses to UW-Madison. In 2018-19, almost 97,000 course credits were successfully transferred to UW-Madison. This includes almost 28,000 course credits for undergraduates who took courses at other UW System institutions and almost 16,000 course credits for undergraduates who took courses from WTCS institutions. The remaining 53,000 credits were for undergraduates who transferred credits from institutions outside these two systems. It should be evident from these figures that UW-Madison welcomes transfer credits. And, also, a common course numbering system would not affect the majority of courses transferred to UW-Madison. Most of these courses do not have and could not have the same number as the course the students took at another institution.

The course number is not a factor in determining the transferability of courses, and it would prove very difficult to give it this meaning. Course equivalency is determined by learning outcomes and topics covered in the course, the level of the course, and the number of credits in the course. Requiring a uniform system has the potential to negatively impact transferability, likely creating more confusion, as it could actually mislead students into thinking that certain courses would transfer when in fact they do not.

The system of course numbering needs to make sense in the context of what is taught at each institution, or even by some departments within an institution. For example, some course numbers are only used for graduate level courses; and, within departments, some use course

numbers as indicators of areas. (History courses that start with 4 are American History courses at UW-Madison.) Attempting to implement common course numbers would likely cause discrepancies in the logic of these subject groups, proving even less clear for students.

Added Bureaucracy & Administrative Burden

UW-Madison alone has over 10,000 active courses on campus and makes about 800 course changes per year, including implementation of new courses; changes to existing courses (such as the course title, learning outcomes, credits, or prerequisites); and course *discontinuations* through governance processes. Under the requirements of the bill, a large and complex new system would need to be developed for administration and governance of a central, uniform course numbering scheme. This would create a unique administrative burden and require significant resources not only to implement but to coordinate daily between institutions, IT systems, and UW System. Almost every course would have to be reviewed to determine if it meets the criteria to be considered the “same course” as one at another institution. If it is determined to be the same course, then its number would likely need to be changed. But more importantly, the courses that are NOT the same as other courses (but have occupied that same number) would also have to be changed. Because each course number change requires modifications to systems that use course numbers, such as the transcript and degree audit systems, just to name two of very many, common course numbering would require an apparatus of almost constant review and updating on every campus and at UW System.

Course numbering touches almost every facet of the student’s digital experience and reporting in our IT system. The fiscal, human, and technical resources to retrofit all the systems and reporting across the UW System to implement such coding would create significant costs, be a multi-year endeavor, and would take away from other strategic priorities to provide superior service toward student success.

New Course Evaluation Team

But while we are not in favor of the particular approach identified in this proposed legislation, as I said earlier we can and do agree on the need for greater clarity and ease of credit transfer for our students. As more students bring more transfer credits to UW-Madison, we have taken steps to improve the processing time for transfer credit and communication about course transfer. The Division of Enrollment Management has developed a new Credit Evaluation Team within the Office of the Registrar. This new team’s primary mission is to (1) process transfer credit of all kinds, (2) maintain current systems and develop new automated technical solutions, (3) be the “forward face” of transfer credit evaluation for students, and (4) enhance on- and off-campus partnerships, *particularly* with UW System and its initiatives in this area. The mission of this office is to update, maintain and publicize true equivalencies between courses within our state and (where we know of them) outside Wisconsin. Implementation of common course numbering would by itself be unresponsive to the true need and divert all efforts to that purpose; this is an innovation that gets at and facilitates true transferability.

Again, I think we all share the goals of easing the course transfer process for students and families. Students have multiple options in the pursuit of their educational goals and recognition

of transfer credit between these options will be a greater and greater need. For all of the educational choices our students make, both within and outside of Wisconsin, UW-Madison is committed to taking holistic steps toward addressing the parts of the credit evaluation process that can be challenging. We continue to welcome feedback on how we can improve, and I would be happy to take questions at this time.