DATE: November 12, 2009

TO: Tih-Fen Ting
Chair Campus Senate

FROM: Sharron LaFollette, Chair
Graduate Council

RE: Nine Credit Hour Minimum for Full Time Graduate Student Status

In recent years, several UIS graduate programs have converted from four–credit-hour to three-credit-hour graduate courses in their curricula. In some cases, the modified curricula are grounded in a four-courses-per-semester course plan (e.g., Human Development Counseling) for degree completion, while in others the curricular structure assumes a three-courses-per-semester course plan (e.g., Master of Business Administration). Curricular shifts from four- to three-credit-hour courses were based on recommendations from accreditation bodies, as well as other academically-based curriculum factors.

Many universities offer graduate degree programs based on three-credit-hour courses and consider nine credit hours the minimum enrollment required for full-time-student status. Despite a diverse credit hour structure at UIS that recognizes different academic strategies for degree completion, the minimum enrollment for full-time graduate student status at UIS remains the same as that for full-time student status at the undergraduate level: 12 credit hours. Presumably, the minimum was originally based on the four-credit-hour and three-courses-per-semester system that historically was the only system represented at SSU/UIS until recent years.

The Provost's office and the College of Business and Management requested a review by the Graduate Council of the current policy. The current 12-credit-hour minimum does not recognize the substantial difference in course demands associated with graduate versus undergraduate work, and it does not recognize the range of course plans represented in the high-quality graduate curricula currently offered at UIS. More specifically, under the current campus minimums, graduate students enrolled in curricula structured on a three, three-credit-hour course plan are not viewed as carrying a full course load.
Graduate students at UIS who do not meet the official campus enrollment requirement of 12 credit hours during the fall and spring semesters are not eligible for some forms of financial assistance, and international students whose enrollment falls below the current official campus minimum of 12 credit hours must either enroll in and complete additional graduate-level courses outside their degree programs or face having to leave the U.S. This represents a substantial academic and financial concern for a growing number of our graduate students, and will undoubtedly hinder enrollment in some graduate programs if the current minimum is maintained.

From an academic perspective, Graduate Council considers 9 credit hours to be a full-time course load for graduate students. From a national perspective, the Integrated Post-Secondary Education Data System (IPEDS), as compiled by the U.S. Department of Education, also considers 9 hours to be the minimum for a full-time classification at the graduate level. As previously noted, a review of comparable Illinois and national public universities finds nine-hour full-time course loads are common for graduate students.

In recognition of the variability of graduate course structures across the campus, the Graduate Council considered the larger context of possibly changing the campus policy on graduate full-time status to meet overall campus needs. Graduate Council has consulted with the administration and believes that it would be desirable to apply this policy consistently across campus. Having one set of standards for one college/department and another for a different college/department is not only inconsistent but also has the potential to seem inequitable to graduate students across the university. This would also require an extensive and time-consuming restructuring of our integrated registration, records, and institutional reporting systems.

Upon analysis, Graduate Council believes that a nine-credit-hour minimum enrollment for full-time status would work academically for all graduate programs, whether their curricula are based on a four-credit-hour course plan or a three-credit-hour course plan. Graduate Council believes that the curricular design of the degree program and the course plan for degree completion presuming full-time study should be the determining factors; the proposed change to the campus minimum number of credit hours for full time enrollment is simply that – a minimum number of credit hours required for full-time status. Just as degree programs vary in the total number of credit hours required for the degree, so too do their underlying course credit-hour systems and course plans for timely degree completion under optimal levels of enrollment.

A representative of the Graduate Council participated in a discussion of the administrative aspects of this proposed change. On October 23, 2009, Lynn Pardie, Tim Barnett, Brian Clevenger, Jerry Joseph, and James Hall met to discuss the potential impact of the proposed resolution. The consensus of the meeting was there is no significant administrative obstacle or concern about moving to a 9-credit-hour minimum for full-time graduate student status, as long as the resolution proposes that the change in campus policy would go into effect for the Summer Semester of 2010—and not before—and that the campus minimum will be nine credit hours at the graduate level in
the regular terms (i.e., Fall and Spring). Minimum credit hours for full-time status in the summer term (6 hours) would remain unchanged.

Brian Clevenger, Jerry Joseph, and Laura Dorman also conferred regarding any necessary changes in the campus definitions of half-time, less than half-time, and part-time enrollment credit hours. Those definitions primarily have administrative implications, rather than academic ones. The minimum enrollment for GA and GPSI students would remain at 8 credit hours per regular semester.

Thus, Graduate Council is advancing the attached resolution to change the minimum number of credit hours required for full-time student status at UIS, and believes it is important to act on the resolution this semester so that, if approved, administrative preparations for the change can begin. Such preparations will include notifying students that there are fee implications for next year. Graduate Council respectfully proposes the attached resolution for consideration by the Campus Senate.

cc: Harry Berman, Provost & Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs
    Lynn Pardie, Associate Vice Chancellor for Graduate Education & Research