SUMMARY

In fall 2008 the Fulton School of Liberal Arts implemented a new curriculum delivery system, moving from a traditional three-credit course model to an innovative four-credit course model similar to the “course-based” curriculum found at many of the nation’s best private liberal arts colleges. The goal of the new model was to “provide all Salisbury University students taking Fulton courses—via majors, minors, General Education and electives—with an enhanced, deeper, more focused, more engaged and more rigorous learning experience” and to “invigorate the liberal arts at SU and revolutionize how both students and faculty work – and work together – in the Fulton School setting.” Student and faculty feedback collected to date strongly suggests that the new course model is working well. Data show that the reform has had no negative effect on retention and graduation rates, and that indeed it delivers instruction more efficiently than its three-credit predecessor. We continue to adjust our curriculum to meet the needs of our students, but we believe that the major changes we have made to our programs and courses have been successful in transforming our curriculum and providing our students with an academic experience appropriate to a Maryland university of national distinction.

The Fulton Four-Credit Course Model

Under the new model, a student in the Fulton School typically takes four four-credit courses instead of five three-credit courses. In many cases, the seat time for the class is the same as it was for a three-credit course, but the expectations for work completed outside class time have been increased significantly, in compliance with code of Maryland (COMAR) regulations. The reform emphasizes greater academic rigor and deeper engagement, and it has provided a menu of manageable and innovative ways to enhance existing three-credit courses by an extra credit hour. All new courses, of course, follow the same rules.

The Fulton Reform course enhancement menu includes:

1. Increased course content and/or collateral readings
2. Undergraduate Research and Information Literacy
3. Technology
4. Higher Level Critical Thinking Exercises
5. Service Learning/Civic Engagement
6. International Education/Cultural Enrichment
7. Additional hour(s) in class, lab or studio

Curriculum reform also has reshaped the teaching load of fulltime Fulton faculty members, who now typically teach three four-credit courses instead of four three-credit. Each course requires substantially more work, as faculty members support the additional learning activity with active mentoring and evaluation. Teaching fewer courses better enables faculty members to keep up
with their academic fields and revise course content, and also to keep up with innovations in pedagogy, including the fast-changing technologies that support instruction.

**The Course and Program Reform Process**

Using the enhancement menu (above), the Fulton faculty converted over 500 existing three-credit courses to four-credit courses. All 500 courses – complete with enhancement details and demonstration of COMAR compliance – were vetted and approved by both the Fulton and Undergraduate Curriculum Committees over a two-year period. As the typical major, with twelve courses – could not simply expand from 36 to 48 credit hours without severely affecting a student’s ability to meet all other graduation requirements, each major and minor had to be redesigned as well, with a limit of ten courses for the major and five for the minor. Three programs – Art, Political Science and Philosophy – served as pilots for full reform in the fall of 2007, and the rest of the school followed a year later.

**Student Feedback – “Three Common Questions”**

In 2008-2009, the first year of School-wide implementation, all students taking a four-credit Fulton course who had previously taken a 3-credit course in the same discipline were asked three questions:

1. Did the 4-credit course require *significantly more work*?
2. Did they *learn more* in the 4-credit course?
3. Were they *more engaged* in the 4-credit course?

Substantial majorities answered affirmatively in each case. In fall 2008, 77% of respondents (just over 3,000) chose *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* for “significantly more work,” while 62% chose those answers for “learned more,” and 62% responded in kind for “more engaged.” In spring 2009, with over 2,600 respondents, 77% again chose *Strongly Agree* or *Agree* regarding “significantly more work,” while 66% gave those answers for “learned more,” and 58% for “more engaged.”

The Fulton School is looking forward to the 2012 NSSE (National Survey of Student Engagement) results to see how they compare with the most recent NSSE results (from 2008) and what they might reveal regarding the Fulton reform.

**Faculty/Chair Feedback – May 2009, May 2010, Fall 2011**

Faculty feedback solicited via two surveys (in May 2009 and May 2010) and a request for feedback, aimed primarily at chairs, in fall 2011 (as the reform begins its fourth year of full implementation), has yielded a wealth of information regarding how faculty have enhanced their courses, how they think their students have responded, whether faculty think the reform has made them better teachers, and the effect the reform has had on Fulton School programs.

By far, the most common enhancements have been those associated with more reading, more writing, and more research. Students are reading much more in most courses. Faculty members are not only assigning more reading, but more challenging reading as well. Students are writing much more as well, including both short “reaction” essays (frequently as a response to outside reading assignments, but also related to on-campus academic and cultural events they are required to attend). Larger research projects break down research and writing process, including
the development of annotated bibliographies and step-by-step faculty mentoring. A growing number of faculty members use technology to have students discuss readings or films or campus events online as a separate or parallel discussion to what is happening in class or to engage web-based reading and interactive assignments (quizzes or foreign language grammar exercise and practice). Several faculty members have added experiential learning, via service learning opportunities, civic engagement, or field trips, both locally and farther afield. Several colleagues have even incorporated study abroad as part of their enhancement strategy, leading students to England, Iceland Italy and Ghana.

Many faculty members reported that students responded fairly well during the first year of School-wide implementation, but many also noted that some students struggled, and a few (particularly seniors, say, needing one more Fulton course to complete a minor or graduate) even expressed resentment regarding the sudden extra work (some students even asked if they could take a three-credit version of the course instead, as they did not need the fourth credit). Most faculty reported, however, in 2010, that they had seen a significant change in student performance and attitude from one year to the next, with some even saying that the reform was no longer an issue with students. This sentiment was even stronger in 2011. Most faculty felt that they were better teachers due to the reform and the reconfigured teaching load, and many were adamant about that. They said that they focused better on their fewer courses/sections and fewer students and on each student’s work and provided better mentoring. They also felt challenged by the enhancements and the opportunities offered by the four-credit model to do more, to stretch themselves, with regard both to new content and new pedagogical approaches. They also reported that they had the energy—and again, focus—to do this all of this. Many, however, even among the most positive, felt that the 3/3 load of four-credit courses was actually more work than the old 4/4 load with three-credit courses. Most thought this was due to the newness of teaching courses in the new model, however, and that it would get better with time. Most, however, would agree that the reconfigured teaching load was just that, a reconfigured load and not a teaching load reduction.

The 2011 feedback, principally from chairs, focused mostly on how the reform had allowed departments to raise expectations in their courses and across their programs and how students were both rising to those expectations and reaping the benefits of the reformed curriculum. One chair, for instance, spoke of a senior capstone seminar with primary texts the difficulty of which her major’s students never could have handled—nor would they have been assigned—in pre-reform days. Chairs and faculty talked about the complexity and greater levels of analysis and research they were adding to writing assignments, up, even, from the assignments they had been making at the outset of the reform. Dr. Nicole Munday, Director of the SU Writing Center, reported the significant and ongoing rise in Writing Center visits made by Fulton majors since the launch of the reform as evidence of both the greater emphasis on writing in the four-credit course model and students taking more responsibility for their education, as Writing Center visits are voluntary.

Not all responses to the request for feedback were as positive as those mentioned above. A small minority of faculty members were, and remained – though less so – in 2011, concerned about student response, and, in particular, how the reform had actually decreased their time for research and service. And one faculty member even said that the best suggestion that he/she
could make regarding improving the reform would be to repeal it. Responses like these, though, again, were very much in the minority.

**Impact of the Reform on Key University Success Indicators**

Prior to implementation of the reform, some colleagues expressed concern that a more challenging curriculum might have a significantly negative impact on retention and graduation rates, academic probations, or the number of Fulton majors. The data show that this has not been the case. Fulton majors have jumped from 1,950 in 2006 to 2,334 in 2010, an increase of 19.7%, compared to 16.2% University-wide. Fulton undergraduate student credit hours have increased from 80,744 (43.6% of the SU total) in 2006-2007 to 94,480 (43.7%) in 2010-2011. Fulton generates almost the same percentage of credit hours for the university despite the fact that general education requires fewer Fulton courses (seven instead of ten, meaning 28 instead of 30 credit hours). Year Two Retention Rates for the University have gone from 81.3% (2006) to 82.5% (2010). Both Four-Year and Six-Year Graduation Rates have remained steady: Four-Year—2004 cohort, 46.6% 2007 cohort, 46.4%; Six-Year—2002 cohort, 68.9%, 2005 cohort, 66.6%. The percentage of first-time students placed on academic probation has actually gone down significantly, from 22.5% in 2006 to 14% in 2010. First-time student suspensions have dropped as well, from 0.87% in 2006-2007 to 0.003% in 2010-2011. The only data point that suggests a possible (though not demonstrated) negative impact of the reform is an increase in the number of students that drop below fulltime status (12 credits) in a given semester as a result of dropping a course. That percentage was 8.17% in 2006-2007, but 11.6% in 2010-2011. While this might suggest that more students are dropping or failing Fulton courses since the reform, Fulton School ABC (vs. DFW) grades have actually gone up slightly since the reform, from 86% ABC grades in 2006 to 88% in 2010 (the University increased from 87% to 88%). The percentage of F and W grades within Fulton’s DFW distribution has shown no marked change, and in some departments W grades have actually gone down. As sixteen credit hours becomes more normative as a typical full-time load, it will be important to advise students carrying fewer credit hours that dropping a four-credit course would make them part-time.

**Efficiency of the Fulton Four-Credit Course Model**

Simply put, the Fulton School, via the four-credit course model, is delivering more credits by way of fewer sections, less class time and less use of classroom space than via the former three-credit course model. Compare:

1. The Fulton School generated 3,452 credit hours in 1,173 course sections in 2006-2007;
2. The Fulton School generated 4,048 credit hours in 1,079 course sections in 2010-2011.

And Fulton courses required just 46.97 minutes of class seat time weekly per credit hour in 2010-2011, compared to 54.07 minutes in 2006-2007. For 80%–90%+ of Fulton courses that deliver four credit hours via three class hours per week, the average number of in-class minutes per credit hour is actually only 37.5. Bringing up the average are the relatively few courses that have added a fourth hour of seat time, and Art studio courses, where the added time has been an unqualified success. Though it is an unintended result of the Fulton reform, these numbers—particularly the 37.5 minutes per credit hour figure—align well with the USM’s Effectiveness and Efficiency (E&E) Initiative and contribute to a “greener” delivery courses.
Conclusion

The full effect of curriculum reform on our students and faculty extends well beyond the classroom. It has promoted student attendance and participation in the rich cultural life of the campus, including lectures, film screening, art exhibitions, plays, dance showcases, and musical performances. Students and faculty members engage one another more outside the classroom; even if much of this is related to particular course enhancements, it is still a very positive community builder and enhances both the students’ and the faculty’s Fulton experience. Many faculty members report being invigorated by the opportunity and experience of enhancing their courses, and their more focused three-course teaching load, to pursue more—and sometimes more ambitious—research projects and in general to stretch themselves professionally in ways they might not have considered before. And the 3/3 teaching load and four-credit course model have attracted a larger, more diverse and more highly qualified pool of applicants for faculty positions in Fulton. Our curriculum reform has also attracted attention and queries from other institutions across the country.

A motto of the reform effort was “Invigorating the Liberal Arts” at Salisbury University. More than three years after full implementation, the reformed curriculum appears to be accomplishing that goal as we engage students and faculty alike in courses and programs that foster develop the knowledge and foster the skills of research, analysis and writing that are critical to professional success in a knowledge-based economy and to the achievement of their full potential as individuals and citizens.

See the full report on our website: www.salisbury.edu/fulton/curriculum/4-creditmodel.html.