

**Resolution in support of a
Cornell University Transfer Credit Policy for
Undergraduate Students**

Background

Proposal in Support of a Resolution to Adopt a Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students

Resolution

Whereas currently, Cornell colleges/schools have different systems for awarding transfer credits;

Whereas the current disjointed approaches produce hardships and inequities for transfer students, including substantial delays in transfer credit decisions and notifications and inconsistent transfer credit evaluations;

Whereas the current transfer credit evaluation processes are cumbersome and involve time-consuming, repetitive processes for staff and faculty;

Whereas the ***Proposal in Support of a Resolution to Adopt a Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students*** explains in detail these hardships and inequities for transfer students and the laborious administrative processes for staff and faculty involved in transfer credit evaluations;

Whereas the ***Proposal*** also explains how the proposed ***Cornell University Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students*** would substantially mitigate, and in some dimensions eliminate, the significant failures of our present systems;

Whereas pursuant to the proposed ***Cornell University Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students***, the university would (1) adopt university-wide standards and methods for assigning transfer credits, including standards for evaluating course equivalencies and calculating credits for quarter-term courses and (2) develop a university-wide database that contains transfer credit evaluations upon which colleges/schools and academic departments/majors would rely and provides a web-based public portal that allows students to promptly and easily determine their transfer credit awards at Cornell;

Be it therefore resolved that the university adopt the proposed ***Cornell University Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students***.

Cornell University Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students

This policy establishes university-wide standards and methods for assigning transfer credits. It applies to all undergraduate colleges and schools of Cornell as well as any additional campus and extension sites that award transfer credit to Cornell undergraduate students. The policy is to be administered by the Office of the University Registrar (OUR) in conjunction with college/school registrars and academic department designees. The determination of acceptability of transfer credit for coursework completed at another institution of higher learning is made solely at the discretion of Cornell based on the standards set forth in this policy, as follows:

- Any U.S. institution from which transfer credit is sought must be regionally accredited by the United States Department of Education.
- Transfer credit will be awarded only upon the student's submission of an official transcript from the institution at which the credit was earned.
- Courses completed seven or more years ago will not provide transfer credit.

Equivalency Determinations

- An external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course if it is approximately 80% similar along the dimensions of scope, content, and learning outcomes to the Cornell course to which it is being compared.
- Equivalency is evaluated by the academic department/major that offers (or is the parent department of) the Cornell course in question.
- Equivalency is determined based upon a review of a course syllabus.
- Equivalency may not be denied based upon type of institutional setting (e.g., community college) or course instruction mode (e.g., online).
- If an external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course, a college/school or academic department/major may not impose additional requirements for the external course unless those same requirements also apply to the equivalent Cornell course.
- A student who has completed a course at another institution that is determined to be equivalent to a Cornell course may elect to retake the course at Cornell, but the student may only receive academic credit for one of the two courses.
- Once made, OUR will enter equivalency determinations into a database, currently, the Transfer Evaluation System (TES), and colleges/schools and academic departments/majors shall adopt these equivalency determinations.
- Equivalency determinations will be reviewed every three years.
- If it becomes evident that a course deemed equivalent does not adequately prepare students for a higher-level Cornell course, or an external course or its Cornell equivalent has substantially changed since the equivalency evaluation, a new equivalency review may be triggered within the three-year period.

Courses Without Equivalencies

- Each Cornell college/school or program determines how external courses without equivalencies may be used to meet degree requirements.¹

Minimum Transfer Grade

- The minimum grade for transfer is C.
- A Cornell college/school or academic department/major may require a grade other than a C for the course to fulfill a specific curricular requirement only if the Cornell course deemed equivalent is subject to the same grade requirement.
- Pass/fail and ungraded courses may receive credit as long as the institution provides a written statement that the mark represents a grade of C or better.

Conversion of Quarter Credits

- Quarter credits from other U.S. institutions will be converted to semester credits by multiplying the number of quarter credits by two thirds.

Limit to Number of Credits Transferred

- With the exception of students in the College of Engineering and in the Department of Architecture in the College of Architecture, Art, and Planning, students are permitted to transfer up to 60 credits, including coursework and credit by exam (e.g., Advanced Placement [AP], International Baccalaureate [IB], and Cornell Advanced Standing [CASE] exams). In the College of Engineering, which requires 123-137 credits to graduate (depending on the major), students are permitted to transfer up to 66 such credits. For Architecture, which is a five-year program and requires 154 credits to graduate, students are permitted to transfer up to 64 such credits.²
- All undergraduate students, with the exception of students in the Department of Architecture, are required to complete a minimum of 60 credits at Cornell to graduate. Students in Architecture, which is a five-year program, are required to complete 90 credits at Cornell.
- First-year students may receive transfer credit for pre-matriculation coursework, subject to the limits stated above and college/school policies about the type of coursework for which transfer credits will be awarded.

¹ Degree requirements are courses that fulfill requirements for a major, minor, concentration, and/or college/school distribution requirements. Some courses may count for both major and distribution requirements. Distribution requirements are college/school-specific courses required to fulfill breadth and depth requirements (each college/school defines their own).

² If the College of Engineering or the Department of Architecture reduces the number of credits required to graduate, the limit to the number of permissible transfer credits would be reduced accordingly (not to fall below 60 credits). In the case of Architecture, such a reduction in graduation credits would also result in a concomitant reduction of the number of credits that students are required to complete at Cornell (not to fall below 60 credits) (see next bullet).

- After matriculation, students who wish to enroll in courses at other institutions and transfer credits into Cornell must receive prior approval from their respective college/school or academic department/major; otherwise, they risk taking courses for which they might not receive transfer credit. The limit to transfer credits awarded, subject to the maximums stated above, is determined by the admitting college/school.
- Junior-standing transfer students who have accumulated the maximum transfer credit limit are not eligible to take additional external transfer credits after matriculation to Cornell to complete Cornell graduation or major requirements.
- Study abroad experiences during the fall or spring semesters that are approved by Cornell's Office of Global Learning will not count towards the transfer credit limits set forth in this policy.³

Religious Studies Courses

- Transfer students may receive credit for religious studies courses that are not doctrinal, confessional, or sectarian in nature.

Independent Study and Research Courses

- Independent study and research courses will be reviewed on a case-by-case basis by the relevant college/school or academic department to determine if/how a course should be awarded transfer credits.

Internships/Externships

- Internships and externships should not carry credit by themselves unless they are part of a college-approved program. However, an individual student may arrange with a Cornell faculty member for an independent study, research, or other academic project to be based on the internship. Credit should be arranged within academic departmental rules for independent or directed study and should meet the usual departmental standards.
- Internal transfer students transferring from one Cornell college to another may receive transfer credit for Cornell-approved internships/externships and independent/directed study, subject to college/school rules.

Non-transferable Courses

- Credit is not permitted for courses that are not designed for transfer to baccalaureate degree programs at Cornell. Such courses are usually highly specialized or are vocational in nature.
- Courses not eligible for transfer include:
 - College orientation, study skills, or career development courses
 - Math courses below the pre-calculus level

³ Students in the College of Arts and Sciences are cautioned to check with the College to determine if a particular program that they are considering has been approved by the College.

- Credits from specialized or proprietary institutions or industry-based education programs
- Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) courses
- Remedial or developmental courses offered for non-credit
- Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs)

Cornell colleges/schools may grant exceptions to the above list of non-transferable courses as they deem appropriate.

Credit by Exam

- There are several ways to receive academic credit for non-collegiate learning experiences. Students may receive credit from standardized national exams such as the Advanced Placement (AP) program, the International Baccalaureate (IB) program, or the General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (GCE A-Level). If transfer course credit and standardized credit by exam result in duplicate credit, only the transfer course credits will be accepted.⁴
- For external transfer students, to receive credit by exam, by the last day of instruction (as indicated in the academic calendar published by OUR) of the student's first semester enrolled at Cornell, a student must:
 - contact the relevant testing agency and request that the testing agency send their scores to Cornell and
 - submit a written request to their [college/school registrar](#) that the credit earned by exam be applied to their degree requirements.

International Transfer of Credits

- International coursework will generally transfer from undergraduate programs of colleges and universities recognized by a national Ministry of Education or alternative appropriate accrediting organization, including regional accreditation from the U.S. Credit for coursework taken at other institutions will be transferred subject to the following considerations:
 - The mission of the institution. Credit normally is not transferred from specialized or proprietary institutions, military schools, or industry-based education programs.
 - The equivalency of courses to Cornell courses based upon the criteria listed above in the "Equivalency Determinations" section.
 - The appropriateness of the coursework for meeting baccalaureate degree requirements at Cornell.

⁴ Cornell also offers a Cornell Advanced Standing Examination (CASE exam) in some academic areas. These proficiency examinations and special examinations for credit are at the discretion of academic departments. Students who pass the department-specific exam may receive credit for or place out of the respective Cornell course.

- Cornell accepts a broad range of academic courses; however, remedial, English as a Second Language (ESL), and international military courses are not transferable. English courses from abroad must be evaluated by the Department of Literatures in English based on course syllabi.

Grade Records

- A student's transfer grade point average (GPA) is not computed into their Cornell GPA.
- Transfer courses, credits, and grades will not appear on the Cornell transcript.
- The name of a student's transfer institution and total transfer credits accepted by Cornell will appear on the transcript.

Proposal in Support of a Resolution to Adopt a Transfer Credit Policy for Undergraduate Students

Introduction and Summary of Proposal

Currently, Cornell colleges/schools have different systems for awarding transfer credits. They have varied requirements, and some departments have unique hurdles, for recognizing course equivalences. They have different administrative processes for handling credit evaluations, many of which are laborious and require repetition. Sometimes they are developed ad hoc. They use different methods for recording equivalency decisions; some rely on outmoded databases or written notes, and sometimes there are no records to be found. They use different calculations for converting credits from quarter-system institutions. It is not uncommon for a single external course to be evaluated for equivalency over and over again and, potentially, by different individuals. Each evaluation requires substantial recurring emails. These duplicative evaluations, extensive emails, differences in equivalency standards and calculations, inefficient and cumbersome administrative processes, and inadequate databases for retaining records produce substantial delays in transfer credit decisions and notifications to students and inconsistent transfer credit evaluations.

In terms of delays, transfer credit evaluations often are not provided to students until after they have matriculated to Cornell. Students become anxious awaiting decisions, and they are uncertain of their Cornell course obligations when deciding whether to transfer to Cornell. In contrast, transfer students can easily obtain this information at many other institutions at the time they need to make acceptance or even application decisions.

Regarding inconsistencies, for multiple reasons and along multiple dimensions, transfer credit evaluations for an identical course may be inconsistent. As mentioned above, college/schools have different requirements. Even within a single college/school, there may be differences across departments. Inconsistencies accrue across time because evaluators change and/or there is no record of prior credit evaluations and there are no shared guidelines in place to facilitate consistency.

In response to these problems, the university asked a group of registrars, those most familiar with professional standards and the drawbacks summarized above, to develop recommendations for improvement. This working group included the university registrar and registrar staff from the central office and colleges/schools. The working group consulted broadly with Cornell faculty and staff involved in transfer credit evaluations, investigated possible solutions (e.g., transfer credit policies and practices at other universities), and developed a set of recommendations for practices that would provide transfer students with a more streamlined, consistent, coherent, transparent, and equitable approach to transfer credit evaluations than many transfer students currently experience under our existing and widely divergent college/school policies.

The sponsors of this resolution have adopted those recommendations and endorsed a proposed policy that establishes university-wide standards and methods for assigning transfer credits, including standards for evaluating course equivalencies and calculating credits for quarter-term courses. In addition to eliminating hardships for our transfer students, the new policy would enhance our compliance with Middle States requirements. Key excerpted policy provisions pertaining to equivalency determinations and related requirements are as follows⁵:

- An external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course if it is approximately 80% similar along the dimensions of scope, content, and learning outcomes to the Cornell course to which it is being compared.
- A student must have earned a minimum grade of C.
- A Cornell college/school or academic department/major may require a grade other than a C for the course to fulfill a specific curricular requirement only if the Cornell course deemed equivalent is subject to the same grade requirement.
- Evaluation of course equivalencies would be performed by the academic department/major (or parent department in the case of cross-college courses) that owns the Cornell course to which the external course is being compared.
- Equivalency is determined based upon a review of a course syllabus.
- If an external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course, a college/school or academic department/major may not impose additional requirements for the external course unless those same requirements also apply to the equivalent Cornell course.
- Courses may not be rejected based on the type of institutional setting (e.g., community college) or mode of learning (e.g., online).
- Equivalency determinations will be reviewed every three years. If it becomes evident that a course deemed equivalent does not adequately prepare students for a higher-level Cornell course or an external course or its Cornell equivalent has substantially changed since the equivalency evaluation, a new equivalency review may be triggered within the three-year period.
- Each Cornell college/school or program determines how external courses without equivalencies may be used to meet degree requirements
- Quarter credits from other U.S. institutions will be converted to semester credits by multiplying the number of quarter credits by two thirds.

The university would develop a university-wide database that contains transfer credit evaluations upon which colleges/schools and academic departments/majors would rely and a web-based public portal that allows students (e.g., prospective and admitted transfer students) to rely on these evaluations and promptly determine their transfer credit awards at Cornell (pending submission of official transcripts and achievement of minimum required grades). This database and web-based portal are available through the software “Transfer Evaluation System,” (TES), which is used by almost 8,000 higher education institutions and contains over 165,000,000 courses. Cornell recently acquired TES.

⁵ See full proposed policy for other requirements.

The Office of the University Registrar would manage TES. A dedicated Transfer Evaluation Team in OUR would work in conjunction with and provide substantial administrative support to college/school staff and faculty involved in transfer credit evaluation processes, including obtaining course syllabi for academic departments to conduct course equivalency reviews.

The proposed policy is based first and foremost on the need to rectify the numerous obstacles that transfer students face under current processes causing students anxiety and frustration due to delays in notification of transfer credit awards and inconsistent transfer credit evaluations, sometimes resulting in concerns about timelines for fulfilling graduation requirements.

It is also suspected that Cornell colleges and schools lose transfer students, both prospective and admitted, because these students are unable to determine in a timely manner (i.e., before application and deposit deadlines, respectively) whether Cornell will award them credits for courses taken at their external institution, whereas they can quickly and easily obtain this information at many other institutions through TES.

Additionally, once implemented, based upon the unified transfer credit policy, TES would significantly reduce workloads for college/school staff and faculty. Present processes create unworkable and unnecessary demands on many of the individuals involved in transfer credit evaluations. Many of these current processes are quite laborious, necessitating repeated manual entry of data in multiple systems and excessive email exchanges. Those involved are too often reinventing the wheel by repeating credit evaluations because of a change in the evaluator or a lack of historical records showing prior credit evaluations.

While the new policy aims to provide transfer students with better and prompter recognition of prior academic achievement (credits), and, secondarily, ease the burden for staff and faculty, the resolution sponsors do not believe, or desire, that the new approach would compromise transfer students' academic preparedness for Cornell or diminish Cornell's high academic standards. The policy would defer to academic department expertise in determining course equivalencies and, of course, college/school admissions offices would still determine whether transfer students meet Cornell's high admissions thresholds.

Cornell's Historical Commitment to Transfer Students

Transfer students have been part of Cornell from its founding. When the university opened in 1868, of the 412 students, eighty transferred in with credit from other institutions.⁶ Cornell's commitment to admitting transfer students has endured. In 1974, a report from the Cornell's President's Committee on the Land Grant Mission of the University recommended that

⁶ This statistic was provided by Corey Earle, Principal Gifts Associate Team Lead, Alumni Affairs & Development, and Visiting Lecturer, American Studies Program

there should be an alternative path to a Cornell degree which involves a shorter on-campus residence period and thus opens the possibility of a Cornell degree to students unable to afford either the time or money required for four years in residence. To a limited extent the path currently exists for students transferring to Cornell for a final two years on campus. The Committee feels that the residence requirement should not now be further shortened, but that the program for transfer students should be strengthened and made available to increasing numbers.⁷

As one means to accomplish this goal, the Committee concluded that Cornell should “form closer ties with selected community colleges in order that students who had not initially thought in terms of Cornell would be encouraged to direct their programs toward transfer to Cornell for their final two years.”⁸

In 2013, Cornell reaffirmed its commitment to transfer students in a report, “The Transfer Student Experience,” issued by the Transfer Student Committee, charged by the then provost to examine the experience of Cornell transfer students. While the Committee did not consider specific admissions policies or transfer credit evaluations, it noted the importance of access to Cornell. It highlighted Cornell’s singular place among our peers in providing transfer students access and recognizing the importance of this population:

Among our peers, Cornell is one of the few schools that treats transfer students as an integral part of its identity as an institution. Our commitment to access, which is explicit in the institutional contract with New York State, has meant that our planning around transfer student admissions and our engagement with transfer students on campus is generally deliberate and considered. (page 5).

The large number of matriculating transfer students at Cornell

Over the period of fall 2019-fall 2023, between 17-21% of our matriculants at the university were transfer students.⁹ Cornell admits far more transfer students than any other Ivy. Over the above period, the next highest percentage of matriculating transfer students at another Ivy was 10-12%. All the other Ivies had percentages in the single digits. To give a sense of how Cornell’s percentages translate into numbers for each Cornell college/school, below are the numbers of

⁷ This quote was also provided by Corey Earle.

⁸ Id.

⁹ Between fall 2015-fall 2023, there were 5487 external transfer students who completed more than one semester at Cornell.

matriculating transfer students for fall 2023 for our colleges/schools (the numbers include both transfer option and regular transfer students):

- Agriculture & Life Sciences = 278
- Architecture, Art, & Planning = 5
- Arts & Sciences = 92
- Brooks = 22
- Engineering = 29
- Human Ecology = 74
- Industrial & Labor Relations = 139
- JCB Dyson = 30
- JCB Nolan = 35

Transfer and prospective transfer applicants want to know by the time of admissions, and usually earlier, how their courses will be evaluated for transfer credits.

Current College and School Approaches to Evaluating Transfer Credits

Minimum grades and standards of equivalency

Most colleges/schools require a minimum grade of C, as is being proposed (one college/school uses a grade of C-). Each Cornell college/school has its own definition of course equivalency, although they do not vary widely. However, in some colleges/schools, departments impose special criteria for determining equivalency. Some departments require minimum grades higher than a C, demand additional evidence, limit the number of courses that may receive transfer credit, reject any course taught at a community college regardless of any equivalency in content, and reject any course taught in whole or in part online, again, regardless of any equivalency in content.

Calculations of credit awards for quarter-system courses

If a course from an institution taught on a quarter system is adjudged equivalent, it must be determined how many transfer credits the course will receive – quarter hours must be converted to Cornell semester hours or credits. The methods to make these conversions have varied across colleges/schools, thus, resulting in inconsistent awards of credits. For example, looking at data since 2021, below are some discrepancies, both within the same college/school and across colleges/schools in how transfer credits were posted to students' records. Some of the variability could be due to factors other than inconsistent conversion methods (e.g., based upon transfer students' other credits or if lab credits are posted separately). Undoubtedly, though, as staff involved in the credit evaluation process describe, the differences in college and school conversion formulas result in inconsistent credit awards across colleges/schools.

Examples from 2021 to the present of disparate credit conversions for quarter-system courses:

- ENGW1111 – Awarded both 3 and 4 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- CHE132 – Awarded both 4 and 5 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- CHEM132 – Awarded sometimes 4 and sometimes 5 credits within a college/school.
- CHE002B – Awarded 3, 3.33, and 4 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- BIS002C – Awarded 3, 3.33, and 4 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- ECON1 – Usually awarded 3 credits but also awarded 2.66 and 2.67. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- STATS10 – Awarded 3 and 3.33 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- WRIT2 – Awarded 3, 3.33, and 4 credits. Awards were inconsistent both within a college/school and across colleges/schools.
- BIO200LLB – Awarded both 4 and 5 credits within a college/school.

Evaluation processes and data systems

Every Cornell college/school differs both in terms of the staff and faculty positions that are involved in transfer credit evaluation processes and the data systems (e.g., software databases, emails, written notes) used to record, share, and retain evaluations internally and communicate progress and decisions externally with students.

In terms of the staff and faculty positions, while college/school registrar office staff play a central role, there is variability as to their decision-making authority. There is also variability as to what role, if any, staff in admissions and advising offices play. In terms of the faculty who conduct the evaluations, there are fluctuations across colleges/schools and sometimes even with a single college/school as to which faculty position is involved. In some instances, it is the instructor of the Cornell course against which the external course is being evaluated. In other instances, it is the chair of that home or parent department, or it might be the director of undergraduate studies (DUS). It may also be a non-faculty position of department manager. In at least one college, faculty from the intended major evaluate courses for equivalencies regardless of whether the courses are taught by that department.

There are a mindboggling number of data systems used across colleges/schools. Even within a college/school, there may be a plethora of data systems – file sharing platforms, computer programs, software systems, digital documents, emails and/or handwritten notes (e.g., Excel spreadsheets, PDF files, Google Docs, Box, Peoplesoft records, Slate platform, FileMaker software, Chatter platform, a SharePoint site). The databases that colleges/schools use vary in formality, sophistication, and generation. One administrator involved in transfer credit evaluations who is familiar with TES described the technology their college currently uses as antiquated, “the grandparent of TES.”

Middle States Standards and the Prohibition Against Discrimination Based Upon Institutional Setting and Mode of Learning

The sponsors bring this resolution to the Faculty Senate because of our belief that current approaches to transfer credit evaluations are antithetical to Cornell's mission; harm transfer students; and, secondarily, are an administrative burden. However, it is worth noting that our goals and recommendations are consistent with goals and requirements enumerated by Middle States.

For example, Middle States requires:

- “The institution will develop a transfer of credit policy and/or procedures that align with student learning outcomes, academic goals, and strategic priorities, are fair and equitable to students, and take into consideration new and innovative methods or sources for learning and alternative assessment methods.”
<https://msche.box.com/shared/static/jawn9nkxgi5fvj66cathv9ualww94nv8.pdf>
- “Member institutions [shall develop] transfer of credit policies and/or procedures that are clearly articulated, consistent, and transparent. Consistency in transfer of credit decisions directly benefits students and helps to reduce systemic inequities in higher education.”
<https://msche.box.com/shared/static/iy7dxzso6x0pgk36yldowhzea2bkl48l.pdf>
- Institutions “shall seek to minimize the loss of credit for students wherever possible.”
- “The institution will conduct evaluations of transcripts and prior learning in a timely manner and institutional decision-making regarding individual students will be swift and definitive.”
<https://msche.box.com/shared/static/jawn9nkxgi5fvj66cathv9ualww94nv8.pdf>
- “The institution will establish written criteria regarding transfer of credit that . . . addresses the following considerations:
 - the educational quality of the learning experience which the student seeks to transfer;
 - the equivalency of course content, expected learning outcomes, curriculum, and/or other standards;
 - the comparability of the nature, content and level of the learning experience to that offered by the receiving institution; and
 - the appropriateness and applicability of the learning experience to the programs offered by the receiving institution, in light of the student's educational goals.”

Two constraints that Middle States sets forth as absolutes are that institutions “will establish written criteria regarding transfer of credit that do not discriminate against particular institutional settings [e.g., community colleges] or modes of delivery [e.g., online instruction].”
<https://msche.box.com/shared/static/jawn9nkxgi5fvj66cathv9ualww94nv8.pdf>

Finally, “If an institution has programmatic or specialized accreditation, it may establish criteria based on the curricular, licensure, or other specific requirements of those accreditors so long as the institution is transparent and explains the rationale for those requirements.” Id.

Difficulties and Obstacles Created by Cornell’s Current Approaches

The current college/school processes create common problems for transfer students such as inconsistent evaluations and delays at various stages, sometimes leading to quite significant overall delays in providing students with credit evaluations (as long as four months). Numerous individuals from different colleges/schools involved in transfer credit evaluation processes said that despite their best efforts, their college/school frequently misses deadlines promised to students. College/school registrar staff uniformly say that changes are desperately needed.

Inconsistencies are manifest in several ways: an identical external course is evaluated disparately, sometimes being evaluated as equivalent to a Cornell course and sometimes not. For quarter system courses, the number of credits awarded vary. Online courses and courses taught at community colleges are treated inconsistently because while most colleges/schools recognize such credits, some departments reject all online and/or community college credits, even if the content is equivalent to a Cornell course and/or even if equivalent courses taught in person or at four-year institutions are recognized.

Inconsistencies in course evaluations and quarter-system credit calculations occur not only across colleges/schools because of different standards, but within a single college/school. There may be “too many cooks in the kitchen,” changes in the persons involved in transfer credit evaluations, and/or the absence of historical records. Departments within a college/school may apply different standards to the same external course, and there are some faculty evaluators who will never find an external course to be equivalent to a Cornell course. Instead, they will only allow external courses to count for elective credit.

There is also wide consensus that these same processes that lead to inconsistent and delayed evaluations for students are also unnecessarily cumbersome and time consuming for staff and faculty. Sometimes college/school processes change from semester to semester, slowing things down, requiring staff to learn and adjust to new methods, and causing errors that need to be manually corrected. Additionally, it is not uncommon for the evaluator and/or other individuals involved in the evaluation process to change. Faculty may depart Cornell and, more frequently, faculty evaluators rotate out of the evaluator positions of chair and DUS. Staff might leave their position, being promoted or departing Cornell. When personnel change, there may suddenly be gaping holes in knowledge and decisions and/or time capacity to perform all the necessary functions. This is particularly problematic when a key individual leaves Cornell, and their notes and records were handwritten and are irretrievable.

A unit may be re-inventing the wheel each academic year not only because of changes in personnel, but also because it lacks a formalized mechanism to store and disseminate course credit evaluation results. In fact, not all have record retention systems. Because record keeping

is uneven, colleges/schools may not be able to reapply decisions previously made about a course; instead, they may have to ask repeatedly for the same course to be reviewed. Every time a college/school needs to repeat this evaluation process, they are at the mercy of the evaluator to respond in a timely manner, ideally looking through historical records to be consistent with precedent. Each time a college/school begins anew a transfer credit evaluation, the college/school registrar office or other staff must request a syllabus, communicate with the student, communicate with college/school and academic department faculty and staff, communicate with OUR staff, work in Peoplesoft (the Student Information System), and work in college shadow systems; a single staff member has to enter data in multiple formats. This is for a single transfer course for a single transfer student. Delays, inconsistencies, errors requiring correction, and duplication of efforts are multiplied across the range of transfer courses requiring credit evaluation each semester.

Because systems are internal, students awaiting credit evaluations are unable to ascertain evaluation results on their own and, thus, their only recourse for obtaining this information is by contacting Cornell staff. This is also true for students interested in transferring to Cornell who would like to learn whether they would get Cornell course credit for their completed courses. If deadlines reported to students are missed, a cycle of communications recommences, exacerbating inefficiencies and frustration.

Accordingly, the number of emails is overwhelming. Due to inevitable delays in decisions (e.g., a faculty evaluator is away during the summer and off email), a single student might and invariably does send multiple emails seeking to find out the status of their course credit evaluation. According to one staff member involved in transfer credit evaluations, each inquiry from a student resulted for her in four to seven internal emails – a student's email to a staff member in admissions (the individual in question), that staff member's email to the college/school registrar's office; the registrar office's email to the presumed faculty evaluator; perhaps a redirection to a different, correct faculty evaluator; the evaluator's email reply to the registrar office, the registrar office's reply to the staff member in admission, and finally, that person's reply to the student. This cycle could very well be repeated, even multiple times, because the decision deadline promised the student has come and gone and the clock is ticking on the student's need to accept an offer of admissions or make a deposit.

Students vent their frustration in Reddit, among other places. And because transfer students find it hard to get timely information, they resort to platforms such as Reddit to ask questions about Cornell policies. Because inquiries and answers are typically framed in terms of Cornell in general, and not specific colleges/schools, and because the students do not appreciate that Cornell college/school policies are different, the generalized answers about Cornell can be wrong and mislead students.

Special Problems for External Transfer Students Who Transfer Internally Within Cornell or Change Majors

Each Cornell college/school re-evaluates external transfer courses once a student is admitted to the new college/school.¹⁰ Thus, external transfer students who internally transfer to another college/school within Cornell may not rely on their original credit evaluation and are at risk of having their credits evaluated differently from the first evaluation, perhaps to their detriment. For example, a student who completed all distribution credit work at the original college/school may have to complete new courses to satisfy the same distribution requirements because the second college/school evaluates their external transfer coursework as elective(s) only. This can cause students to fall behind in their progress to degree.

The same problems may accrue to students who remain in their original college/school but change majors because departments within the college/school use different standards for evaluating credits.

Also, because Cornell colleges/schools evaluate quarter system courses differently, a student might lose course credit upon their internal transfer. For example, one college/school may award five courses 2.66 credits each, at a total of 13.3 credits for one semester. Another college/school may award the same five courses 3 credits, equal to 15 credits for one semester. If a student internally transfers in the wrong direction, they would lose 1.7 credits for that semester, and, of course, twice as much for two semesters.

Inequities for Students Seeking NCAA eligibility

Inconsistent evaluations of course equivalencies create inequities for students hoping for NCAA eligibility. One example is that of students who transferred to Cornell from Tompkins Cortland Community College. These students enrolled in different Cornell colleges/schools, which evaluated the same external courses differently. The student who transferred into a college/school that evaluated their courses as equivalent and applied these courses to college/school requirements met the requirements for NCAA eligibility. Another student, in a different Cornell college/school, was not allowed to apply the identical credits to their college/school requirements, and because the student was now short on credits to meet these requirements, the student was ineligible for NCAA participation. In the absence of a unified transfer credit policy, such inequities would be allowed to persist.

Losses in Yield and Prospective Transfer Students

Likely, Cornell colleges/schools experience reductions in yield due to delays; students get tired of waiting for their belated credit evaluations, which they can obtain quickly at other

¹⁰ Between fall 2015 and fall 2023, there were 216 external transfer students who internally transferred to another Cornell college/school.

institutions through TES. For the same reason, it is also likely that students decide not to apply for transfer to Cornell.

Conclusion

Pursuant to the proposed policy, the university would (1) adopt university-wide standards and methods for assigning transfer credits, including standards for evaluating course equivalencies and calculating credits for quarter-term courses, and (2) develop a university-wide database, TES, that contains these transfer credit evaluations upon which colleges/schools and academic departments/majors would rely and a web-based public portal, also through TES, that allows students to promptly and easily determine their transfer credit awards at Cornell (pending submission of official transcripts and achievement of minimum required grades).

These improvements would substantially mitigate, and in some dimensions eliminate, the significant failures of our present processes discussed above – delayed and inconsistent credit evaluations and time-consuming, repetitive processes for staff and faculty.

Proposed standard of equivalency and related requirements

Key excerpted policy provisions pertaining to equivalency determinations and related requirements (as set forth in the Introduction and Summary of Proposal) are as follows¹¹:

- An external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course if it is approximately 80% similar along the dimensions of scope, content, and learning outcomes to the Cornell course to which it is being compared.
- A student must have earned a minimum grade of C.
- A Cornell college/school or academic department/major may require a grade other than a C for the course to fulfill a specific curricular requirement only if the Cornell course deemed equivalent is subject to the same grade requirement.
- Evaluation of course equivalencies would be performed by the academic department/major (or parent department in the case of cross-college courses) that owns the Cornell course to which the external course is being compared.
- Equivalency is determined based upon a review of a course syllabus.
- If an external course is deemed equivalent to a Cornell course, a college/school or academic department/major may not impose additional requirements for the external course unless those same requirements also apply to the equivalent Cornell course.
- Courses may not be rejected based on the type of institutional setting (e.g., community college) or mode of learning (e.g., online).
- Equivalency determinations will be reviewed every three years. If it becomes evident that a course deemed equivalent does not adequately prepare students for a higher-level Cornell course or an external course or its Cornell equivalent has

¹¹ See full proposed policy for other requirements.

substantially changed since the equivalency evaluation, a new equivalency review may be triggered within the three-year period.

- Each Cornell college/school or program determines how external courses without equivalencies may be used to meet degree requirements
- Quarter credits from other U.S. institutions will be converted to semester credits by multiplying the number of quarter credits by two thirds.

Deference to faculty expertise

Determinations of equivalency would be based on faculty expertise; as mentioned above, course equivalency evaluations would be performed by the academic department/major (or parent department in the case of cross-college courses) that owns the Cornell course to which the external course is being evaluated for equivalency. This is now the case for some, but not all, of our colleges/schools.

The Transfer Evaluation System (TES)

The Transfer Evaluation Team in OUR would monitor and maintain TES. The team would be responsible for obtaining syllabi and providing them to the academic departments/majors assessing equivalencies. Once equivalencies are determined, the OUR team would record the information in TES and communicate with college/school staff as necessary.

TES provides transparency and timely notification of transfer credits

Via the web, students could search TES's extensive public database to view how courses from their institutions are equated to Cornell courses. Students would be able to determine if an external course is equivalent to a Cornell course or whether the course is not equivalent and may only be used for elective credit. Notes can be added to provide additional information. The Transfer Evaluation Team would work with academic departments/majors to determine how best to portray equivalencies. The database of course equivalency evaluations will grow over time and be updated regularly. Potential transfer students can learn course equivalencies at Cornell from the time they begin their research via websites. Transfer applicants and admitted transfer students will be instructed to use TES from the start.

At the time of admission, students would be able to learn how their transfer credits would apply to college/school major and degree requirements, thus, allowing students to make informed decisions whether to continue their education at Cornell or pursue alternatives. This timing coincides with the time when admitted students receive their financial aid award letters and college financing plans. Under the proposed policy, when considering their offer of admission, students would have the equivalent time to factor in their remaining course credit obligations, which obviously impact the cost of attendance and time to degree completion. This early access to and certainty about course credit equivalency evaluations is a vast improvement from the delays, sometimes as long as four months, and uncertainties that students currently experience.

Through TES's repository of decisions on course equivalencies, there would no longer be a worry that a single external course would be evaluated anew repeatedly and inconsistently upon every transfer student's request for credit for that same course. The significant problems created by departures and changes in the staff and faculty involved in credit evaluation processes, the reliance on antiquated data systems, and the lack of historical records would be solved.

Benefits for staff and faculty from a new policy and use of TES

The proposed policy, including the use of TES, would be of great benefit not only to students but also to college/school staff and faculty who now must respond to frequent, repeated cycles of emails from students seeking information about their credit evaluations, which are often long overdue. As the TES repository grows, the administrative burden for staff and faculty of repeatedly answering the same questions about the same courses will be eliminated. Related, staff and faculty working with transfer students will be better informed to answer questions on equivalencies based on the data available in TES.

Additionally, by eliminating duplicative course equivalency processing as well as repetitive data entry processing, college/school staff and faculty would be relieved of much additional time-consuming work. Also, as mentioned above, the OUR Credit Evaluation Team will serve as an additional resource, working closely with and providing dedicated support to college/school registrar office and other staff as well as academic departments.

Equitable standards are necessary to fulfill Cornell's mission

Crucially, once an external course is adjudged to be equivalent to a Cornell course, an academic department/major could not set a higher bar (e.g., a higher minimum grade) or impose different and/or additional requirements for the external course than it does for the equivalent internal course. Nor could a department/major deny transfer credits based upon institutional setting (e.g., community college) or mode of learning (e.g., online), which violates Middle States explicit prohibition against such disparate treatment. The sponsors of this resolution believe that these new limitations are essential for achieving equity for transfer students, realizing our conception of Cornell as "a world-class institution with egalitarian ideals,"¹² and giving meaning and substance to Cornell's founding principle of ". . . any person . . . any study." The university has repeatedly affirmed that transfer students are an "integral part of [our] identity as an institution," and that community college students, specifically, are core to our identity and mission. Indeed, the university has noted the importance of improving access for transfer students from community colleges. Clearly, it is impossible to expand access for and fulfill our

¹² This description of Cornell is found on the university's land grant webpage, <https://landgrant.cornell.edu>. The original source for the quote is unclear.

foundational commitment to community college students if we deny them credit solely because their credits are from a community college.

The proposed policy includes safeguards to help ensure that transfer students are academically prepared for Cornell coursework. If it becomes evident that an external course that was evaluated as equivalent to a Cornell course is in fact dissimilar (e.g., due to changes in the external or the Cornell course) or that it fails adequately to prepare transfer students for advanced Cornell courses, the equivalency determination may be changed. By default, the OUR team will ensure that courses are reviewed for equivalency every three years. Of course, too, college/school admissions offices would still determine whether transfer students meet Cornell's high admissions thresholds.

In sum, Cornell's current disjointed transfer evaluation processes cause unnecessary and substantial distress and prejudice to our transfer students, resulting in considerable inequities. The proposed policy advances easily implemented solutions, which have been successfully adopted at many other institutions.