

Graduate Council, UW Faculty Senate

Position Paper – 3+2 Graduate Degree Programs

Approved by majority vote (12 Yes, 0 No)

October 5, 2015

This position paper reviews and makes recommendations regarding accelerated BS/MS (BA/MA) degree programs (hereafter “3+2” programs). Academic Affairs requested Graduate Council input in Spring 2015 following a new proposal to initiate a 3+2 degree program and given that the University currently has no clear policies governing the creation or administration of such programs. To create this document, the Graduate Council reviewed 3+2-like programs at comparator institutions, and consulted with representatives of Academic Affairs and the Office of the Registrar. The paper was led by a sub-committee consisting of Dr. Klaas van ’t Veld and Dr. Ben Rashford.

Background – Characteristics of 3+2 Programs

Marketed under a variety of names (e.g., “4+1 program,” “accelerated masters,” “fast track masters”), 3+2 programs that allow students to complete a BS/BA and an MS/MA in less than the typical amount of time have become increasingly common. A recent informal review of 20 comparator Universities revealed that 15 had at least one 3+2-like program. These programs are most common in certain disciplines (e.g., engineering and computer science); however, across the universities surveyed, there were examples of 3+2-like programs in nearly every discipline and even some universities with campus-wide policies to allow students to pursue accelerated degree programs within any major. These 3+2 programs are typically marketed towards enrolled undergraduates with exceptional potential for graduate study and thus serve to retain a program’s best undergraduate students. Though 3+2 programs have many variations, several common themes help further characterize these programs:

- i. **Years to completion:** Most programs aim at 5-year completion, some at 5.5, some at as little as 4 (relying on AP credit). Related, most programs essentially ‘shorten’ the undergraduate program, which makes it appropriate to refer to them as 3+2 programs (three years for the BS/BA plus two years for the MS/MA).
- ii. **Standardization:** Some programs are standardized across the entire university, some across departments in a college, and some not at all. Standardization usually involves setting minimum admission and degree requirements.
- iii. **Admissions criteria:** Programs commonly require students to have completed 75/120 credits of their bachelor’s degree before they apply, and 90/120 credits before they start the accelerated program. Almost all programs impose minimum

cumulative GPA requirements for admission, ranging from 3.0 to 3.5. Some programs apply separate minima for subsets of courses (e.g., courses in the major, specific core courses, or recently taken courses). Minima often vary across programs at the same university or college. Some programs waive GRE requirements for entry into the 3+2 program. Others do not, and sometimes use GRE scores as additional or alternative criteria for program eligibility.

iv. **Strategies for program acceleration:**

Double-counting credit hours is the primary strategy that programs use to allow students to complete both the undergraduate and graduate degree requirements at an accelerated pace. Double-counting implies that selected credit hours are counted toward both the BS/BA and MS/MA requirements. Programs usually allow 6 to 12 credits to be double-counted towards both degrees. Most programs require double-counted credits to be graduate-level, but some allow double-counting of dual-listed or undergraduate-level credits. Many programs require at least a B grade or 3.0 GPA average for double-counted courses. Undergraduate courses that can be substituted are sometimes restricted by type, e.g., to courses of the same general area as the graduate program, or to courses that don't satisfy distribution requirements (e.g., USP). Quite a few programs post a list of courses from which students can pick substitutable courses, and some allow only very specific substitution-pairings.

Many programs also allow graduate credit hours to be reserved during the undergraduate program. Reserved credit hours are counted towards the graduate but not the undergraduate degree requirements. The number of credits that undergraduates can reserve for graduate credit without double-counting varies widely across programs, from as few as 3 to as many as 18.

- v. **Tuition costs:** Some programs charge undergraduate tuition for double-counted graduate courses. Others charge graduate tuition.

Existing UW 3+2 Degree Programs

UW currently has two 3+2-like programs: the Quick Start program in the College of Engineering and the recently approved Five-Year BA/MA in Political Science. The Quick Start program “allows an accelerated path towards completion of an MS” in five of the six engineering fields offered at UW (Atmospheric Science does not have an undergraduate program). The five-year BA/MA program in Political Science aims “to recruit and retain high quality students in Political Science at UW and to provide an efficient path to the MA without requiring additional University resources or reducing the quality of our MA program.” Both programs have similar eligibility requirements –

students must be in their junior year to apply, must meet minimum GPA requirements (which vary by program), and must provide letters of recommendation. The GRE is generally required for final admission into each program, though some Engineering Departments allow applicants to waive the GRE requirement. Both programs allow students to double-count 6 credit hours towards both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs. The Quick Start program also allows students to reserve up to 12 credit hours of graduate coursework during their undergraduate program (note: this provision is an exception to current regulations, which stipulate that only 6 credit hours can be reserved for graduate credit).

Graduate Education Policies Applicable to 3+2 Degree Programs

Credit-Hour Requirements

According to UW regulations (see University Catalog) BA/BS degrees require completion of 120 to 142 credit hours (depending on the College). MA/MS degrees require at least 26 credit hours of coursework for a Plan A and 30 hours of coursework for a Plan B. By including the same courses on both the undergraduate and graduate program, 3+2 programs arguably satisfy the letter of these regulations, but not necessarily their spirit. Students who complete a BA/MA or BS/MS in a 3+2 degree program could end up completing a total of only 140 credit hours (114 undergrad + 20 graduate + 6 double-counted) compared to a minimum total of 146 credit hours for students who complete their undergraduate and graduate degrees independently.

Dual-Listed Courses

Graduate regulations require that dual listed courses be taken at the 5000-level to receive graduate credit (i.e., to be applied to a graduate program of study). Specifically,

“If a course is dual listed at the 4000/5000 level, the course must be taken at the 5000 level to receive graduate credit regardless of whether the course is in the student’s primary program area.”

This rule seems to imply that any dual-listed courses that will be double-counted towards both undergraduate and graduate degrees must be taken at the 5000 level.

Hours Earned Before Admission

The Graduate Regulations and Policies define the types of credit hours earned prior to admission that can be counted towards a graduate program of study. Specifically,

“With committee and Graduate School approval, a student may submit up to a total of 12 pre-admission hours that may be a culmination of non-degree, reserved, and/or transfer hours. The total number of hours allowed from each category is as follows: 12 non-degree, graduate hours; 9 transfer; and 6 undergraduate.”

This regulation establishes that there are only three types of credit hours earned prior to admission that may be counted towards a graduate program of study: 1) non-degree hours, 2) transfer hours, and 3) reserved hours. Each of these types is further defined in the regulations as follows (emphasis added):

Non-Degree Hours – *“You may request that up to 12 hours of graduate level coursework, taken during your graduate, **non-degree status**, be used toward a program of study should you choose to pursue a graduate degree at the University of Wyoming.”*

Transfer Hours – *“To transfer hours earned **at another institution** to a graduate program at UW, the student must provide a copy of the official transcript from the institution where the credits were earned. ... Coursework approved for transfer from **another college or university** are considered as part of the 12 credit hour pre-admission course limitation...”*

Reserved Hours – *“Approved graduate level courses taken prior to completing the baccalaureate degree, **but not part of the degree’s requirements**, may be applied to the master’s or doctoral program with approval of the student’s committee. ... These courses will appear on the undergraduate transcript with a notation that they have been reserved for graduate credit.”*

Collectively, these regulations seem to prohibit using double-counted credit hours towards graduate degree requirements. Double-counted credit hours, as described in existing UW 3+2 programs, do not meet the definitions of non-degree, transfer, or reserved hours. They are not earned while the student has graduate non-degree status; they are not earned at another institution; and they *are* part of the student’s undergraduate degree requirements. Erin Olson in the Office of the registrar confirmed the conflict with the regulations when describing the Engineering Quick Start program (see Graduate Council Minutes, 24th February 2015):

*“These (Quick Start) students are being allowed **several exceptions to graduate policy**. ... They are allowed to dual count 6 credits for the BS and MS. We load those 6 credits as cross-college graduate transfer work. In this way these credits are part of their undergraduate transcript and also part of their graduate transcript, appearing as transfer credits.”*

Graduate Council Recommendations

The Graduate Council discussed several concerns with 3+2 programs, including: 1) reducing degree requirements (either for the BS/BA or MS/MA) could lessen, or give the perception of lessening, the quality of degrees; 2) implementing 3+2 programs could create a “race to the bottom” (i.e., institutions competing for students based on the

shortest time to degree completion instead of on degree quality); and 3) marketing 3+2 programs to our best undergraduate students may discourage them from fully investigating all of their graduate degree options. Acknowledging these concerns, the Graduate Council supports, in principle, 3+2 degree programs. As a land-grant and the only university in Wyoming, UW must balance academic ideals and pragmatic concerns. Accelerated bachelors/masters are common at institutions with which we compete for undergraduate and graduate students. Approving 3+2 degree programs when there is a compelling case that they enhance rather than degrade UW's education mission is therefore necessary to maintain competitiveness.

The Graduate Council therefore recommends the creation and adoption of campus-wide graduate education policies pertaining to 3+2 degree programs. These policies should provide equal opportunity for any interested program/division to offer 3+2 programs, and should be consistent with all other applicable policies and procedures. Specifically, the Graduate Council recommends the following:

i. Creation of New 3+2 Programs

The Graduate Council recommends that new 3+2 programs follow the standard two-stage process for forming new graduate programs (see http://www.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/_files/docs/Graduate_DegreeRevisionProcess.pdf). However, departments/divisions proposing 3+2 programs should be expected to specifically justify the need for and benefits of an accelerated degree program. For example, during stage one of the proposal process ("Conceptual Foundation"), proposers should indicate why the 3+2 program is needed in addition to existing degree programs (e.g., to recruit and retain students) and justify how an accelerated degree will benefit students. In stage two of the proposal process ("Program Development and Approval"), proposers should clearly describe admission and degree requirements, with emphasis on how these requirements will assure that 3+2 students achieve the same level of proficiency as students who complete the standard BS/BA and MS/MA degree programs. All proposals for new 3+2 programs should clearly indicate how the degree requirements ensure that students will achieve the learning objectives of both the undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

We encourage Academic Affairs to update the "Graduate Degree Revision and Formation Process" document, or create a separate document, to provide additional guidance to those proposing 3+2 degree programs.

ii. Standardization

For consistency across campus, the Graduate Council suggest standardizing several aspects of new 3+2 programs:

Degree Naming Conventions

UW currently has two 3+2-type programs with different names (“Quick Start” and “Five-Year BA/MA”). Rather than impose a single naming convention, the Graduate Council suggests allowing new programs to use any of the following names to label programs: “Quick Start”, “Five-Year BS(BA)/MS(MA)”, or “3+2 BS(BA)/MS(MA)”. We explicitly discourage the use of other common labels, such as “accelerated” or “4+1.” These are arguably misleading, since they suggest that the graduate portion of the degree is compressed.

Admission Criteria

Given general University guidelines, admission requirements are and should be the purview of individual departments/divisions. Nonetheless, the University may want to suggest minimum admission requirements/procedures for 3+2 degree programs. Specifically, the minimum number of undergraduate credit hours earned prior to admission into a 3+2 program could be set to 90 credit hours (i.e., students are officially admitted at the end of their junior year). Setting minimum credit hour requirements is meant to ensure that students adequately demonstrate their exceptional potential for graduate study – they need enough upper-division credit hours to demonstrate that they can achieve the learning objectives of both undergraduate and graduate degrees with fewer total credit hours.

“Double-Counting”

The Graduate Council recommends that students in approved 3+2 programs be allowed to “double-count” up to six credit hours of approved graduate coursework (i.e., any course that can be included on a graduate Program of Study) towards completion of undergraduate degree requirements. A consistent process for recording double-counted graduate credit hours should be resolved between Academic Affairs and the Office of the Registrar (see below).

Reserving Graduate Credit Hours

Current regulations allow undergraduates to reserve up to 6 hours of graduate coursework. As noted above, the Quick Start program in the College of Engineering was granted an exception that allows its students to reserve up to 12 hours. The Five-Year BA/MA in Political Science has no such exception. The Graduate Council recommends that the current maximum of 6 hours be retained for future 3+2 programs (while retaining the exception for the Quick Start program, if necessary).

iii. Revision of Graduate Education Policies

Though most graduate education policies are consistent with 3+2 degree programs, the inconsistency between policies regarding “hours earned before admission” and double-counting credit hours should be resolved. The appropriate resolution will depend on how double-counted credit hours are recorded on student’s degree program (see below).

iv. Registrar Procedures

The existing procedure for recording double-counted coursework (i.e., recording them as “cross college transfer courses” on the graduate program) is inconsistent with existing policy and with principles of transparency. The Graduate Council recommends that Academic Affairs and the Office of the Registrar develop clear and transparent procedures for recording coursework on both undergraduate and graduate transcripts, as well as on graduate program of study forms for students admitted to approved 3+2 programs. Academic Affairs should also consult with Financial Aid to ensure that registrar procedures for recording double-counted courses do not conflict with undergraduate scholarship and financial aid regulations.

v. Degree/Diploma Indication

Since 3+2 degree programs may include fewer total credit hours, some have suggested that the degree name should be different, such that the accelerated degree path is indicated on one or both of the student’s diploma. The Graduate Council recommends making no distinction between degree names or otherwise indicating 3+2 degree programs on diplomas. As described above, 3+2 programs should be approved only when it is clear that they do not degrade the educational objectives of the degree program. Thus, as long as 3+2 programs are designed judiciously, there should be no difference in the knowledge base of 3+2 graduates as compared to those that follow the more traditional path.