



PRINCETON UNIVERSITY | OFFICE OF THE
Dean of the College

Dear Colleagues,

The proposal described herein invites the faculty to approve a new way of accounting for A.B. students' independent work in their major field of concentration.

Although this proposal will resolve compliance issues, address advising challenges, and create more equity across the undergraduate curriculum, I reassure you that it will not fundamentally alter the distinctive features of Princeton's independent work requirements.

If approved, the credit-bearing model would be implemented on a phased approach. This would begin with students in the Class of 2026, whose theses would be transcribed with a formal course credit in each of the fall and spring terms.

Because the course counts required for the degree would be increased by two units to reflect this shift, this would be mainly a change in notation, with students' grades for the thesis spread across both terms rather than the two thesis credits being transcribed at the end of the spring.

Likewise, the shift in the junior independent work would allow departments to continue their current teaching practices while streamlining the manner in which the junior independent work is transcribed.

A two-year timeline for implementation of the junior year requirements – with the framework going into effect for the Class of 2028 – will permit ample opportunities for ODOC to consult with departments about how to translate their departmental courses and junior paper requirement into this new model.

This policy change has been discussed in various settings over multiple years, and was motivated by the recommendations generated through our recent MSCHE re-accreditation review. It has since been reviewed and endorsed by the Academic Planning Group and discussed in multiple meetings with the departmental Directors of Undergraduate Studies over the past two years. The final proposal, which was approved by the Faculty Committee on the Course of Study this April, reflects their input and feedback.



Assigning Credit Units to A.B. Independent Work

(Approved by the COCS, April 2, 2024)

This proposal seeks to assign credit to A.B. independent work as described below.

Background

Currently, Princeton does not award course credit for the four semesters of independent work required for the A.B. degree. As has long been our practice, faculty award grades, and the Registrar records the work on the official transcript with a 900-level number but does not assign actual credit value for independent work. Since its inception, however, the University has viewed the four semesters of independent work as the equivalent of four course units.

Recording independent work in place of course work for the A.B. degree (31 course credits plus four semesters of independent work) is distinct from the B.S.E degree, which awards and records course credit for independent work (36 course credits).

An A.B. senior currently must take a minimum of six credit-bearing courses in the senior year and may elect either a 3-3 or a 4-2 split across the fall and spring terms. The senior thesis is not recorded until completion at the end of the year. As a result, a senior who elects the 4-2 course split will only register two course credits of enrollment in their eighth term.

Although they are actively engaged in an appropriate workload when the senior thesis work is factored in, their numerical course enrollment will appear to be below the minimum threshold for full-time enrollment defined by Title IV funding regulations and reported to the National Student Clearinghouse (NSC).

Princeton receives Title IV funding for students who qualify to receive federal financial aid. Eligibility is determined in part by a student's enrollment status, which is defined as full-time, less than full-time, half-time, or less than half-time. From an institutional perspective, all Princeton undergraduates are considered full-time and reported as attending full-time, but the Department of Education regulations mandate that full-time enrollment status must exceed minimum activity thresholds. Full-time is a minimum of twelve credit hours or three Princeton course credits.

Rationale and Implementation

This proposal would implement recommendations from the MSCHE self-study process that have endorsed better scaffolding, transparency, and consistency across the independent work process for A.B. students. This would:

- Transcript the senior thesis for credit with the same weight as courses, which will clarify a student's full-time status in the senior year.
- Create consistency between the A.B. and B.S.E. programs for awarding and transcribing credit for independent work,
- Prompt a reevaluation of the University's approach to A.B. junior independent work and provide an opportunity to create greater transparency and equity around the junior paper requirement.

Senior Thesis Work

For students and departments, the proposed change will mostly mean "business as usual." The two semesters of required senior thesis work would be transcribed and assigned a course unit of credit each semester, with a corresponding increase in the total required course count by two units.

Even though departments will begin treating the thesis as bearing credit, this will not necessitate a formal course meeting time (most of the departments in SEAS currently handle senior independent work in this manner). In other words, this is a change in notation practice rather than course load, so that the transcript credits more accurately reflect the advising and intellectual work that the thesis requires.

Once this change is implemented for current students, senior A.B. students who are making normal progress to degree will need to complete eight credits in their senior year, which they could take either as 4-4 or 5-3, provided that they have one credit of senior thesis work each term. This would rectify the impression that spring-semester seniors who take only two courses are not enrolled full-time.

The only substantial changes are the following:

- To align with the B.S.E. taxonomy, the senior thesis will need to be renumbered across all departments as 498 (fall) and 499 (spring). Departments will also need to decide how to grade each unit of the thesis credit. Although the spring thesis credit will require a letter grade, the department could choose to grade the fall unit as PDF only. Requiring a grade for each term will help ensure that students understand the investment required in the fall thesis work; that departments assess work-in-progress; and that students in difficulty are identified and supported in a timely manner. Departments could also elect to weigh the spring thesis grade more heavily in their honors calculations.
- Students in the Classes of 2026 and 2027 who are ahead in their course count could elect to take only three courses each term, provided that one of the courses each term is the

senior thesis. However, these students would not be able to drop any courses during the senior year, as three courses per term constitutes minimum full-time enrollment.

- Although departments will not be required to attach formal meeting hours to the senior thesis credit, they could elect to scaffold this work in different ways to help keep students on track.¹
- In senior thesis courses with more than five students, the course (senior thesis) could be formally evaluated if the faculty and/or department so desire, with a specialized set of evaluative questions designed to provide feedback to the department each semester. Standard questions could be drafted by the COCS and departments could customize those questions as needed to address their particular areas of interest.

Junior Independent Work (JIW)

This change, however straightforward on the senior thesis side, prompts renewed attention to junior independent work, which is now structured in many different ways across A.B. departments.

Currently, all A.B. departments require two units of non-credit-bearing junior independent work. This can take the form of one JP in each of the fall and spring terms (each factoring in 1.0 toward the junior independent work unit requirement), or a year-long, spring JP “2.0.” which is typically offered in departments that require a credit-bearing fall methods course. (*Appendix A*, below, charts the current variation in this landscape.)

However, this wide range of junior paper formats creates significant inequities that are increasingly difficult to justify. For instance:

- Some departments require one JP each semester while others require the year-long JP which is transcribed only in the spring. This spring JP is weighted twice to indicate that a year-long JP represents twice as much work as a one-semester JP. But in practice, this assumption is difficult to verify or enforce.
- Some departments initiate their junior arc with a credit-bearing methods course while others carry out this training in a non-credit bearing workshop that functions as an invisible fifth class (row B in *Appendix A*). Non-credit bearing workshops, however, are difficult to audit, and often signal (wrongly) to students that they need not invest as heavily in them as they do in their courses. The fact that some students earn course credit for this work while others do not is an inequity that is difficult to explain and justify.

¹ The new course sequence ORF 498-499 is one example of this. Because the independent work already carries course credit in SEAS, the ORF department structured the senior thesis training in the form of a more typical class.

- For students in departments with a credit-bearing methods class (rows C and E in *Appendix A*), the credit cannot count as a JP but does count toward the 31 credits required for graduation. In theory, students are pursuing their JP work entirely separate from their coursework, but in practice this is rarely the case. This means that some students are de facto earning course credit for a JP while others are not.
- And perhaps most importantly, it is difficult to defend each unit of JIW credit as being equal to the senior thesis which, by extension, is treated as being equal to two courses.

Attaching credit to the junior independent work promises to address these problems by considerably simplifying this complicated landscape. But this change can only be accomplished if accompanied by a reconsideration of the JP requirement itself, and by asking whether two units of JP independent work credit are necessary for the A.B. degree.

This is because more than half of all undergraduates are majoring in a department that is already offering a credit-bearing methods course which counts toward the 31 courses currently required for the A.B. The growth of these courses has been a necessary and welcome change in the curriculum, since it helps introduce students to the requisite methods of the discipline on which they've chosen to focus. But the junior methods courses have also made it increasingly difficult to defend the premise that each unit of JIW represents a separate and distinct body of work that warrants transcription with the weight of an additional course.

For this reason, we recommend a shift to requiring only one unit of junior independent work credit for A.B students, which will give departments a range of ways to creatively adapt their curriculum to this new requirement. Departments could have the single paper requirement transcribed only in the spring (as sixteen A.B. departments already do) or have it spread across both the fall and the spring, if this model better suits their curricular needs. Some departments might even elect to continue requiring two separate, semester-long junior papers if they deem it necessary for their majors' training. Giving departments these options will make the junior paper requirement more transparent and, in the process, more consistent and equitable across departments.

Specifically, it would do this:

- For the twenty departments with a fall methods course, the first unit of independent work as currently required could be folded into the existing course. This would create parity across departments and end the inequities through which some students are required to write a fall JP separate from a course while others effectively complete the first half of their JIW for course credit. These departments would continue to require a single, spring JP that could be carried out as it is now. Alternatively, a department could elect to have the single JP credit spread out across both semesters.

In careful negotiation with ODOC, departments with credit-bearing fall methods course could also elect to require two semester-long junior papers. We expect this will be rare.

- For the nine departments in which students write a JP in the context of a non-credit bearing workshop or seminar, these experiences could be transitioned to a true, credit-bearing class which would count toward their total course credits, like many other departments do already. The spring JP could be carried out as it is now.
- The three departments with no formal organization around the JIW could elect to establish a credit-bearing sequence or continue as they do now. If so, the two JPs that students complete as the fall and spring JIW would either be treated as two units of semester-long credit, or (depending on the scope of the work required) be recast as the equivalent of two half-credit projects, one completed in each term.
- Regardless of a department's proposed junior independent work format, the course count for A.B. students would be amended to note the additional two course credits required for the senior thesis and the one course credit expected for the junior paper. (Departments that elect to require two junior papers would reflect this requirement as additional departmental courses, but students would not be expected to complete an additional course for the A.B. degree in these departments.)

We propose that a two-year implementation period would allow all departments to plan for any additional instructional needs and discuss with ODOC potential formats for these revised courses (for instance, a methods course in which students are working independently in a lab outside of class time might not need to meet for the standard three class hours).

This period of implementation would also allow ODOC to work with departments to clarify options for students wishing to study abroad during the junior year. While we do not anticipate that this change will inhibit students' ability to spend a semester abroad, we will take care to articulate alternative options for students who seek them.

At the same time, this proposal would continue to grant departments considerable flexibility in how they choose to scaffold the JIW, a benefit of the current system that we seek to preserve.

We conclude with proposed language to reflect these changes in the Undergraduate Announcement.

Potential new language for the Undergraduate Announcement:
"Program of Study for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts"

Existing language:

With the exception of students who receive one or two terms of advanced standing, all A.B. students must successfully complete a minimum of 31 courses and two years of departmental independent work in eight terms of study.

Proposed revision:

Effective AY 2025-2026, for the Class of 2026 and beyond, the senior thesis requirement will be transcribed as two units of course credit, which will satisfy the existing requirement of two semesters of department independent work in the major in the senior year.

A.B. students in the Classes of 2026 and 2027 will therefore need to complete 33 total credits (two of which will be the senior thesis credits) and one year of junior independent work, as currently described and implemented by their departmental major.

Effective in AY 2025-2026, beginning with the Class of 2028 and beyond, all A.B. students will be required to successfully complete at least 34 total credits, which will include at least three credit-bearing units of departmental independent work. At least one unit of independent work credit must be earned in the junior year, and two units must be earned in the senior year.

Appendix A: Examples of current departmental models for Junior Independent Work

		Fall	Spring	Departments with this model
Models for completing 2 Junior Papers (1.0 each in Fall and Spring)	A	Freestanding Fall JP (1.0), no course or workshop	Spring JP (1.0)	FIT, SPO, AST
	B	Freestanding fall JP, but carried out within the structure of a required, non-credit bearing workshop (1.0)	Spring JP (1.0)	CHM, EEB, GEO, MAT, MOL, NEU, PHI, PHY
	C	Required credit bearing methods course + Fall JP (must be written and graded separately from class)	Spring JP (1.0)	CLA, COS, EAS, HIS, SLA
Models for completing 1 Year-Long Junior Paper,	D	Non-credit bearing seminar/workshop (no fall grade)	Spring JP (2.0)	ECO

(Transcribed in Spring as 2.0)	E	Required credit-bearing methods seminar(s)	Spring JP (2.0)	AAS, ANT, ARC, ART, COM, ENG, GER, MUS, NES, POL, PSY, REL, SOC, SPI* (*effective for Class of 2026)
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