

Guidelines for Faculty and Departments on Course Point Values
Educational Policy and Planning Committee
Spring 2014

Courses at Columbia carry varying levels of credit as indicated by their point value. Point values matter, as they indicate to students the workload for the course and affect the number of courses students will take. This document offers guidance on two matters:

- How to assign point values to courses, and especially how to distinguish between three-point and four-point courses. As a general rule, **a 3-point course should have a workload appropriate to a student taking five courses while a 4-point course should have a workload appropriate to a student taking four courses.**
- How point values for lecture courses with discussion sections might be raised to four, as well as how to pursue other changes that might be justified.

What ‘Points’ Mean

Point values are based on the workload of the course. They do not reflect difficulty but rather the amount of time – both inside and out of class – the student is expected to spend on the course. There are state and federal guidelines governing ‘points,’ but these are interpreted knowing that course structures and pedagogical practices will vary and that point values need to adapt to those variations. Most Columbia courses carry three or four points. This document is intended in part to clarify the distinction between three point and four point courses.

How to determine point values

1. Expectations about overall student courseloads and workloads

State and federal guidelines are based on the assumption that a full student load is 15 credits/term or 30 credits a year. Columbia requires 124 credits to graduate; we thus assume a minimum of 15-16 credits/term. The state assumes, roughly, that each point reflects three hours of work (including class time). A 3-point course thus assumes 9 hours (including class time), and a 4-point course assumes 12 hours. A student in full-time study (15-16 pts.) is devoting 45-48 hours/week to their studies (including class time). Such a schedule could consist of four 4-credit courses or five 3-credit courses or some mix of the two; student can also of course take more than the minimum number of courses necessary to graduate (and many of ours do). There should, however, be a meaningful difference between a 3-point and 4-point course. As a rule, **faculty should imagine a 3-point course having a workload appropriate to a student taking five courses and a 4-point course having a workload appropriate to a student taking four courses.**

2. Expectations about “contact hours”

Assumptions about the normal ratio between in-class and out-of-class work also underlie point values. The state defines 50 minutes as a ‘contact hour’ and posits a 1:2 ratio between in-class ‘contact hours’ and out-of-class work – so that, say, a three-point class would have 3 ‘contact hours’ and expect 6 hours out-of-class work and a four-point class would have 4 contact hours and expect 8 hours of out-of-class work. That said, ratios between in-class and out-of-class work can vary based on course

format (large/small, lecture/seminar), instructional level, discipline, how reading- or writing-intensive the course is, and the amount of independent work involved. Courses that do not conform to the usual lecture course model, or that have an extensive individual-supervision component or higher expectations for independent and out-of-class work, may have a different relationship between the in- and out of class components. The crucial point is that our decisions about points be consistent, and defensible in terms of overall expectations for student work, appropriate faculty supervision, and good pedagogical practice.

Course templates and recommended point values

Lecture courses with sections adding an extra component to the course

150 min. (2x75) lecture plus 50 min. section

4 points

Many Columbia lecture courses meet for two 75 minute lectures with an additional discussion section. These are not simply ‘homework help’ sections but are a regular part of the course for which students prepare and which add to both the work and value of a course. Based on average workload as well as contact hours, such courses would normally carry 4 points.

Other lecture courses:

150 min. (2x75) lecture

3 points

Many lecture courses either do not have sections or have sections that are used essentially as recitations or help rooms. Such courses routinely carry 3 points, but faculty should be aware that the workload for such courses should be set on the expectation that such a course would normally be one of five and not four courses a student would take.

Undergraduate or graduate seminars

110 minutes

3-4 points

Seminars at Columbia are usually 2 hours (110 minutes), but carry point values of either three or four. Either can be justified: what is crucial is that departments make decisions based on clear expectations about coursework and programs. In setting point values, departments need to consider the implications for students at all levels – undergraduate, masters, and PhD.

110-minute seminars carry 4 points if they have higher expectations for out-of-class work (e.g. extensive reading and writing assignments). Generally, 4-point seminars are part of well-defined departmental programs for undergraduate majors or graduate students that assume students are taking four such courses each term. **110-minute seminars carry 3 points** if their expectations for out-of-class work justify that value, and if they are part of well-conceived departmental programs that assume a normal five-course student load. In both cases, given the lower level of contact hours, it is assumed that faculty members will make themselves regularly available to students outside class hours to guide their independent work.

Some advice about other formats

Small courses taught in lecture-course time slots without discussion sections

150 minutes (2 x 75 min.)

3-4 points

Faculty and departments are advised to think about point values for small courses in terms of pedagogical best practice and student workload as a whole. Most likely, a faculty member will not teach a lecture course with five students in the same way he or she would teach a lecture course with 50 students; small courses routinely incorporate discussion into the course.

Some departments have been experimenting with a hybrid course form melding the lecture and the seminar. Such courses meet in regular lecture time slots, but have capped enrollments and convert one of the weekly lecture times into a period of instruction in research methods or discussion of common readings and student projects. This model enables the faculty member to provide the kind of detailed instruction offered in lecture but also to incorporate the kind of instruction in close reading and discussion offered in seminars. Point values for such courses should depend on expectations about out-of-class preparation and work; it is assumed that the faculty member is available for out-of-class guidance and supervision.

Proposals for changes in point values

1. Bringing lecture courses with discussion sections to four points.

In an effort to bring point values into line with state guidelines and with expectations about student work, the EPPC recommends that lecture courses (2 x 75 minutes of lecture) which have an additional 50 minute section as a routine part of the course carry four points. The EPPC has established a joint administrators' committee with the college COI to work with departments to raise point values for such courses from three to four. That group will be contacting departments who offer such courses and who have indicated that they feel such a change to be justified. We will work with departments through the next year to make such changes in a consistent manner.

2. Other changes

If departments feel other changes to point values are necessary, proposals for such changes (which should include a pedagogical justification for the change and be consistent with the principles outlined here) should go to the College COI for undergraduate courses or the GSAS Executive Committee for graduate courses for approval. **Rose Razaghian (rr222) is available to advise departments and facilitate such proposals.**