Micro-courses at JMU--Plan for a Pilot Study

A Report of the JMU Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee--April 2015

Overview

During the 2014-2015 academic year, the JMU Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee (APC), in partnership with Vice Provost for Academic Development Teresa Gonzalez, and JMU Registrar Michelle White, considered a proposal to create the opportunity for faculty to develop "micro-courses"--courses representing less than one credit hour--that would be taught at JMU. Input was solicited from faculty members in various units, and administrative units including Academic Affairs, the Registrar, Business Office, and Financial Aid. Such courses could take many forms, such as teaser courses, continuing education, supplemental topics, concurrent modular instruction, remedial and "gap-filler" courses for transfer students, and seminar series. While attractive, offering such courses poses many administrative hurdles and challenges both at the university level--e.g. calculating financial aid eligibility, classroom space utilization, billing, entry into the Registrar's system--and also at the academic unit level--how are such courses proposed, quality assured, teaching loads calculated, etc. While the original proposal entertained the notion that courses could be for various fractions of one credit hour (½, ⅓, ¼), the number of challenges posed by creating such a system led the APC to simplify the scope of the original idea and pursue developing a limited pilot study of the feasibility and desirability of creating the infrastructure for micro-courses at JMU. The guidelines for implementing this pilot study were created in cooperation with the JMU Administration and are articulated in this document, along with descriptions of the various benefits and challenges a micro-course system at JMU would present. This goal of this document is to provide decision-makers enough information to decide on whether or not to proceed with a pilot study on offering micro-courses at JMU.

What is a "Micro-course?"

A micro-course is a course that is offered for less than one credit hour. It has a specific title, well-defined content, and students would receive a grade for the course. For the purposes of this document, the definition has been restricted to refer to courses that are equivalent to ½ of a credit hour. Since a standard 3-credit course represents 45 contact hours between the student and instructor (3 hours/week * 15 weeks), this represents 7.5 contact hours. Technically, courses at JMU typically meet for 50 minutes three times a week, or 75 minutes twice a week, meaning that a "contact hour" actually represents 50 minutes. Therefore, a micro-course requires instructors and students to have an actual total of 375 minutes (7.5 * 50), or 6 hours 15 minutes. Currently, online and hybrid courses at JMU allow some of those contact hours to be in the form of online lectures and/or interactions. Operationally, micro-courses could be offered entirely in a single full-day seminar, or broken up into smaller units of time, as long as the contact hour requirements are met.

What Forms Might a Micro-course Take?

A number of different scenarios were developed by the APC. This list is not intended to be exhaustive, but rather to demonstrate the range and flexibility of the micro-course for traditional and non-traditional teacher/student interaction. Nor are these scenarios presented in any

particular order that might suggest that one or another of them is preferable to any other. Design of the course experience is left up to the creativity and expertise of instructors and their academic units. Six different scenarios are presented here.

1. Teaser/Intro/Enrichment Courses

Micro-courses could be used to provide students with a way to get short, engaging, exciting experiences with a broad array of subject matter. These short courses could be offered by departments to first year students as a low-cost way for them to learn about potential majors. The University of Richmond's First Year Seminar Series[1] follows a model similar to this. These courses might also allow for particularly eager students to dive more deeply into "cutting edge" or other topics they might not see as part of a regular degree program.

2. Continuing Education

Teachers and other professionals who are required to accumulate continuing education credits to remain credentialed in their fields may be more attracted to having a wide array of short, intense offerings, than having to commit to full-semester options. Such courses are easier to fit into their busy daily schedules, and could be tailored to specific, timely needs. These courses offer the possibility of increased engagement between professionals in the community and JMU. When coupled with the Bachelor of Independent Studies Program (the BIS is JMU's adult degree program), this could make it easier for busy adults to obtain their bachelor's degree.

3. Supplemental Topics

As many fields evolve rapidly, students may need knowledge or skills that are outside of the currently established curriculum, but don't yet merit creating an entirely new course. For example, many students in biology and chemistry are finding that they need some basic computer programming skills in order to use new informatics tools. A 2-3 week micro-course could meet this need.

4. Concurrent Modular Instruction

The syllabi for many traditional courses (i.e. non-micro-courses) *could* contain content from a range of topics that would far exceed the amount that would fit into a single semester. Currently, an instructor has to choose which of those topics will actually make it into the syllabus. An alternative model that takes advantage of micro-courses would be to offer a wide range of micro-courses that meet together at the same time. Students could select the version of the syllabus that most appeals to them and/or could participate in the experience multiple times while selecting different pieces of the micro-curriculum each time.

For example, ISAT 341 is a 3-credit course in simulation and modeling with computers. There are many different methods of simulation and modeling that *could* be included in this course. Currently, students are allowed to select several from among these many methods and focus on them for the duration of the course. However, since students cannot get credit for taking the same course twice, and since there is not a second course in simulation and modeling, students

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[1] http://fys.richmond.edu/seminar-topics/index.html

who have wished to further pursue other methods in simulation and modeling have not had any attractive options for getting this content - despite clear expressed interest. By breaking up ISAT 341 into 15-18 micro-courses of 0.5 credits each, students could essentially take the course multiple times, but select a different subset of six micro-courses. This format fosters engagement and rewards intellectual curiosity.

5. Remedial and "Gap-Filler" Courses

Offering micro-courses offers the possibility that students who need to brush up on, be re-introduced to, or repeat a specific subset of material could do so without having to find the time to re-take an entire 3-credit course. Or possibly, if a transfer student has taken a course at another institution that is "close" but not entirely sufficient to satisfy a JMU or major requirement a micro-course could be used to fill the gap left by their prior experience. Having to satisfy requirements not met by courses at another school, or having to retake an entire course that was failed because a small portion of the material was not mastered is probably one of the most common reasons that students do not graduate on time. If students could have this as a resource to rely on, JMU may in the process increase it's 4-year completion rate.

6. Year or Semester Long Seminar Series

Some programs at JMU require majors to attend "extracurricular" events such as talks from visiting scholars, dance or musical performances. Micro-courses could be a way to provide credit to students for participating in these events and being more engaged in the academic life of the university.

These six scenarios articulate a good case for the desirability of implementing micro-courses at JMU. They have many potential implementations, and those forms provide concrete benefits to students, to faculty members, to programs, and to the university. However, there are other benefits that micro-courses may provide that have not been articulated yet.

What Other Benefits Do Micro-Courses Provide?

Again, while a number of other benefits are described in this section, this is not intended to be a comprehensive list.

1. Increased Engagement

Having the possibility of offering micro-courses may mean that students will be more likely to propose, and faculty members will be more likely to accept proposals to create and run timely seminars on topics of interest. The JMUTeach[2] project was an example of how students can be motivated to take control of their own education. Offering the possibility of micro-courses opens up the opportunity to have a formal, stable process for standing up content that was co-created by students and faculty members.

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[2] http://www.jmu.edu/universitystudies/JMUTeach.shtml

2. More Meaningful Transcripts

There is a new trend in some professional fields towards awarding badges.[3] Think of these in the same way one would think of merit badges in Boy/Girl Scouts. Since the course descriptions of standard 3-credit courses are necessarily broad, if a traditional course were broken up into six or more micro-courses, each could have a more specific title on the transcript and would provide a more easily interpretable catalogue of the skills, knowledge, and experiences that a particular student had while attending JMU. This level of specificity would appeal to both students and potential employers.

3. Agile Curricula

Furthermore, since many fields are evolving rapidly, teaching a traditional course as a set of six or more micro-courses would allow instructors to more rapidly retire old content and introduce new content, without compromising the integrity or flow of the degree program as a whole. No longer would instructors have to come up with course descriptions that are intentionally vague so as to allow them to modify the content without going through a cumbersome C&I process.

4. A Hedge Against MOOCs and Other Online Options

The last several years have seen a great rise in the number of free course offerings online. These offerings are of varying quality and comprehensiveness. MOOCs are only one of a number of new technologies that threaten to undermine the value proposition of a traditional 4-year degree program. Micro-courses, since they are smaller, require less investment of instructor time to create, and represent an opportunity to match the agility of organizations that provide these alternative options. Students frequently question the need to follow a liberal curriculum, and micro-courses offer faculty members the ability to offer an exciting and relevant rebuttal to the notion that the main purpose of college is to learn how to do a specific job, or follow a specific career trajectory.

What are the Challenges of Offering Micro-courses?

There are a number of challenges that must be overcome before micro-courses become an available option for JMU faculty members. While not insurmountable, they are non-trivial. This section organizes the challenges by the administrative units that are most affected by each.

Challenges to Units and Programs

There will be a number of hurdles that academic programs and units will have to jump over before micro-courses can become a regular component of their offerings. In the near future, the most likely course of action will be to restrict the options available until more robust procedures can be developed.

Course Development, Advertising, and Advising

It may prove to be extremely difficult both to find the time to develop and deploy micro-courses, and also to keep academic advisors and students aware of the current offerings. Indeed, the

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[3] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Digital_badges

challenge of publicity was one of the major challenges faced by the JMUTeach program. At present, there does not appear to be any uniform or widespread means of communicating with students about potential options.

Course Catalog Maintenance and SCHEV Compliance

SCHEV and the JMU Course Catalog are not known for being the most agile entities. It is anticipated that some micro-courses would be ephemeral, and others more stable. There may be questions about when and if a course needs to be listed in the course catalog. While this poses a problem for the Registrar, it is chiefly faculty members who have the responsibility for creating documentation and sending it through the appropriate channels to be approved.

Grade Reporting Process for Faculty Members

Faculty members teaching micro-courses may find that their schedules now contain a greater number of courses. It may be difficult to keep track of who is enrolled in which micro-course and make sure that the grade rosters have been submitted for all courses. In other words, there is an increased overhead associated with managing the grading and reporting about students.

Assessment and Accreditation

Ensuring the quality of micro-courses will be the responsibility of faculty members and has repercussions for annual progress template (APT) reporting and for disciplinary and university accreditation. Programs will have to develop processes and methods for determining whether or not micro-courses are living up to the high expectations of various constituencies.

Teaching Load and Overload Pay

Units are currently responsible for managing the teaching loads of faculty, making sure that each faculty member bears a fair share of the teaching load of the unit, while also making sure that necessary courses are covered and student demands are met. Units would need to develop procedures for determining if and how micro-courses fit into the mix. Unit heads and deans would be responsible for making effective arguments for personnel based on teaching loads taking into account the micro-courses. They would also have to decide how to compensate instructors for whom micro-courses represent a teaching overload.

Challenges for the Registrar

The JMU Registrar will be keenly affected by the decision about whether or not to adopt micro-courses. While it is technically feasible to set up PeopleSoft (the system that runs our catalogue and student/course information system) to award ½ credit for a course, there are many other challenges that must be addressed.

System Integration

The current system for scheduling and managing courses (PeopleSoft) would need to be updated. The request to articulate what changes need to be made and go forward with this project would originate with the Registrar's office and would be executed by JMU's IT department.

Add/Drop/Refunds

Given the short timeframe in which students register for, begin, and end mini-courses, it difficult to envision appropriate timeframes for dropping and/or receiving refunds for courses. As such, it will be recommended that there be no drop/refund period for these courses.

Scheduling and Space Utilization

Currently, JMU has "terms" that are defined within PeopleSoft that specify when courses take place. Fall and spring semesters and the first and second eight-week blocks within them, as well as the first and second summer sessions represent the currently defined terms. Any course that begins or ends outside of one of these terms, summer study abroad courses, for example, must be entered into the Registrar's system manually. Scheduling and locating mini-courses within a currently defined term could present a challenge. Manually entering new terms for each mini-course would not be feasible for a widely available system. Furthermore, the current terms determine when grades are due to the Registrar. These issues would be addressed by the System Integration effort described above.

Likewise, courses are typically scheduled into rooms and take up that space for the duration of a given term on a regular schedule, e.g. MWF 9:05-9:55. Micro-courses could be used to "fill in the gaps" and make greater use of the available spaces on campus. Figuring out the space puzzle is a non-trivial task that will need careful thought and planning if micro-courses are to become generally available.

Borderline Credit Issues and GPA

Although these cases are likely to be rare, there may be cases where students taking ½ credit courses find themselves on the cusp of being full or part time, of being a junior or a senior, of being eligible or not eligible for graduation. Policies would need to be developed and put in place to deal with borderline cases because class standing and accumulated credit hours have important ramifications for financial aid, registration times, and graduation status.

Furthermore, policies would also have to be developed to incorporate micro-courses into GPA calculations. Currently, GPA is only calculated at the end of the semester, but it is plausible to think that a student on academic probation who took and passed a micro-course in early September might wish to have the GPA recalculated sooner than the end of the semester. While it is straightforward to make the executive decision not to recalculate GPA mid-semester, it still falls to the Registrar's office to deal with potentially disgruntled students.

Registration, Prerequisites, and Tuition

When would students register for micro-courses? Would these courses be allowed to have prerequisites or be prerequisites for other courses? How much tuition should be charged for a micro-course? How would differential tuition be calculated for these courses? Setting up PeopleSoft to handle the dependencies between micro-courses and other courses would need significant attention. Setting tuition policy is also a significant task that will involve approval of

the Board of Visitors, which has responsibility for setting tuition rates in coordination with the state legislature.

General Student Relations Issues

In general, the Registrar's office bears the responsibility of dealing with students who are disgruntled and/or stressed about GPA, credit-hour, and registration issues. If the new micro-course system is not created carefully, there is the potential to greatly increase the emotional overhead that the Registrar's office is required to deal with. It is not the desire of the faculty to increase such work and stress for the Registrar.

Challenges for the Financial Aid Office

There are some significant challenges that must be overcome to make micro-courses work with the financial aid system.

Influence of For-Profit Universities

Recently some for-profit universities have come up with innovative ways to create and schedule courses that will allow students to qualify and the universities to receive as much money as possible from federal financial aid programs. As such, these "many-mester" systems have been receiving increased scrutiny from the federal government. JMU would need to proceed with care in the implementation of micro-courses, so as not to become bogged down in federal inquiries as to the nature of our new system.

Audit Schedule

Financial aid, the timing for application for and disbursement of funds, and the annual schedule which determines how much a student has received so far, and how much they can yet receive is based in the traditional semester system. The accounting of these systems is frequently audited. Since the registration, billing, and teaching of micro-courses might be separated in time, and may not follow a traditional schedule, care would need to be taken not to make this process any more complicated than it has to be or to draw unwanted and unnecessary scrutiny from auditors.

Veterans Receiving Government Assistance

There are strict regulations for veterans receiving tuition and living assistance reimbursements under the GI Bill. We would not inadvertently want to cause financial hardship to these students if taking a micro-course somehow caused them to receive a smaller reimbursement than they were expecting or to which they were entitled.

Determination of Full/Part-time Status

One of the most key and basic factors that determines the amount of financial aid a student can receive is whether or not the student is full time or part time. While the cutoff is fairly cut and dry, we want to make sure that students know the rules and will not be caught off-guard if their ½ credit course does not push them over the limit, or if failing the course drops them below it.

Challenges for the JMU Business Office

The JMU Business Office is responsible for making income projections for the university based on projected enrollments. This has ramifications for university-wide budgets and hinges on the amount of tuition that would be received for micro-courses, the billing schedule, and when these revenues would be received. This is particularly relevant for students coming from outside of the normal student body, such as non-matriculated students, continuing and professional education students, all of which would be likely targets of micro-course enrollments.

Summary of Challenges

It is clear that from an administrative and pedagogical standpoint, the implementation of micro-courses is feasible, but non-trivial. While there are many reasons why it would be a good idea to introduce such courses, particularly for promoting engagement in line with the JMU Vision Statement, a great deal of care must be given to the details of such an implementation. As such, Academic Council and Senior Leadership have provided a set of parameters and guidelines for conducting a pilot study. These parameters, recommendations, and guidelines will be reviewed in the next section.

Parameters, Recommendations, and Guidelines for a Pilot Study

After discussion of all of the above benefits and challenges of implementing micro-courses at JMU, Provost Benson, Senior Leadership and the Academic Council have set for the following guidelines for moving forward with a pilot study.

Courses offered as part of the micro-course pilot should follow the following guidelines:

- Faculty teaching pilot courses need to submit forms to academic unit C&I committees for approval of experimental courses.
- Pilot courses must be scheduled within the established regular and/or eight-week sessions.
- Classes meeting outside the standard meeting days (M-F) will be scheduled by the faculty member teaching the class using individual room reservation.
- Classes will be setup as corequisites so students will not have partial credit hours earned, i.e. students must sign up for pairs of micro-courses to avoid having partial credits on their transcripts.
- Maximum number of class offerings: 10
- Maximum class size: 30 students

Furthermore, because elements of this proposal cross curricular and calendar areas as well as being a significant change in our approach to scheduling, Academic Council and Senior Leadership felt that the proposal calls for a high level review, and they provided a process for this review. The process is as follows:

1. Dr. Benton and the Faculty Senate Academic Policies Committee (APC) should complete the white paper[4] on awarding micro-credit and provide it to Dr. Benson. The paper should include a description of the process, rationale and benefits of a micro-credit course option, as well as measures to be used to evaluate the effectiveness of micro-credit courses.
2. Dr. Benson will present the APC white paper to Academic Council (AC) for review.
3. Upon receiving AC support, Dr. Benson will present the proposal to the Senior Leadership Team (SLT) for their review and will request support to conduct a pilot program.
4. If the SLT is supportive, Dr. Benson and Dr. Gonzalez will inform Academic Council.
5. The University Registrar, Ms. White, will develop the guidelines for courses to be included in the pilot. Parameters will be provided for schedule, room use, class size and number of classes. Because the registration support must be completed manually, participation will be limited so the Office of the Registrar is able to effectively administer the program.
6. Dr. Gonzalez will inform the Committee on Academic Programs (CAP) about the pilot and will request CAP's participation as evaluators of the outcomes report.
7. APC will work with Ms. White to identify/select courses for inclusion in the pilot. Participating faculty will develop courses and submit Experimental Course Action for Micro-Credit Course forms to academic unit C&I committees for approval to offer these courses in spring 2016. Proposals should be submitted as soon as possible but no later than September 1, 2015 so approval can be obtained in advance of construction of the spring 2016 schedule of classes.
8. When outcomes results are compiled by APC in fall 2016, the report will be submitted to CAP. That group will make a recommendation about implementation to the Provost. If the Provost approves, the micro-credit course option will become part of the Registrar's request for system changes to scheduling options.

The next section of this document will outline a proposal for moving forward with the pilot study.

Proposal for a Pilot Study of Micro-course Implementation

This section articulates a plan for conducting a pilot study of micro-course implementation, beginning with a timeline.

Timeline

- **June 1, 2015**
  A team will be assembled to organize and run the pilot study. This team will consist of, at a minimum, one representative each from APC, CARS, CFI, CIT, the Registrar's Office, and the Financial Aid Office. This team will be responsible for soliciting and reviewing proposals, monitoring and advising course development, and being involved in the compilation of data from the pilot and writing up the final report.

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[4] This document.

- **Summer 2015 through September 1, 2015**
  Pending Academic Council approval of the plan to run the pilot study, proposals for up to 5 pairs of micro-courses (for a total of 10) will be solicited from faculty members from a variety of academic units across the university. Proposals will be targeted to take advantage of as many of the different benefits of micro-courses as possible. Proposals will be in the form of a pair of course syllabi (since courses must be offered in pairs), along with a short statement of rationale for the proposal and a plan for assessment of the two courses, as well as a plan for recruiting students to take these courses. Proposals must have the approval of the academic unit C&I committee and academic unit head (AUH) prior to submission, and certification of these approvals must accompany the submission. Courses should be targeted to run during the first eight-week block of the spring 2016 semester.

- **September 1, 2015 to November 4, 2015**
  Proposals must be received by Tuesday, September 1. Applicants will be notified by Friday, September 18 of the decision regarding the proposals. Between September 18 and November 4, which is the first day of registration for the spring 2016 semester, the successful applicants will work with the Registrar to find a time and space to run the courses. These instructors will also work with their academic units to recruit enough students to meet target enrollment levels, not to exceed 30 students per section.

- **September 18, 2015 to January 11, 2016**
  Once notified of acceptance, instructors of accepted courses will consult with a member of CARS to develop a plan for course evaluation and assessment. This consultation is designed to influence the course design in such a way that, when the course has been completed, there will be sufficient data of a nature that is likely to support a strong indication of the success or failure of the pilot course.

- **First eight-week block of spring 2016 semester**
  The pilot courses will be run, and assessment data collected.

- **Second eight-week block of spring 2016 semester**
  The data from the pilot courses will be analyzed and a report written. This activity may spill over into summer 2016 if there is not sufficient time during the spring.

- **September 1, 2016**
  Results of the pilot study will be submitted to the Faculty Senate APC, Committee on Academic Programs (CAP), as well as Academic Council, and Senior Leadership. These groups will provide feedback on the results to CAP, which will make a recommendation on future directions to the Provost.

Expected Outcomes of a Successful Pilot

Given that there are a number of different scenarios under which micro-courses might be implemented, outcomes will differ given the scenario. These will be specified here in addition to engagement, which is a general outcome expected from all scenarios. Also, given the limited scope of the pilot, not all of the six scenarios described at the beginning of this report will be able to be investigated. For the pilot the scenarios to be investigated will be for

teaser/intro/enrichment courses, continuing and professional education courses, supplemental topics courses, and remedial/gap-filler courses.

General Outcome: Increased Engagement

Following the JMU Vision Statement:

> ***JMU will be the national model for the engaged university: engaged with ideas and the world***

Micro-courses should be developed specifically to foster engagement among students and faculty members addressing one or more of the following outcomes:

1. Micro-courses will promote ***engaged learning***--deep, purposeful and reflective learning, that unites campus and community in the pursuit, creation, application and dissemination of knowledge
2. Micro-courses will promote ***civic engagement***--preparing individuals to be active and responsible participants in a representative democracy dedicated to the common good
3. Micro-courses will promote ***community engagement***--fostering mutually beneficial and reciprocal partnerships, ranging from local to global, that connect learning to practice, address critical societal problems and improve quality of life

If successful, incorporating engagement into the outcomes of the micro-course pilot will further the pursuit of JMU's Vision Statement. More specifically, it has the potential:

1. To demonstrate that engagement can come from short, intense units of instruction
2. To aid in the development of concrete metrics of engagement that can be more broadly applied to the assessment of JMU's success in achieving its Vision
3. To produce artifacts that can be used to communicate JMU's commitment to its vision to audiences both within and without JMU

Outcomes for Teaser/Intro/Enrichment Micro-courses

If successful, students will leave these courses with:

1. A broad level of ***understanding*** of a potential major or area of study comparable to students who have taken a 3-credit introductory course in the same area
2. A ***positive attitude*** indicating their desire to spend more time studying this subject regardless of whether or not it becomes their major
3. The ***ability to communicate the value of studying this subject*** area to others as it relates to being an enlightened citizen who leads a meaningful and productive life
4. An ***accurate awareness of their own innate talents, abilities, and passions*** as they relate to the subject matter of the course

If successful, these courses might serve as a model for helping students more accurately identify their own gifts and passions, and make better choices of majors. As micro-courses, a freshman student could take six teaser courses in a variety of subject areas in place of a single 3-credit intro course in only one subject area. Increased exposure to a variety of topics serves the purpose of a liberal arts education.

Outcomes for Continuing and Professional Education Micro-courses

Adults are frequently busy with full-time jobs and families. Although continued study and lifelong learning are goals or requirements for many, it is not always feasible to commit to taking a full-semester, 3-credit course. If successful, micro-courses for continuing and professional education students would:

1. Enhance the personal and professional lives of non-traditional students
2. Increase the number of such students taking classes at JMU, and thereby increase the linkages between JMU and the surrounding community
3. Provide a valuable service to professionals in the area

Traditional semesters and 3-credit courses are a barrier to many who would like to pursue higher education. Not only would offering micro-courses to these people fit better into their lives, but it is also a demonstration of the degree to which JMU cares about its community and is willing to innovate to meet the demands of modern lifestyles.

Outcomes for Supplemental Topics Micro-courses

Supplemental topics refer to subjects that may not be covered by a particular program deeply or at all, but which have clear relevance to students within the major. If successful, micro-courses on supplemental topics would leave those students with:

1. Significant knowledge or skills related to, but outside of the traditional bounds of their major, and which would improve prospects for employment and/or graduate school
2. A deeper sense of how their major relates to other topics or fields outside of that major
3. Strong feelings of being at the cutting edge of their field
4. An enhanced desire to explore other supplemental topics, either on their own or as part of an organized group

The disciplines represented by academic programs at JMU are constantly changing and evolving. There is not always time to create entire new 3-credit courses to explore topics at or near the cutting edge. At the same time, students' experiences and competitiveness would be enhanced by exposure to these topics. Micro-courses, if successful, could very effectively close this gap, invigorating students and making them more attractive to employers and graduate schools.

Outcomes for Remedial or "Gap-Filler" Micro-courses

Remedial or "gap-filler" courses are designed to address the needs of students who have either:

1. Failed part of a required course, but could have received a passing grade if they had done better in one or two specific topic areas within the course, or
2. Taken a similar course at another institution which almost, but not quite, counts for transfer credit, but would be sufficient if supplemented by one or two additional topics

If successful, micro-courses for remedial or gap-filler courses would:

1. Focus students' attention on specific, key content areas within required courses either within a program or within general education
2. Assist students in staying "on schedule" and graduating without having to remain additional semesters
3. Increase the satisfaction level of students who need these courses with their JMU experience

Attending college is expensive, and using micro-courses to help students finish in a more timely fashion would better serve these students' needs. At the same time, universities are evaluated on their 4-year graduation rate, and micro-courses could help increase these rates and improve the standing of JMU.

Other Considerations for the Pilot Study

In order to keep the pilot study manageable, a number of other considerations and restrictions are planned:

- Only full-time students or non-matriculated students will be allowed to participate to avoid issues regarding financial aid status.
- In every case, students will need to be given explicit permission to register for courses.
- Students will not be permitted to drop the course once it has begun.
- Academic units will be given freedom to determine how involvement in the micro-course pilot factors into an instructor's teaching load, but will be encouraged to treat the instructor in the same way that they expect that they would should micro-courses become a standard option at JMU.

Final Summary, Thoughts, Acknowledgements, and Conclusion

The educational landscape is evolving and JMU needs to keep pace. Offering micro-courses is an exciting opportunity to respond to a number of salient needs of JMU's constituencies and also to further our Vision Statement. This document provides an attempt at a comprehensive description of the benefits and challenges of offering micro-courses at JMU, and proposes parameters and initial design constraints for a pilot study that would help us decide whether or not to go forward.

A survey of the implementation of micro-courses at other universities reveals that while they exist, their use is not widespread and tends to be limited to very narrow parameters. JMU would

be a pioneer and a leader in curricular innovation if it decided to allow instructors to design and offer micro-courses routinely.

This report was prepared by the JMU Faculty Senate's Academic Policies Committee (APC), and would not have been possible without the active cooperation and generous contributions of time and effort from Provost Benson, the Senior Leadership Team, Academic Council, members of the Financial Aid and Business Offices, and especially Vice Provost for Academic Development Teresa Gonzalez and JMU Registrar Michelle White. The APC would like to express its heartfelt appreciation for all of the time and energy of everyone who contributed to the preparation of this report.

In conclusion, the APC recommends moving forward with a pilot study to investigate the feasibility of offering micro-courses at JMU. Such an effort would truly be an example that JMU is striving to become the national model of the engaged university.