COURSE DESIGNATOR POLICY – Draft

1. Course designators must satisfactorily represent the course content and unique program/unit attributes as aligned with the National Center for Education Statistics Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) categories.
   a. If a CIP category does not satisfactorily represent a course/program, then either: (a) the closest one will be identified by the unit; or (b) a new category and associated course designator will be proposed by the unit and considered by the Office of Academic Programs, Assessment, and Accreditation, the Registrar’s Office, and the Curriculum Council.
   b. Course designators will be independent of program or unit naming and assigned in a manner that provides stability in course identification over time.

2. Units/degree programs can keep their current course designators/subject codes but as of (date TBD*) requests for new course designators/subjects codes will either be mapped to a CIP-based designator (from the approved list) or courses may request to use an existing code. From date* forward, these will be considered the course’s “permanent” designator and requests for changes to “permanent” course designators will need to go through the Curriculum Proposal System.

3. Substantive changes to a course may or may not require a new designator. Substantive course changes will be submitted through the Curriculum Proposal System and course designator and numbering will be considered in that context. Key questions regarding whether a course would need a new designator or number is: “Has the content changed enough such that a student who took the previous version of the course could take the revised version of the course?”

4. Course designator requests for general courses in a program or courses than span a College or multiple programs in a unit will receive a designator that is broadly recognized in the field and is not duplicative of designators used within the individual degree programs. These designators should be independent of unit names, which are subject to change.
   o managing blanket courses such as seminar, internship, and leadership?

5. Course designators are independent of course credits for teaching assigned to a unit.
Implementation Steps – Upon Approval of the Policy

1. The Office of Academic Programs, Assessment, and Accreditation and the Registrar’s office would work closely with each degree program and unit to develop acceptable designators.

2. The Registrar’s Office would send the list of proposed designators to registrar’s across the state to identify conflicts. Proposed changes to the list would be discussed with the unit/degree program.

3. Once the list of designators is approved, requests for a course designator would be integrated within new or revised course proposals.

4. Oversight of the course designator list is shared between the Office of Academic Programs, Assessment, and Accreditation, the Registrar’s Office, and the Faculty Senate Curriculum Council. Changes to this list would be initiated via a request to *.

POLICY BACKGROUND AND RATIONALE

a. Course Designator versus Subject Code

Oregon State University has had the following definition for a course designator:

An abbreviation representing the department, college, or program offering the course.
Example: MB indicates that the course is offered through the Department of Microbiology.

At OSU the term “course designator” has been used synonymously with “subject code,” both of which refer to the abbreviated letters preceding a course number (e.g. MTH to represent a “math class” such as MTH 111. College Algebra). The Course Designator definition implies an association of a course with department, college, or program (i.e. the originating unit or program; the program in which the course is designated). This association, when linked with degree program or unit titles, can be problematic for several reasons. These problems are explained in next section below.

A “subject code” is part of a code to efficiently categorize course-related information to (a) reduce the need for lengthy descriptions, (b) efficiently track and manage courses in a database, catalogs, and student advising systems within the institution, and (c) to create an efficient tracking mechanism for transferring courses from one institution to another.
b. Problems With Directly Associating Subject Codes/Course Designators with Titles of Departments, Schools, Colleges, or Specific Degrees

Departments, schools, colleges, and degree programs frequently change names because of reorganization, creating a unique identity, or to represent changes and trends in their field. Having the flexibility to change unit and program names is important and necessary. However, by directly associating course designators/subject codes with units and degree titles, programs feel compelled to change the associated course designators with each unit or program name change.

Frequent changes to these codes cause very real negative consequences for students, workloads within and outside the institution, and long-term tracking of the curriculum.

**Impacts On Students**
- When a course designator changes, hundreds of OSU students per year unknowingly register for and take courses they have already completed, thinking it was a different course. Once the error is discovered, for many of these students it is too late to drop the “repeated” course and register for another course. This can set students back a term or more. In some cases students do not realize the course was a repeat until they notice on their transcript or degree audit that they did not receive credit. In both circumstances students often do not get a refund for the money they spent for the “repeat” course, and they have to spend more money to make up for the credit loss.
- Changing course designators can also negatively impact transfer students. For example, if curriculum guides or articulation agreements are not updated, or if a person making transfer decisions is not aware of changes to course designators, students may be given credit for a course that no longer exist, which may later be taken away from them, or they may not receive credit or a transfer when they should have.
- Although there are “equivalent course” lists, students do not know to look for such a list and advisors are not consistent in their advising. Although these prevention mechanisms are in place, they are error prone, with high negative impacts. In addition, the system cannot be set up to “prevent registration” for a repeat course. This is because students have the choice to repeat a course to improve a grade, there are many topics courses that allow repeats as the topics change, and there are thesis and dissertation credits that need to be repeated.

**Workload Impacts**
- When a course designator changes there are many places that the change needs to be reflected, including in Banner, the catalog, program websites, course equivalency lists within and outside OSU, curriculum guides, articulation
agreements with other institutions, and accreditation tracking. Making these changes is very time consuming, for multiple people across multiple departments within and outside of OSU. This is particularly true for changes to a large numbers of courses when a program changes its name and then wants all of its courses changed.

- Making a large number of changes in multiple places is also prone to error.

**Long-term Curriculum Tracking**
- Changing course designators can make long term curriculum tracking difficult.
THE PROPOSED SOLUTION

There are four requirements for course designators/subject codes: (1) accreditation; (2) affiliation with CIP (Classification of Instructional Programs) codes (this is a Department of Education requirement); (3) courtesy checks with other Oregon higher education institutions to avoid conflicting codes (e.g. The College of Agricultural Sciences requested the designator CAS, however, upon checking it was discovered that CAS is commonly used by other Oregon institutions for computer sciences, thus CAG will be used for the designator); and (4) compatibility with databases and support technologies.

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), OSU’s regional accrediting body, requires that designators shall be “consistent with program content in recognized fields of study.” The National Center for Educational Statistics Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) provides a taxonomic scheme that identifies nationally recognized fields of study and associates a code with that field. Each course and degree program in OSU (and in all higher education institutions) are required to have an accurately assigned CIP code. The CIP code supports the accurate tracking and reporting of fields of study and program completions activity nationally. It is also used by the state of Oregon for educational funding assignments. (NOTE: Within OSU allocation for course registration credit to units is independent of the course designator/subject code, as departmental association with a course is a separate field in Banner.)

a. Advantages

This approach directly aligns courses with nationally recognized fields of study while keeping the courses meaningfully connected with their degree programs. It also provides consistency when programs or units change their names, as the course designators would remain the same. This approach also meets accreditation requirements and eliminates the extra (required) step of mapping a course to a CIP code, thereby increasing administrative efficiency and decreasing unnecessary workload.

In addition to greatly reducing the adverse impacts on students, having consistency in course designators/subject codes has additional advantages: (a) It eliminates the need to continuously check with other Oregon higher education institutions about potential conflicts with a new course designator (the new list of course designators will have already been reviewed and approved by the other Oregon Institutions); (b) It reduces the need to constantly check and update articulation/transfer agreements and course equivalency lists; and (c) it eliminates an administrative approval step that currently involves the Curriculum Council (i.e. streamlines the process).
b. Other Considerations

- It is anticipated, that adopting this policy should not have any adverse impact on transcript reading for employers. When employers look at a transcript they often don't look at the designator (since it is just a code and codes differ between institutions). Rather they look at the course number to indicate the level of the course and the title of the course to note the course content/topic.
  - Some units have expressed concern that course designators differentiate courses that may sound similar but are taught in different units from a discipline-specific perspective. In most cases, the specificity allowed by the CIP code sub-categories should adequately address this concern.

- Student concerns
  - For those students who have been at OSU and are used to course designators having the abbreviations of a unit or degree program, it may take a period of time for them to adjust to the change and they will need to be educated via advisors and other announcement mechanisms. However, new students will easily adjust, as it will be all they know. The specificity allowed by the CIP code sub-categories may adequately address this concern.
  - Advisors will need to be informed of the policy.