Report on Course Numbering at Queens College
Writing at Queens • Spring 2025

Kevin L. Ferguson, Interim Director
Writing Fellows:

Paris Shih	Matthew Mautarelli
Andrea Ariza	Leslie Haynes
Idil Onen	Ming Chen
Meredith Hilliard	Scott Ferrara

I. Overview

Course numbering at Queens College is simultaneously consistent and incoherent: at the department level, departments are generally thoughtful about their course numbering practice; however, at the college level, there is no systematic guidance for selecting course numbers. Course numbering systems help organize academic programs by making course selection, degree planning, and credit transfers easier for students, faculty, and administrators. Different schools use various approaches depending on their history, structure, and needs. Recognizing these common patterns can help in understanding how institutions maintain consistency and accessibility in their course offerings. While the most important aspects of a course offering are to be found in the title and description, having a shared, flexible, college-wide course numbering system has distinct advantages for the college.

During the Spring 2025 semester we polled department chairs for information about their existing course numbering practice. We wanted specifically to know:

- Is there a specific, intentional course numbering system in place for existing offerings?
- If so, what information is encoded in this numbering system (i.e. does the first digit indicate the level or number of credits, second subfield, topic, credit, or modality)?
- What kinds of challenges or limitations have been identified in how course numbers are currently assigned?

We received responses from 21 of 31 departments. We identified a range of practices, from departments with careful systems to those unclear on the origin and logic of their numbering system. We also identified a variety of existing limitations, such as a lack of potential numbers, inflexibility in renumbering, and inconsistency across the college.

Lastly, we surveyed other comparable institutions for existing best practices around course numbering systems.

We recommend the college consider transitioning to a college-wide course numbering system that:

- Uses four-digit codes for all courses
- Encodes the appropriate course level in the first digit
- Allows departments optional use of the second digit for other course aspects

---

II. Current Practice

To better understand the current course numbering systems at Queens College, we surveyed department chairs. Their responses revealed a wide variety of approaches. Some departments have structured and intentional systems, while others have little to no internal logic. Below is a summary of general tendencies:

- *Level–based numbering:* Most departments have a 3-digit numbering system. The first digit typically indicates the level of study, e.g.:
  - 100s for introductory courses
  - 200s for intermediate courses with prerequisites
  - 300s for advanced undergraduate courses
  - 500s–700s for graduate-level courses

- *Encoding additional information:* Some departments add further meaning into courses numbers:
  - second or third digit indicates a disciplinary subfield
  - in two instances, departments use 4 digits, where the last one follows a decimal point indicating credit variations

For example, Anthropology is a department that reserves sequences of course numbers for fields, e.g. 360 through 379 = biological anthropology advanced courses, while 380 through 389 = linguistic anthropology advanced courses.

Psychology is an example of a department that uses a decimal and fourth digit to indicate a curricular sequence (e.g., 709.1, 709.2, 709.3 in Masters in Behavioral Neuroscience) or to indicate number of credits awarded.

Math and Chemistry currently use their second digit to describe subfields, e.g. Chemistry:

X0X - Workshops and introductory courses (math methods, computational methods, etc)
X1X - Physical Chemistry
X2X - Chemical Education
X3X - Inorganic Chemistry and Material Science
X4X - Analytical Chemistry
X5X - Organic Chemistry
X6X - Potential future directions for department
X7X - Biochemistry
X8X - Interdisciplinary courses and labs (seminar, advanced labs, etc)
X9X - Research related courses

III. Limitations and Challenges with Existing Practice and Identified Needs

Some issues persist across departments:

- Reusing course numbering. Some courses remain registered despite being inactive, making it difficult to assign numbers to new offerings.
- Unstructured or unclear systems. A number of departments reported having little to no systematic approach to course numbering. The current numbers are inherited from past faculty or administrative decisions and their rationale is unknown.
- Some departments report assigning numbers based on availability rather than a guiding framework.

Many chairs identified a lack of available course numbers as a common problem, especially to accommodate courses proposed by new faculty hires. Some needed to rely on previously registered numbers to offer new courses. A number of chairs also expressed a desire to standardize their course numbers and some are already exploring new numbering systems. Some specific comments emblematic of general challenges include:

- When we create new courses, we have a difficult time finding a course number designation that is not already taken.

- Our [Masters degrees] numbers begin with a 7. No one in the department is clear on what exactly the 7 represents. Our numbers do not relate to subfields, topics,

or modality, but we have three codes for variable topics courses that indicate credits.

- Unfortunately, we've learned that changes to course numbers of currently existing courses turns out to be a major administrative hassle.

- [We] once had coherence in terms of levels but that has fallen apart over decades (no one currently on staff knows when the original system was put in place).

- As the curriculum has expanded, and some courses have been "retired," it hasn't always been possible to maintain a numbering that is wholly systematic.

We also note that the college's shift to CourseDog as a bulletin management system has introduced new technical limitations that pose challenges, particularly the expectation that course numbers may not be reused.

The most identified need, therefore, is to have more available course numbers. Some chairs proposed a four-digit numbering system as a solution.

IV. Other Models for College-Wide Numbering Systems

Course numbering systems differ across institutions in several ways. Codes usually start with a department code of variable length, typically consisting of three or four letters, such as PSY or PSYC. The number of digits in a course number varies from three, four, or five digits, whereas most institutions use four. The first digit in a course number often indicates course level, where 1 typically denotes a freshman-level course, 2 indicates a sophomore-level course, 3 represents a junior-level course, 4 indicates a senior-level course, and 6 or higher represents graduate-level courses.

Baruch College at CUNY uses a three-digit numbering system, where numbers ranging from 000 to 699 indicate undergraduate courses, and 700 to 999 indicate graduate courses. Lehman College at CUNY follows a similar format, with the first digit indicating whether or not a course has prerequisites. Courses numbered 1 or 2 have no prerequisites, whereas courses numbered 4 do.

The University of Northern Iowa uses a 4-digit numbering system where the first digit represents the course level (e.g., 1000 for introductory, 5000+ for graduate). Mississippi State University also follows this structure, where the first digit denotes the level of

preparation, the last digit represents credit hours, and the middle digits vary based on department needs.

The Texas Common Course Numbering system standardizes course numbering among Texas institutions. In their system, the first digit indicates academic level, the second digit represents credit hours, and the last two digits uniquely identify the course. The University of Notre Dame follows a five-digit numbering system where the first digit represents course level, and the second digit is used to categorize the type of course, with 1 representing lab courses and 3 representing seminars. The last three digits are used by different departments to meet their own needs.

A few institutions employ a more complex structure to distinguish course levels, section types, or subcategories. Cornell University's Mathematics Department uses the second digit to categorize subject areas, such as 0 for general mathematics and 5 or 6 for topology. The last digits of a course number may be assigned by departments based on historical conventions, topics, or administrative classification. For example, Cornell University transitioned from a three-digit to a four-digit system by appending a zero to most courses for standardization purposes. Mississippi State University utilizes a variable last digit to indicate credit hours and offer dual-level course listings, such as HI 4703/6703, which allow enrollment for both undergraduate and graduate students. Some institutions include section identifiers to differentiate multiple sections of the same class, such as the University of Iowa, which uses an additional colon to specify labs or discussions.

V. Recommendations

After reviewing existing practice and need, we propose the following four-digit course numbering system to implement across Queens College:

DEP XYZZ

DEP: Department code of 3-5 characters (ENG, ANTH, CMLIT, etc.)

X: First digit encodes the appropriate level, based on difficulty or prerequisites: freshman 1XXX, sophomore 2XXX, junior 3XXX, senior 4XXX.

5XXX, 6XXX, 7XXX, and 8XXX are used for graduate programs, distinguishing perhaps between MFA or MA, etc. The college might consider using 6000-level for graduate courses that don't count towards a degree (but do for certification), 7000-level for

graduate courses that count for the MA, and 8000-level for PhD-level courses that students in a Masters program can take with permission.

A level 0XXX could also be introduced for non-major or elective courses if needed.

Y: An optional second digit could encode a department-specific aspect of the course, such as credit hours awarded (1, 2, 3, etc.), a department's subfield or topic area (as with Math, Chemistry, Anthropology, etc.), or modality (e.g., a workshop, a lab, a seminar, a lecture).

ZZ: The remaining two digits correspond to individual course numbers, and might simply be existing ones.

Advantages of this system:

- Preserves most course information needs already commonly encoded across departments
- Resolves most frequent complaints about organization systems
- Easy to read and interpret for both students and faculty
- Introduces a larger number of course numbering options for each department
- Gives departments individual jurisdiction over how to number courses within the department, without making the most essential course information confusing for anyone unfamiliar with a department-internal numbering system
- Eliminates inconsistency across departments and makes course level information legible college-wide

Limitations:

- We note that instituting a college-wide course numbering would be a significant project requiring support for curriculum departments and units tasked with Bulletin management.

VI. Two Examples

The proposed course numbering encoding model in this document, although standardized, can vary among disciplines based on the department's course offerings, sub-disciplines, and associated credit hours per course. Provided in this section are examples of the proposed system, showing what this system could look like for both humanities and STEM departments. The examples below arbitrarily draw on the English,Physics, and LCD departments at Queens College to provide a comparison of existing numbering systems to the system proposed in this report.

The following examples illustrate the practical application of the new course numbering system at Queens College. These scenarios demonstrate how the system enhances clarity, consistency, and organization across departments, making it easier for students, faculty, and department administrators to identify course levels, subjects, the unique course, and the number of credit hours for each course. By applying this new structure to a range of different disciplines, these examples highlight the benefits of the proposed system in streamlining course registration, transfer evaluations, and curriculum planning.

***Example 1, encoding credit hours*:** Introduction to the Study of Language (freshman-level introductory course in the Linguistics & Communications department with no prerequisites; awards 3 credit hours)

Previously encoded as: LCD 101
Now encoded as: LCD 1300

Where each digit corresponds to level (1), credit hours awarded (3), and individual course number (00), respectively.

Additional freshman-level courses for this department that also award 3 credit hours could be numbered as follows: 1301, 1302, 1303, 1304, 1305, etc. up to 1399 (or up to 1999 if the department does not wish to encode credit hours in its numbering scheme). Departments have up to 100 course code options for courses that share a level and one other feature, such as credit hours or subfield, optionally encoded in digit Y.

Table 1.

Science, Technologies. Engineering, Mathematics (STEM) Example [**Physics Department**]			
Existing System		Proposed System	
Course Title	Course Number	Course Title	Course Number
General Physics II (4 credit)	**PHYS 1224**	General Physics II (4 credit)	**PHYS 1402**
Optics (3 credits)	**PHYS 222**	Optics (3 credits)	**PHYS 2305**
Electromagnetism I (4 credits)	**PHYS 310**	Electromagnetism I (4 credits)	**PHYS 4410**
Seminar (5 credits)	**PHYS 3813**	Seminar (5 credits)	**PHYS 4515**

This example, shown in the table above, analyzes the current course numbering system used by the Queens College Physics Department, which was selected arbitrarily to demonstrate the practical application of the proposed new system. Like the following example featuring the English Department, this example also relies on a randomized selection of four courses within the selected department. The left column displays the department's existing numbering structure, while the right column illustrates how the revised system could be implemented. In the new system, the first digit indicates the course indicates the course level, determined by factors such as prerequisite requirements. The next two digits represent the unique course theme, ensuring consistency across subjects. To reflect increasing course complexity, the proposed numbering sequence, in this example, increases in increments of five. Finally, the last digit denotes the number of credit hours assigned to the course.

***Example 2, encoding a subfield*:** Sociolinguistics (sophomore-level course with one prerequisite; awards 3 credit hours, but in this scenario the department chooses not to encode this information; department wishes to encode this as belonging to subdiscipline #1 of up to 10 total subdisciplines numbering 0-9)

Previously encoded as: LCD 205
Now encoded as: LCD 2100

Where each digit corresponds to level (2), subdiscipline (1), and individual course number (00), respectively.

Table 2.

Humanities Example [**English Department**]			
Existing System		Proposed System	
Course Title	Course Number	Course Title	Course Number
College Writing I (3 credits)	**ENGL 110**	College Writing I (3 credits)	**ENGL 1110**
Intro to Literature Study (4)	**ENGL 170W**	Intro to Literature Study (4)	**ENGL 1170W**
Literary History (4 credits)	**ENGL 242**	Literary History (4 credits)	**ENGL 2242**
Chaucer (3 credits)	**ENGL 331**	Chaucer (3 credits)	**ENGL 4331**

This example, shown in the table above, analyzes the current course numbering system used by the Queens College English Department, which was selected arbitrarily to demonstrate the practical application of the proposed new system. The left column displays the department's existing numbering structure, while the right column illustrates how the revised system could be implemented. In the new system, the first digit indicates the course indicates the course level, determined by factors such as prerequisite requirements. The next two digits represent the unique course theme, ensuring consistency across subjects.