Dean of Undergraduate Students
Guidelines for Overload Petitions

Caltech Catalog, September 2017 (p. 189):

“An overload is defined as registration for more than 48 units for an undergraduate. This limit corresponds to five 9-unit classes plus a 3-unit non-academic class (PA, PE) or four 9-unit classes plus one 12-unit class. Classroom and laboratory courses are to be limited to 45 units for freshmen for the first two terms and the remaining three units should be used for frontier (‘pizza’) courses, PE, PA, or research. Students may take up to 51 units (inclusive) but it requires their adviser’s approval for such an overload. To take more units than 51, students will need to petition the undergraduate dean, with the expectation that permission will be granted only in exceptional cases. This policy is aimed at having no effect on currently recommended courses of studies in all options, while putting a very high bar for taking 6 full-time classes simultaneously.”

September 15, 2016 memo to students and faculty advisors, from VP of Student Affairs Joe Shepherd and Registrar Mary Morley, explaining policy changes recommended by the four-year experience committee:

“The committee proposed a reduction in the overload and academic eligibility limits which was approved by the Academic Policies Committee. The goal is to establish 4 to 5 classes as the normal load during a quarter, while allowing students to pass only 3 courses in particularly difficult quarters. More than 5 formal classes places an undue burden on students, and hamper the process of knowledge acquisition. The new policy aims to encourage an engagement in research during the academic year rather than taking an excessive classroom course load. A further goal is to curb the practice of excessive course loads in the freshmen and sophomore years.”

Caltech Catalog, September 2017 (p. 11):

“A Caltech undergraduate degree is based on a four-year residential experience (study abroad included) in which students have the time to explore their academic interests in a deep and rigorous way. ‘To expand human knowledge and benefit society’ has been an essential part of Caltech’s mission statement since its inception, and the curriculum is designed to give students the tools necessary to accomplish these ambitious objectives. Through four years of intense classwork and research, students mature intellectually, and acquire an interdisciplinary academic foundation upon which excellence, creativity, and curiosity are built. In addition, students develop life skills, such as thinking critically, managing one’s time, collaborating with others, and achieving personal goals.”
The office of the Dean of Undergraduate Students is responsible for evaluating petitions from students who want to take more than 51 units in a single term. Such petitions are considered in light of the above policies and principles. While each case is evaluated on its own merits, the following guidelines can assist students considering a petition.

The overload policies introduced in the fall of 2016 were meant to prevent students from overloading on formal academic courses, while encouraging their growth and development in other areas of undergraduate life. For this reason, the initial consideration by the Deans’ office in evaluating petitions is not the total number of units, but rather the number of “formal classes,” generally understood to be 9 or 12 unit academic courses.

Requests to take six such courses will require a specific and compelling reason that all the courses need to be taken in a single term. The catalog sets “a very high bar for taking 6 full-time classes simultaneously.” Students are encouraged to consult the Registrar’s office in advance of any such petition to discuss the rationale for an overload and possible alternatives. A student’s demonstrated ability to bear a heavy academic load is not by itself a reason to take six formal academic courses.

The Deans’ office may take a more favorable view of petitions that involve five (or fewer) formal academic courses, and reach unit totals above 51 through some combination of frontier (“pizza”) courses, physical education (PE) courses, student activities (SA) courses, performing and visual arts (PVA) courses, or research units. Here, a student’s demonstrated ability to manage a demanding academic schedule may be a relevant consideration.

In accord with the expressed desire “to curb . . . excessive course loads in the freshmen and sophomore years,” the Deans’ office is not inclined to approve overloads for freshmen and sophomores. An exception may be freshman required to take Ma 1d, Wr 4 or SA81.

The final report of the four-year experience committee indicated that all majors and double majors could be accommodated within the new framework of overload limits. If juniors and seniors with a declared second option feel the need to overload, they should seek advice from the Registrar’s office about their academic plan. The Deans’ office will consult with the Registrar when evaluating such overload petitions.

These are general guidelines. Individual petitions will be evaluated by the Deans’ office, in consultation with faculty and with other administrative staff.