

Policy on Institutional Degrees and Credits

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Background

The Accreditation Standard II, Eligibility Requirements 9 and 10, and the Commission Policy on Award of Credit require institutions to meet generally accepted practices when awarding credit. These practices require evidence of:

1. academic study of sufficient content, breadth, and length;
2. levels of rigor appropriate to the programs and/or degrees, including baccalaureate degrees offered;
3. statements of expected student learning outcomes relevant to the disciplines; and
4. assessment results which provide sufficient evidence that students are achieving key institutional and program learning outcomes.

This policy incorporates federal requirements regarding credit hour and defines credit hour applicable to a degree or certificate awarded by an accredited institution as well as adopts the federal definitions of terms related to institutional degrees and credits.¹

Policy

An accredited institution conforms to a commonly accepted minimum program length of 60 semester credit hours or 90 quarter credit hours awarded for achievement of student learning for an associate degree and 120 semester credit hours or 180 quarter credit hours for a bachelor's degree. Any exception to this minimum must be explained and justified.

An accredited institution must have in place written policies and procedures for determining a credit hour that generally meet commonly accepted academic expectations and it must apply the policies and procedures consistently to its courses and programs.

At the time of a comprehensive review, the Commission will review the institution's policies and procedures for determining credit hours for its courses and programs and how these policies and procedures are applied. The Commission will as part of this review assess whether the institution implements the clock-to-credit-hour conversion formula. The Commission will make a reasonable determination of whether the institution's assignment of credit hour conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education using sampling and other methods. If, following the review, the Commission finds systematic non-compliance with this policy or significant non-compliance regarding one or more programs at the institution, it must take appropriate action and promptly notify the U.S. Secretary of Education.²

¹ 34 C.F.R. § 602.24(f).

² 34 C.F.R. § 602.24(f)(1),(2); § 668.8(l)(2).

Federal Definitions

Credit hour: An amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutional established equivalence that reasonably approximates not less than:

- (1) One hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours of out-of-class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time; or
- (2) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, or other academic work leading to the award of credit hour.³

There is no requirement that a credit hour exactly duplicate the amount of work in paragraph (1) of the definition, as is highlighted by the provisions in paragraph (2). The requirement is that a credit hour reasonably approximates that minimum amount of work in paragraph (1).⁴

Clock-to-Credit-Hour Conversion Formula

Federal Formula:

- (1) Except as provided in paragraph (2) of this section, below, for purposes of determining the number of credit hours in that educational program with regard to Title IV, Higher Education Act program:
 - (i) a semester hour must include at least 37.5 clock hours of instruction;
 - (ii) a trimester hour must include at least 37.5 clock hours of instruction; and
 - (iii) a quarter hour must include at least 25 clock hours of instruction.
- (2) The institution's conversions to establish a minimum number of clock hours of instruction per credit may be less than those specified in paragraph (1) of this section, if the institution's designated accrediting agency⁵, or recognized State agency for the approval of public postsecondary vocational institutions for participation in the Title IV, Higher Education Act programs, has not identified any deficiencies with the institution's policies or procedures, or their implementation, so long as
 - (i) The institution's student work outside of class combined with the clock-hours of instruction meet or exceed the numeric requirements in paragraph (1) of this section
 - (ii) (A) a semester hour must include at least 30 clock hours of instruction;
(B) a trimester hour must include at least 30 clock hours of instruction; and
(C) a quarter hour must include at least 20 hours of instruction.⁶

Quarter credit hour or quarter hour: quarter credit hours represent proportionately less work than semester hours due to shorter terms; this equates to about two-thirds of a semester credit hour. See USNEI.⁷

³ 34 C.F.R. § 600.2.

⁴ See U.S. Department of Education, Guidance to Institutions and Accrediting Agencies Regarding a Credit Hour as Defined in the Final Regulations published on October 29, 2010, published March 2011.

⁵ In the context of this policy, the ACCJC.

⁶ 34 C.F.R. § 668.8 (l)(1),(2).

Contact hour or clock hour: a unit of measure which represents an hour of scheduled instruction given to a student. See IPEDS.⁸

Academic Year: for the purposes of Federal student assistance programs, an academic year has a minimum of 30 weeks of instructional time for a course of study that measures its program length in credit hours or a minimum of 26 weeks of instructional time for a course of study that measures its program length in clock hours. A full time student is expected to complete at least 24 semester credit hours or 36 quarter credit hours in an academic year.⁹

An academic year in a direct assessment program is a period of instructional time that consists of a minimum of 30 weeks of instructional time during which a full time student is expected to complete the equivalent of at least 24 semester credit hours, 36 quarter hours or 900 clock hours.¹⁰

Program: a combination of courses and related activities organized for the attainment of broad educational objectives described by the institution. These may include:

Certificate: a formal award certifying the satisfactory completion of a postsecondary education program, generally focused on a pre-baccalaureate career or technical education program of study that is less than two years of full-time equivalent college work; or

Associate degree: an award that requires completion of an organized program of study at the postsecondary level below the baccalaureate degree which is at least 2 but less than 4 years of full-time equivalent college work. See IPEDS.³

Baccalaureate degree: an award that requires completion of an organized program of study at the postsecondary level which normally requires at least 4 years but not more than 5 years of full-time equivalent college work. See IPEDS.⁸

Direct Assessment Programs

Programs in which credits and degrees are awarded based solely on successful student demonstration of expected competencies, and not through credit or clock hours, are defined as direct assessment programs.

A direct assessment program is an instructional program that, in lieu of credit hours or clock hours as a measure of student learning, utilizes direct assessment of student learning or recognizes the direct assessment of student learning by others. The assessment must be consistent with the accreditation of the institution or program utilizing assessment results. Direct assessment of student learning means a measure by the institution of what a student knows and what the student can demonstrate in terms of a body of knowledge and identified student learning outcomes at the course, program, and institutional levels which comprise the learning outcomes for the program. These measures provide evidence that a student has command of a specific subject, content area, or skills or that the student demonstrates a

⁷ U.S. Network for Education Information
(<http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/edlite-index.html>)

⁸ Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (<http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/>)

⁹ 20 U.S.C. § 1088.

¹⁰ 34 C.F.R. § 668.10.

specific quality such as creativity, analysis or synthesis associated with the subject matter or program. Examples of direct measures include projects, papers, examinations, presentations, performances, and portfolios.

To be eligible, direct assessment programs must meet federal requirements. The institution must establish a methodology to reasonably equate the direct assessment program to credit or clock hours for the purposes of complying with applicable regulatory requirements. Institutions with direct assessment programs must apply to the Federal Secretary of Education for approval and must include documentation from ACCJC indicating that the Commission has evaluated the institution's offering of direct assessment program(s) and has included the program(s) in the institution's grant of accreditation¹¹.

¹¹ 34 C.F.R. § 668.10; 20 U.S.C. §1088.