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ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES

Policy on Credit Hour, Clock Hour, and Academic Year

June 2024

Background

The Commission's Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Policies (hereafter referred to as the Commission's Standards) require institutions to meet generally accepted practices when awarding credit. These practices require evidence of the following:

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.

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.

Federal Definitions[1]

Credit hour:

Except as provided in 34 CFR § 668.8(k) and (l), a credit hour is an amount of student work defined by an institution, as approved by the institution's accrediting agency or State approval agency, that is consistent with commonly accepted practice in postsecondary education and that—

1) Reasonably approximates not less than—

   (i) 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

[1] 34 C.F.R. § 600.2

(ii) At least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1)(i) 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 hours.

2) Permits an institution, in determining the amount of work associated with a credit hour, to take into account a variety of delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels.

Clock hour:

1) A clock hour is a period of time consisting of—
   (i) A 50- to 60-minute class, lecture, or recitation in a 60-minute period;
   (ii) A 50- to 60-minute faculty-supervised laboratory, shop training, or internship in a 60-minute period;
   (iii) Sixty minutes of preparation in a correspondence course; or
   (iv) In distance education, 50 to 60 minutes in a 60-minute period of attendance in—
      a. A synchronous or asynchronous class, lecture, or recitation where there is opportunity for direct interaction between the instructor and students; or
      b. An asynchronous learning activity involving academic engagement in which the student interacts with technology that can monitor and document the amount of time that the student participates in the activity.
2) A clock hour in a distance education program does not meet the requirements of this definition if it does not meet all accrediting agency and State requirements or if it exceeds an agency's or State's restrictions on the number of clock hours in a program that may be offered through distance education.
3) An institution must be capable of monitoring a student's attendance in 50 out of 60 minutes for each clock hour under this definition.
4) For clock-hour programs required to prepare a student for gainful employment in a recognized occupation, the program length cannot generally exceed the State minimum[2].

Clock-to-Credit-Hour Conversion Formula

Federal Formula[3]:

For purposes of determining whether a program meets requirements set forth in Title IV, HEA programs—

1) a semester hour must include at least 30 clock hours of instruction;
2) a trimester hour must include at least 30 clock hours of instruction; and
3) a quarter hour must include at least 20 clock hours of instruction.

[2] 34 CFR § 668.14(b)(26)
[3] 34 C.F.R. § 668.8 (l)(1)(2)

Academic Year:[4] 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.

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.

A week of instructional time is any week in which—

(i) At least one day of regularly scheduled instruction or examinations occurs, or, after the last scheduled day of classes for a term or payment period, at least one day of study for final examinations occurs; or

(ii) (A) In a program offered using asynchronous coursework through distance education or correspondence courses, the institution makes available the instructional materials, other resources, and instructor support necessary for academic engagement and completion of course objectives; and

(B) In a program using asynchronous coursework through distance education, the institution expects enrolled students to perform educational activities demonstrating academic engagement during the week; and

Instructional time does not include any scheduled breaks and activities not included in the definition of “academic engagement” in 34 CFR § 600.2, or periods of orientation or counseling.

See Policy on Competency Based Education for guidance on outcomes based approaches to earning a degree or credential, including direct assessment programs.

Adopted January 2012; Edited August 2012; Revised October 2013, June 2014, Edited November 2013; Revised June 2020; Revised January 2022; Revised June 2024

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[4] 34 C.F.R. § 668.3