



## **CREDIT HOUR ASSIGNMENTS (Postsecondary Institutions)**

- a. The U.S. Department of Education establishes the credit hour as the basis for measuring an institution's eligibility for participating in federal Title IV student loan programs. The Carnegie unit has served as the traditional unit of measure, but the Department also recognizes that institutions are developing other measures of educational content and credit equivalency. The purpose of this credit hour policy is to ensure that credit hour measures are reasonably equivalent regardless of how institutions award credit hours to courses and programs in various modes of instruction and teaching and learning formats.
- b. The Middle States Commission on Secondary Schools expects all candidate and accredited institutions to demonstrate that they use acceptable and consistent methods for assigning credit hours to all courses and programs of study. The credit hour is defined by the U.S. Department of Education as a basic institutional measure of the level of instruction and academic rigor that establishes eligibility for federal funding. Both within and between institutions, consistency in credit hour determinations has implications for the transferability of credit and for demonstrating that all courses and programs—regardless of teaching and learning formats or delivery mode—are of sufficient academic rigor, content, and depth.
- c. The purpose of this policy is to guide institutions in assigning credit hours in ways that are consistent with U.S. Department of Education credit hour regulations and that allow for flexibility.

### **Section 1: Definitions**

- a. Credit Hour for Federal Student Aid Purposes. An amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally established equivalency 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 15 weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or 10 to 12 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 is required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other academic activities as established by the institution, including laboratory work internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.
  - 3) A credit hour for Federal purposes is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates some minimum amount of student work reflective of the amount of work expected in a Carnegie unit: key phrases being "institutionally established," "equivalency," "reasonably approximates," and "minimum amount."
  - 4) A credit hour is a unit of measure that gives value to the level of instruction, academic rigor, and time requirements for a course taken at an educational institution. At its most basic, a credit hour is a proxy measure of a quantity of student learning. The higher education community has long used the credit hour, as defined by the Carnegie unit, as part of a process to establish a standard measure of faculty workloads, costs of instruction, and rates of educational efficiencies as well as a measure of student work for transfer students.
  - 5) An institution is responsible for determining the credit hours awarded for coursework in its programs in accordance with the definition of a credit hour for Federal program purposes. These credit hours are used to determine the eligibility of the institution and its educational programs for participation in Federal programs. As required under the Higher Education Act

of 1965, as amended (HEA), they are also a measure of student work used by an institution to determine the eligibility of a student for Federal student assistance and the amount of the student's assistance.

- 6) The definition provides several critical flexibilities for institutions in determining the appropriate amount of credit hours for student coursework:
    - i. The institution determines the amount of credit awarded for student work. It is up to institutions to gain the confidence through peer review in the accreditation process that their credit hour policies and practices consistently meet conventional academic expectations.
    - ii. A credit hour is expected to be a reasonable approximation of a minimum amount of student work in a Carnegie unit in accordance with commonly accepted practice in higher education. It is important to note that 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 of paragraph (2). The requirement is that a credit hour *reasonably approximates* that minimum amount of work in paragraph (1).
    - iii. The credit hour definition is a minimum standard that does not restrict an institution from setting a higher standard that requires more student work per credit hour.
    - iv. The definition does not dictate particular amounts of classroom time versus out-of-class student work.
  - 7) In determining the amount of work the institution's learning outcomes will entail, as under current practice, the institution may take into consideration alternative delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels.
  - 8) To the extent an institution believes that complying with the Federal definition of a credit hour would not be appropriate for academic and other institutional needs, it may adopt a separate measure for those purposes.
  - 9) The intent of these flexibilities is to recognize the differences across institutions, fields of study, types of coursework, and delivery methods, while providing a consistent measure of student work for purposes of Federal programs.
  - 10) The credit hour definition does not emphasize the concept of "seat time" (time in class) as the primary metric for determining the amount of student work for Federal purposes. Institutions may assign credit hours to courses for an amount of work represented by verifiable student achievement of institutionally established learning outcomes. Credits may be awarded on the basis of documentation of the amount of work a typical student is expected to complete within a specified amount of academically engaged time, or on the basis of documented student learning calibrated to that amount of academically engaged time for a typical student. Thus, the definition for Federal purposes represents nothing new in this regard.
- b. Credit Hour for Purposes Other Than Federal Student Aid Purposes. An amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is defined by the institution and implemented in all components of the institution's educational program.
- 1) A credit hour for Federal purposes is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates some minimum amount of student work reflective of the amount of work expected in a Carnegie unit: key phrases being "institutionally established," "equivalency," "reasonably approximates," and "minimum amount."
  - 2) A credit hour is a unit of measure that gives value to the level of instruction, academic rigor, and time requirements for a course taken at an educational institution. At its most basic, a credit hour is a proxy measure of a quantity of student learning. The higher education community has long used the credit hour, as defined by the Carnegie unit, as part of a process to establish a standard measure of faculty workloads, costs of instruction, and rates of educational efficiencies as well as a measure of student work for transfer students.

## **Section 2: Requirement for Credit Hour Policies.**

- a. The Commission recognizes that institutions may use one or both of the options identified in the definition of credit hours when assigning credit hours.
- b. Accredited and candidate institutions shall have and implement consistently and fairly policies and procedures for determining the award credit hours as defined in Federal Regulation that the institution awards for courses and programs. (MSA-CSS Educational Program Standard for Accreditation for Career and Technical Institutions, Indicator EP.30)
- c. Institutions must provide the following information to the Commission's evaluators at appropriate points of accreditation review so they can verify compliance with the credit hour regulations:
  - 1) Written policies and procedures used to assign credit hours;
  - 2) Evidence and analyses demonstrating that these policies and procedures are consistently applied across programs and courses, regardless of delivery mode or teaching/learning format; and
  - 3) An explanation of how the institution's assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted standards of postsecondary education.

### **Section 3: Commission Review of Credit Hour Policies.**

- a. In evaluating an institution's policies and procedures for awarding credit hours, the Commission shall incorporate requirements in the Standards for Accreditation of Career and Technical Institutions and accreditation/reaccreditation process as follows. The Commission's criteria for evaluating an institution's policies and procedures to ensure:
  - 1) The institution has policies and procedures for determining the credit hours, as defined in Federal Regulation, that the institution awards for courses and programs;
  - 2) The institution can provide evidence that it implements its credit hour policies and procedures; and
  - 3) The institution's assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education;
- b. In reviewing and evaluating an institution's policies and procedures for determining credit hour assignments, the Commission may use sampling or other methods in the evaluation, sufficient to comply with Federal Regulation.

### **Section 4: Commission Action for Institutional Non-Compliance with This Policy.**

- a. The Commission will take such actions that it deems appropriate to address any deficiencies that it identifies at an institution as part of its reviews and evaluations, as it does in relation to other deficiencies it may identify, subject to the requirements of this policy. Actions the Commission may take but are limited to:
  - 1) Monitoring actions that require the institution to submit to closer scrutiny by the Commission including follow-up reports, special visits, shortened terms of accreditation, and
  - 2) A show cause action requiring the institution to show cause why its accreditation should not be removed. This action offers the institution a final chance to offer evidence or explain reasons why accreditation should be maintained. [See MSA-CESS Policy: Accreditation Actions]
- b. If, following the institutional review accreditation/reaccreditation process the Commission finds systemic noncompliance with the Commission's policies or significant noncompliance regarding one or more programs at the institution, the Commission shall promptly notify the U.S. Secretary of Education.