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Guidelines

Degrees and Credits

[Effective June 26, 2009]

The Commission's Requirements of Affiliation stipulate that accredited institutions comply with all applicable Federal, state, and other relevant government policies, regulations, and requirements, which generally include requirements and expectations for degrees and credits. The purpose of these guidelines is to remind institutions of these requirements and expectations.

The Commission's accreditation standards, particularly Standards 11 (Educational Offerings) and 14 (Assessment of Student Learning), require evidence of:

- academic study of sufficient content, breadth, and length;
- levels of rigor appropriate to the programs or degrees offered;
- statements of expected student learning outcomes that are consonant with the standards of higher education and of the relevant disciplines;
- direct evidence of student learning; and
- assessment results that provide sufficient, convincing evidence that students are achieving key institutional and program learning outcomes.

The Commission considers assessment evidence to be the most compelling evidence that an institution's academic offerings are of appropriate academic content, breadth, length, and rigor. It nonetheless recognizes that, because student learning requires students and faculty to spend time engaged in the teaching-learning process, it is appropriate for relevant government agencies to set reasonable and suitable expectations for time spent earning degrees and credits.

Federal Definitions

These definitions are provided as a reminder to institutions. They are not Commission requirements, and an institution may demonstrate in alternative ways that academic offerings are of appropriate academic content, breadth, length, and rigor, provided that it also demonstrates compliance with all applicable government policies, regulations, and requirements.

The full sources of these definitions are provided at the end of these guidelines.

Contact hour or clock hour. A unit of measure that represents an hour of scheduled instruction given to students. *Source:* IPEDS

Credit or credit hour. A unit of measure representing the equivalent of an hour (50 minutes) of instruction per week over the entire term. It is applied toward the total number of credit hours

needed for completing the requirements of a degree, diploma, certificate, or other award. *Source:* IPEDS

Credit hours are used by most U.S. higher education institutions to calculate, record, and interpret the amount of earned academic or training credits that students accumulate en route to earning certifications, diplomas, degrees, and other qualifications. Institutions typically use credit hours to record all types of academic work including independent research and not just taught courses. *Source:* USNEI

Some U.S. higher education institutions use other approaches to calculate, record, and interpret the amount of academic or training work that students complete en route to earning a degree or other award. These approaches may be acceptable if the institution can justify them and demonstrate compliance with applicable Commission and government policies, regulations, and requirements.

Semester credit hour or semester hour. A semester hour must include at least 30 clock hours of instruction. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.8

The actual amount of academic work that goes into a single semester credit hour is often calculated as follows: *Source:* USNEI

- One lecture, seminar, or discussion credit hour represents 1 hour per week of scheduled class/seminar time and 2 hours of student preparation time. Most lecture and seminar courses are awarded 3 credit hours. Over an entire semester, this formula represents at least 45 hours of class time and 90 hours of student preparation.
- One laboratory credit hour represents 1 hour per week of lecture or discussion time plus 1-2 hours per week of scheduled supervised or independent laboratory work, and 2 hours of student preparation time. Most laboratory courses are awarded up to 4 credit hours. For a laboratory course earning 3 credit hours, this formula represents at least 45 hours of class time, between 45 and 90 hours of laboratory time, and 90 hours of student preparation per semester.
- One practice credit hour (supervised clinical rounds, visual or performing art studio, supervised student teaching, field work, etc.) represents 3-4 hours per week of supervised and/or independent practice. This in turn represents between 45 and 60 hours of work per semester. Blocks of 3 practice credit hours, which equate to a studio or practice course, represent between 135 and 180 total hours of academic work per semester.
- Internship or apprenticeship credit hours are determined by negotiation between the supervising faculty and the work supervisor at the cooperating site, both of whom must judge and certify different aspects of the student's work. The credit formula is similar to that for practice credit.

Quarter credit hour or quarter hour. Quarter credit hours represent proportionately less work than semester hours due to the shorter terms, about two-thirds of a semester credit hour. *Source:* USNEI

A quarter hour must include at least 20 hours of instruction. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.8

Independent study credit hour. One independent study (including thesis or dissertation research) hour is calculated similarly to practice credit hours (see "Semester credit hour" above). *Source:* USNEI

For the purposes of direct assessment programs (see the section below on "Federal Regulations Regarding Competency-Based Programs"), independent study occurs when a student follows a course of study with predefined objectives but works with a faculty member to decide how the student is going to meet those objectives. The student and faculty member agree on what the student will do (e.g., required readings, research, and work products), how the student's work will be evaluated, and on what the relative timeframe for completion of the work will be. The student must interact with the faculty member on a regular and substantive basis to assure progress within the course or program. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.10

Week of instructional time. An institution provides one week of instructional time in an academic program during any consecutive seven-day period that the institution provides at least one day of regularly scheduled instruction or examinations, or, after the last scheduled day of classes for a term or payment period, at least one day of study for final examinations. Instructional time does not include any vacation periods, homework, or periods of orientation or counseling. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.8

A week of instructional time in a direct assessment program (see the section below on "Federal Regulations Regarding Competency-Based Programs") is any seven-day period in which at least one day of educational activity occurs. Educational activity in a direct assessment program includes regularly scheduled learning sessions, faculty-guided independent study, consultations with a faculty mentor, development of an academic action plan addressed to the competencies identified by the institution, or, in combination with any of the foregoing, assessments. It does not include credit for life experience. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.10

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 in an undergraduate course of study is expected to complete at least 24 semester credit hours or 36 quarter credit hours in a course of study that measures its program length in credit hours, or at least 900 clock hours in a course of study that measures its program length in clock hours. *Source:* 20 USC 1088

An academic year in a direct assessment program (see the section below on "Federal Regulations Regarding Competency-Based Programs") is a period of instructional time that consists of a minimum of 30 weeks of instructional time during which, for an undergraduate educational program, a full-time student is expected to complete the equivalent of at least 24 semester credit hours, 36 quarter credit hours or 900 clock hours. *Source:* 34 CFR 668.10

The U.S. Secretary of Education may reduce the 30-week minimum to not less than 26 weeks for good cause, as determined by the Secretary on a case-by-case basis, in the case of an institution of higher education that provides a 2-year or 4-year program of instruction for which the institution awards an associate or baccalaureate degree [*the following was proposed on May 26, 2009, through negotiated rulemaking*] and that measures program length in credit hours or clock hours. *Source:* 20 USC 1088

Semester. Most U.S. higher education institutions operate on an academic year divided into two equal semesters of 15-16 weeks' duration, with a winter break of 2-3 weeks and a summer session of 10-12 weeks, plus additional shorter breaks. Normal full-time registration is usually 15 credit hours per semester or 30 per academic year (shortfalls can be made up in summer sessions or independent study). *Source:* USNEI

Quarter. Some U.S. institutions use a quarter calendar, in which the academic year is divided into three terms, called quarters, of 10-11 weeks' duration plus a summer session (considered the fourth quarter, but optional), a short winter term and other calendar breaks. *Source:* USNEI

Program. A combination of courses and related activities organized for the attainment of broad educational objectives as described by the institution. *Source:* IPEDS

> **Accelerated program.** Completion of a college program of study in fewer than the usual number of years, most often by attending summer sessions and carrying extra courses during the regular academic term. *Source:* IPEDS
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> **Diploma.** A formal document certifying the successful completion of a prescribed program of studies. *Source:* IPEDS
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> **Certificate.** A formal award certifying the satisfactory completion of a postsecondary education program. *Source:* IPEDS
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>> **Postsecondary award, certificate, or diploma.** An award that requires completion of an organized program of study at the postsecondary level (below the baccalaureate degree). *Source:* IPEDS
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>> **Postbaccalaureate certificate.** An award that requires completion of an organized program of study equivalent to 18 semester credit hours beyond the bachelor's degree. It is designed for persons who have completed a baccalaureate degree, but does not meet the requirements of a master's degree. *Source:* IPEDS
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>> **Post-master's certificate.** An award that requires completion of an organized program of study equivalent to 24 semester credit hours beyond the master's degree, but does not meet the requirements of academic degrees at the doctor's level. *Source:* IPEDS

Academic program. An instructional program leading toward an associate's, bachelor's, master's, or doctor's degree or resulting in credits that can be applied to one of these degrees. *Source:* IPEDS

Degree. An award conferred by a college, university, or other postsecondary education institution as official recognition for successful completion of a program of studies. *Source:* IPEDS

Associate's degree. An award that normally requires at least 2 but less than 4 years of full-time equivalent college work. *Source:* IPEDS

Bachelor's degree. An award (baccalaureate or equivalent degree, as determined by the U.S. Secretary of Education) that normally requires at least 4 but not more than 5 years of full-time equivalent college-level work. This includes bachelor's degrees in which the normal 4 years of work are completed in 3 years. *Source:* IPEDS

A typical bachelor's degree on a semester calendar requires at least 120 credit hours to be earned by the student. This roughly translates into at least 30-40 courses (depending on the major subject and thus the proportion of types of credit hours earned) and represents at least 5,400—and probably more—actual hours of dedicated academic work. A bachelor's degree at an institution on the quarter calendar may require a minimum of 180 quarter credit hours, which compares to 120 semester credit hours. *Source:* USNEI

Master's degree. An award that requires the successful completion of a program of study of generally one or two full-time equivalent years of work beyond the bachelor's degree. Some of these degrees, such as those in Theology (M.Div., M.H.L./Rav) that were formerly classified as "first-professional," may require more than two full-time equivalent academic years of study. *Source:* IPEDS

Doctor's degree. The highest award a student can earn for graduate study. The doctor's degree classification includes such degrees as Doctor of Education, Doctor of Juridical Science, Doctor of Public Health, and the Doctor of Philosophy degree in any field such as agronomy, food technology, education, engineering, public administration, ophthalmology, or radiology. *Source:* IPEDS

Doctor's degree – research/scholarship. A Ph.D. or other doctor's degree that requires advanced work beyond the master's level including the preparation and defense of a dissertation based on original research, or the planning and execution of an original project demonstrating substantial artistic or scholarly achievement. Some examples of this type of degree may include Ed.D., D.M.A., D.B.A., D.Sc., D.A., or D.M. and others, as designated by the awarding institution. *Source:* IPEDS

Doctor's degree – professional practice. A doctor's degree that is conferred upon completion of a program providing the knowledge and skills for the recognition, credential, or license required for professional practice. The degree is

awarded after a period of study such that the total time to degree, including both pre-professional and professional preparation, equals at least six full-time equivalent academic years. Some of these degrees were formerly classified as "first-professional" and may include: Chiropractic (D.C. or D.C.M.); Dentistry (D.D.M. or D.M.D.); Law (L.L.B. or J.D.); Medicine (M.D.); Optometry (O.D.); Osteopathic Medicine (D.O.); Pharmacy (Pharm.D.); Podiatry (D.P.M., Pod.D., D.P.); or Veterinary Medicine (D.V.M.); and others, as designated by the awarding institution. *Source:* IPEDS

Doctor's degree – other. A doctor's degree that does not meet the definition of a doctor's degree – research/scholarship or a doctor's degree – professional practice. *Source:* IPEDS

Federal Regulations Regarding Competency-Based Programs

Programs in which credits and degrees are awarded based solely on successful student demonstration of expected competencies, and not through credit hours or clock hours, are defined by Federal regulations as direct assessment programs. See the "Federal Definitions" section above for definitions of "Independent study," "Week of instructional time," and "Academic year" as they apply to 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 the results of the assessment.

Direct assessment of student learning means a measure by the institution of what a student knows and can do in terms of the body of knowledge making up the educational program. These measures provide evidence that a student has command of a specific subject, content area, or skill or that the student demonstrates a specific quality such as creativity, analysis or synthesis associated with the subject matter of the program. Examples of direct measures include projects, papers, examinations, presentations, performances, and portfolios.

To be an eligible program, a direct assessment program must meet the requirements in 34 CFR 668.8 including, if applicable, minimum program length and qualitative factors. Because a direct assessment program does not utilize credit or clock hours as a measure of student learning, an institution must establish a methodology to reasonably equate the direct assessment program (or the direct assessment portion of any program, as applicable) to credit or clock hours for the purpose of complying with applicable regulatory requirements. The institution must provide a factual basis satisfactory to the U.S. Secretary of Education for its claim that the program or portion of the program is equivalent to a specific number of credit or clock hours.

An institution that offers a direct assessment program must apply to the U.S. Secretary of Education to have that program determined to be an eligible program for Title IV program purposes. The institution's application must provide information satisfactory to the Secretary that includes:

1. A description of the educational program, including the educational credential offered (degree level or certificate) and the field of study;
2. A description of how the assessment of student learning is done;
3. A description of how the direct assessment program is structured, including information about how and when the institution determines on an individual basis what each student enrolled in the program needs to learn;
4. A description of how the institution assists students in gaining the knowledge needed to pass the assessments;
5. The number of semester or quarter hours, or clock hours, that are equivalent to the amount of student learning being directly assessed for the certificate or degree;
6. The methodology the institution uses to determine the number of credit or clock hours to which the program is equivalent;
7. The methodology the institution uses to determine the number of credit or clock hours to which the portion of a program an individual student will need to complete is equivalent;
8. Documentation from the institution's accrediting agency indicating that the agency has evaluated the institution's offering of direct assessment program(s) and has included the program(s) in the institution's grant of accreditation;
9. Documentation from the accrediting agency or relevant state licensing body indicating agreement with the institution's claim of the direct assessment program's equivalence in terms of credit or clock hours; and
10. Any other information the Secretary may require to determine whether to approve the institution's application.

The Secretary's approval of a direct assessment program expires on the date that the institution changes one or more aspects of the program described in the institution's application. To maintain program eligibility, the institution must obtain prior approval from the Secretary through reapplication. *Sources:* 34 CFR 668.10 and 20 USC 1088

Institutions wishing to obtain documentation from the Commission as described in Items 8 and 9 above should consult with their Middle States liaison and submit a request to the Commission, following the general procedures described in the Commission's policy statement on "Substantive Change."

State Definitions

A number of states in the Middle States region have their own definitions and regulations regarding degrees and credits. These requirements are generally consistent with Federal definitions and considered to be common practice. It is the responsibility of each institution to demonstrate compliance with any applicable state regulations that go beyond Federal regulations.

Joint, Concurrent, and Dual Degrees

Some institutions allow students to pursue two degrees concurrently or to pursue one degree awarded jointly by two institutions. The Commission uses the following definitions of these arrangements, noting that nomenclatures may vary:

Jointly conferred degree. A single degree jointly conferred by two institutions, such as a B.S. in Environmental Science jointly conferred by two institutions. The transcript and diploma bear the names of both institutions.

Dual or concurrent degrees. In these programs, often referred to as joint degrees, two separate degrees pursued concurrently and seamlessly by the student. The degrees may be conferred by one or two separate institutions. For example, many institutions offer a dual B.A./B.S.Ed. program, and a number of business schools and law schools, either at the same institution or at two separate institutions, offer J.D./M.B.A. programs. In the latter example, the transcript and diploma for the J.D. bear the name of the law school's institution, and the transcript and diploma for the M.B.A. bear the name of the business school's institution.

Dual or concurrent degrees require further study than either degree alone but less than if the degrees were pursued separately. Dual bachelor's degrees typically require at least one additional academic year of study beyond a single bachelor's degree. Dual graduate degrees, each requiring two academic years of study if pursued separately, would typically require 3½ academic years of study if pursued concurrently.

Institutions considering establishing jointly conferred, dual or concurrent degrees should consult the Commission's policies on "Contracts by Accredited and Candidate Institutions for Education-Related Services" and "Substantive Change." If one institution is providing faculty and courses that earn credits awarded by the other institution, Commission approval of the program may be required as a substantive change. For example, suppose a law school at one institution and a business school at a second institution plan to offer a J.D./M.B.A. program. No substantive change approval is required if the law school and its faculty offer all the J.D. courses and the law school's institution awards the J.D., and the business school and its faculty offer all the M.B.A. courses and the business school's institution awards the M.B.A. But if the two institutions enter into a contract in which business school faculty teach some of the courses in the J.D. program, with credit awarded by the law school, substantive change approval of the contractual agreement may be required.

Sources

20 USC 1088: U.S. Code, Title 20, Chapter 28, Subchapter IV, Part F, Section 1088, in effect January 3, 2007 (http://www.gpoaccess.gov/uscode/browse.html)

34 CFR 668.8: Code of Federal Regulations Title 34, Volume 3, Chapter VI, Part 668, Section 668.8, revised as of July 1, 2008 (http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2008/julqtr/34cfr668.8.htm)

34 CFR 668.10: Code of Federal Regulations Title 34, Volume 3, Chapter VI, Part 668, Section 668.10, revised as of July 1, 2008 (http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/cfr_2008/julqtr/34cfr668.10.htm)

IPEDS: Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, National Center for Educational Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/glossary)

USNEI: International Affairs Office, U.S. Department of Education (http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/credits.doc)