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## Policy on Credits and Degrees

The purposes of this policy are to provide guidance to institutions and evaluation teams on the Commission's expectations regarding credits and degrees and to set forth the federal regulations regarding the award of credit.

### Background

The credit system was invented in New England, originally as a way to provide students with the opportunity to elect certain courses as part of their overall degree which had previously consisted of a fully required curriculum. Created to support academic innovation, the academic credit has provided the basis to measure the amount of engaged learning time expected of a typical student enrolled not only in traditional classroom settings but also laboratories, studios, internships and other experiential learning, and most recently distance learning. Students, institutions, employers, and others rely on the common currency of academic credit to support a wide range of desirable functions, including the transfer of students from one institution to another, study abroad programs, formalized recognition of certain forms and quality of non-collegiate study, inter-institutional cooperation on academic programs, and the orderly consideration of students applying to study at the higher degree. For several decades, the federal government has relied on credits as a measure of student academic engagement as a basis of awarding financial aid.

When applying the definition of the credit hour below, other considerations may also be relevant. For example, some institutions may require more academic time than the norms defined below, and such expectations are typical at the graduate level. Also, the Commission's Standards and practices welcome perceptive and imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education, measuring student achievement directly rather than relying on academic engaged time. As stated in the Preamble to the *Standards for Accreditation*, "The institution whose policies, practices, or resources differ significantly from those described in the Standards for Accreditation must demonstrate that these are appropriate to higher education, consistent with the institution's mission and purposes, and effective in meeting the intent of the Commission's Standards."

### Federal Definition and Commission Review of the Credit Hour

As an accreditor recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education, the Commission is obliged to follow federal law and regulations pertinent to that recognition.

Federal regulation defines a credit hour as 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, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.

By federal regulation, at the time of the Comprehensive Evaluation, the Commission will review the institution's policies and procedures for determining the credit hours that the institution awards for courses and programs and how those policies and procedures are applied to the institution's programs and coursework. As part of its review, using sampling or other methods, the Commission must make a reasonable determination of whether the institution's assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education. If, following this institutional review process, the Commission finds systematic non-compliance with this policy or significant noncompliance regarding one or more programs at the institution, the Commission is obliged to promptly notify the Secretary of Education.

### **Degrees**

The Commission's expectations are based on common institutional practice in New England and are consistent with practices of regionally accredited institutions elsewhere in the United States and with the Commission's Standard on *The Academic Program*: "The institution's degrees and other forms of academic recognition are appropriately named, following practices common to American higher education in terms of both length and content of the programs" (4.29).

#### **Undergraduate degrees:**

**A.A., A.S., etc.:** An undergraduate degree normally representing the equivalent of two academic years of full-time study (and requiring a minimum of 60 semester credits) or its equivalent in depth and quality of experience. The A.S. usually implies more applied orientation and the A.A. more liberal education orientation, although these distinctions are not always clear.

**B.A., B.S., etc.:** An undergraduate degree normally representing about four academic years (and requiring a minimum of 120 semester or 180 quarter units) of full-time study. The distinctions between the B.S. and the B.A. are similar to those between the A.S. and the A.A.

**Graduate Degrees:** Graduate degrees include a significant component of coursework in addition to any supervised research or practice.

**M.A., M.S.:** A first graduate degree, representing at least one year of post-baccalaureate study (requiring a minimum of 30 semester or 45 quarter units). The distinctions between M.A. and M.S. are similar to those between B.A. and B.S. and A.A. and A.S. Some M.A. and M.S. degrees are merely continuations at a higher level of undergraduate work without basic change in character. Others emphasize some research that may lead to doctoral work.

**M.B.A., M.Div., M.F.A., M.P.A., M.S.W., etc.:** Professional degrees normally requiring two or more years of full-time study. Extensive undergraduate preparation in the field may reduce the length of study to one year.

**Pharm.D., D.P.T., Au.D., etc.<sup>1</sup>:** Entry level clinical practice degrees normally requiring three years more full-time study than a baccalaureate.

**Ed. D., Psy.D., D.B.A., etc.<sup>1</sup>:** Degrees with emphasis on professional knowledge. These degrees normally require a baccalaureate for entry and three or more years of prescribed postgraduate work.

**M.D., J.D., D.D.S., etc.:** First professional degrees, generally requiring a baccalaureate degree for admission and three or more years of prescribed postgraduate work.

**Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>:** The standard research-oriented degree which indicates that the recipient has done, and is prepared to do, original research in a major discipline. The Ph.D. requires a baccalaureate degree or higher for admission and usually requires three years or more of postgraduate work including an original research dissertation.<sup>2</sup>

**Joint, Dual or Concurrent Degrees<sup>3</sup>:** While the nomenclature for various arrangements in which students study simultaneously from or for two degree programs is not entirely consistent among institutions, the definitions below will be used by the Commission for purposes of consistency:

**Joint degree:** A single degree awarded by two institutions.

**Dual or concurrent degrees:** Two degrees, awarded by one or two institutions to students who have been admitted to each degree program, based on the normal qualifications. At the undergraduate level, students must typically take the equivalent of a full year of study beyond the first baccalaureate degree to earn the second degree. At the graduate level, enrollment in a dual or concurrent degree program typically results in a reduction in time, for example, a reduction in total time of a semester for two degrees which if taken separately would require four years of full-time study.

#### **Terms of Study:**

**Quarter:** A calendar of ten weeks of instructional time or its equivalent.

**Semester:** A calendar 15 weeks of instructional time or its equivalent in effort.

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<sup>1</sup>Normally, doctoral degrees represent a minimum of 64 credits beyond the bachelor's degree. Requirements vary by field, with some areas having requirements of specialized or professional accreditors. Students in some doctoral programs progress by examination, dissertation defense, and/or field or clinical work in addition to credit requirements.

<sup>2</sup>The initiation of the Ph.D. is considered a substantive change.

<sup>3</sup>Institutions considering joint, dual, or concurrent degrees should consult the Commission's Policy on Substantive Change.