

Redefining the Credit Hour

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For well over the past century, the credit hour has been the currency by which college and universities in the United States organize their work and measure student status and success. Originally defined by the National Education Association during the 1800s, colleges used the “standard unit” as an accepted uniform measure of the amount of time students spent in any one course. This standard unit of measurement was an estimate of a student’s readiness to undertake college-level work post-high school and monitored the amount of time students spent in the classroom on a given subject. Late in the 19th century, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching embraced the “unit” as a method to evaluate the hours an instructor spent teaching within the classroom for time measured toward their pension. Since then, the credit hour has become infused into every academic function of an institution and is fundamental to most data exchange within institutional systems.

For example, financial aid eligibility is determined by using credit hours, both in terms of the total number of credits in a program and the number of successful credits completed by students. The credit hour is the basis for calculating faculty workload, course assignments and compensation. It is the data source to track the educational status of students, including: the number of achieved credits, transfer and prior learning assessment credits, GPA, degree audits, satisfactory progress, degree completion and other student success measures. The seven regional accreditation bodies¹ use the credit hour to evaluate educational effectiveness. Policy-makers at system, state and federal levels use the credit hour to determine institutional accountability and funding formulas. In sum, the credit hour permeates all aspects of higher education in the United States.

According to the United States Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education (2011), the credit hour 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 ...” (p. 10). Within this same document, the U.S. Department of Education defined the credit hour as:

... [A]n 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 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. (p. 10)

The seven regional accrediting bodies all use language in their policies that is identical when articulating credit hour policy. Given the connection between the credit hour and accreditation and financial aid, uniformity across the country is not surprising. One minor exception is the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (2014). Although it has the conventional credit hour definition contained within its policy, it does offer an additional policy statement on competency-based programs. These programs measure student learning in ways other than credit or clock hours. In these programs, students:

... [C]an 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 as specific quality such as creativity, analysis, or synthesis associated with the subject matter or program. (pp. 3-4)

However, institutions with such programs must “reasonably equate” the direct assessment program to credit or clock hours to comply with regulatory requirements, and thus, are still under the purview of the time-based credit definition.

A review of a small sampling of schools from across the seven regional accrediting bodies reveals that most of the institutional policies adhere to the U.S. Department of Education’s definition of the credit hour. However, there is variation in the definition and length of instructional minutes across accrediting bodies. The actual time of instruction ranges from 30 minutes to 60 minutes across the nation. Instructional minutes can be defined as time in a classroom or lab, as well as interaction between the instructor and student either online or face-to-face. No consensus exists regarding measuring student-instructor interaction outside of the classroom or in blended courses that contain both face-to-face and online components. With these questions virtually unanswered, many colleges create their own criteria for measuring the breadth and depth of the learning experience.

The definition of a credit hour has remained remarkably consistent over time. The federal regulations of 2010 from the U.S. Department of Education built upon earlier definitions of the credit hour and serve to clarify questions, rather than set forward a redefinition. For example, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2012) established a policy on the credit hour, which reiterated the federal policy and established that every institution accredited within the commission must have:

- Written policies and procedures to assign credit hours;
- Evidence and analyses demonstrating that these policies and procedures are consistently applied across programs and courses, regardless of delivery mode or teaching/learning format;
- An explanation of how the institution’s assignment of credit hours conforms to commonly accepted standards of higher education. (p. 2)

The State University of New York (SUNY) established the credit/contact hour policy that governs all SUNY institutions’ campus definitions of the credit hour in 1976, which still falls within the federal regulations. The Credit-Contact Hour Relationship Policy at SUNY Empire State College, also established in 1976 (revised in 1980), follows the SUNY policy. In each of these cases and consistently across other regional accreditation agencies, systems and institutional policies, the credit hour defines the amount of “seat time” students spend receiving instruction as a proxy to student learning. Policy varies little.

The problem with the conventional definition of the credit hour is that it is a measure of time and not of learning, although the federal government’s definition does assume that some learning takes place within that block of time (“... an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates some minimum amount of student work reflective of the amount of work expected in a Carnegie unit ...” [U.S.

Department of Education Office of Postsecondary Education, 2010, p. 10]). Scholars have noted problems with the use of the credit hour to define student learning within higher education for quite some time. The most prevalent criticism is that the credit hour presumes to represent a quantity of learning when all it represents is a minimal standard of attendance. Moreover, a student receives credits based on the number of course contact hours, not for the number of hours actually attended. As Silva, White and Toch (2015) have noted, the credit hour does not address a student's strengths or weaknesses in the classroom. It does not approximate learning in any way.

As modes of delivery of higher education have changed (e.g., from traditional brick and mortar classrooms to online and blended models), the credit hour has become even more challenged. Practices, such as prior learning assessment (PLA), open educational resources (OERs) and other external sources of learning have compounded the debate even more as these approaches challenge traditional definitions of "classroom," "direct faculty instruction" and "contact." The crux of the debate has shifted to consider how the credit hour standard applies to students who obtain their education without experiencing "seat time" and/or who have demonstrable college-level learning gained outside the college classroom.

In response, a few institutions have moved to competency-based programs to more effectively capture and document student learning. Some of these programs initially planned to eliminate the reporting of the credit hour on a transcript, but due to financial aid rules, employment demands and other driving forces, in most cases, the credit hour remains documented in conjunction with competencies. These alternative efforts have sought to replace the credit hour completely, but struggle how to accomplish this. The infused nature of the credit hour into the day-to-day operations requires unraveling every function it touches and rebuilding new systems and processes in order to replace it. This mandates a huge human and financial resource commitment that would be cost prohibitive for most institutions. It also necessitates new systems and processes to supplant the existing ones. The inability to untangle the credit hour from systems and processes makes reporting what students know and can do nearly impossible. The U.S. Department of Education has encouraged experimentation through some special programs to determine ways to award financial aid that is not dependent on the credit hour, but there are still no clear solutions.

Practitioners in prior learning assessment have debated over the decades on how to convert verifiable college-level learning acquired outside of traditional learning environments into credits. Research and practices on how to determine credit amounts for PLA are basically missing from the literature. These are also commonly absent from institutional policies on PLA.

A common practice for institutions is to allow only their students to acquire credits for prior learning when that learning can be demonstrated to be equivalent to already established courses within their or other institutions. This type of practice (often referred to as a course-match model) avoids the need to develop policies and procedures for establishing prior learning credits. Some may not require such a course-match practice, but still rely on researching established courses to estimate the appropriate number of credits. Others still use best judgments as their credit criteria, but often based on courses previously taught. These practices rely on the status quo for credit determinations and reinforce a seat time perspective to document learning. How, then, can institutions approach prior learning assessment that values the learning rather than trying to fit the knowledge gained through experiences into time-bound measures?

There have been many qualifications frameworks established across different countries that define levels of learning and provide guidance as to the overall competencies that are expected at the college level. In the United States, three frameworks have provided this same type of guidance. The Degree Qualifications Profile

(DQP; <http://degreeprofile.org/>), established by the Lumina Foundation, has defined the overarching competencies expected at the associate, bachelor's and master's degree levels. When assessing prior learning, the DQP can provide guidance as to the degree level into which the particular learning fits. The Global Learning Qualifications Framework (GLQF; <https://www.esc.edu/glqf>) was developed specifically to assess college-level prior learning (also Lumina-funded). The GLQF is focused on the undergraduate levels (associate and bachelor's degrees) and provides competency statements and student prompts across eight learning domains. It defines learning as college-level when knowledge, integration and engagement are all present in the learning. The Beta Credentials Framework, part of the Lumina Foundation initiative Connecting Credentials (<http://connectingcredentials.org/>), provides competencies for knowledge and three sets of skills across eight levels. The Beta Credentials Framework provides a structure for comparing learning and credentials, and is especially useful for developing a profile of both educational and workforce credentials, and determining common elements, gaps and how the competencies fit within a continuum.

These frameworks provide direction and processes for assessing learning and determining if the learning is college-level. This is a huge leap forward for the world of prior learning assessment. Yet, there still is no guidance for how to assign credits to that learning. Currently, the only options are to match to existing courses, make your best educated guess, or state the learning in competencies and not assign credits. One approach not yet taken is to redefine the credit hour as a measure of the depth and breadth of learning.

A research team at SUNY Empire State College is exploring just that. Launched in July 2017, the study explores faculty perceptions of the current definition of the credit hour, faculty expectations for the depth and breadth of learning and the level of engagement within a credit hour, and suggestions for a redefinition. The faculty at Empire State College have vast experience in understanding and thinking through the learning expectations and assigning credit hours. The combination of mentoring students through the degree planning and prior learning assessment processes, assessing prior learning, understanding transfer credits, developing independent studies and other courses, reviewing and approving degree plans, and interpreting and revising area of study guidelines, provides the college faculty with a background in interpreting the credit hour as measures of learning.

This research project proposes to develop a working definition of the credit hour, which represents the depth and breadth of learning that students acquire through studies, prior learning assessment and other credentials of postsecondary education. To date, 160 faculty, academic administration and professional staff have responded to a survey and provided their perspectives on the current definition of the credit hour, and proposed a new working definition. The data are currently undergoing analysis. The working definition will be shared initially across the college faculty to seek feedback for revision, and then with the appropriate college academic governance bodies to consider it for institutional practice. The results of this study will also be shared with a wider audience to engage additional perspectives and to promote more thinking about how to determine credit hours, whether it be for current or prior learning. There will be an update on the data results in the next *PLAIO* issue (no. 7). In the future, the research team hopes to expand the study to include faculty from other institutions. If you are interested in learning more or wish to include your institution in the study, please contact Nan Travers (Nan.Travers@esc.edu) or Patricia Pillsworth (Patricia.Pillsworth@esc.edu).

Note

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The seven regional accrediting bodies in the United States are: Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), Western Association of Schools and Colleges; Higher Learning Commission (HLC); Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE); New England Association of

Schools and Colleges (NEASC-CIHE), Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC); and WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC).

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