

Montana State University

Credit Hour Policy

The United States Department of Education requires that each institution develop a written credit hour policy that defines what constitutes a credit hour of instruction at the institution. Accreditation agencies are tasked with ensuring that the institution's credit hour definition conforms to the definition of a credit hour outlined in the Federal Register (75 FR 66832 p. 66946):

...a credit hour is 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 hour¹ 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 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.

The introductory statement is an important change to the traditional Carnegie seat-time-based definition of credit hour that allows documented equivalent learning to be equated to credit hours. This opens the door for competency-based instruction.

Traditional, Seat-Time-Based Approach

At Montana State University the *credit hour* is used as a unit of instruction to quantify student learning. The credit hour is typically related to seat time, as a minimum of three class work hours (50 minutes of classroom instruction and an additional two hours² of out-of-class student work) each week during a 15-week (minimum) semester. Using a seat-time approach, one credit of instruction should be approximated by 45 hours³ of combined direct instruction (counting a 50-minute class as 1 hour of instruction) and student work.

¹ One hour is not necessarily intended to represent 60 minutes of instruction in this context. This was noted in the Federal Register (Vol. 75, No. 209, p. 66846), "We believe that it is unnecessary to define one hour as either 50 minutes or one clock hour..."

² It is recognized that not all students work at the same pace. This value represents the minimum time that the instructor expects the typical student will require in order to complete the assigned learning activities and accomplish the intended learning outcomes for the course.

³ The value "45 hours" is obtained by counting each 50-minute class as 1 hour of instruction. Many institutions use the value of 37.5 hours per credit, which is obtained by using a 50-minute "hour" for both classroom instruction and student work. It is perhaps more reasonable to expect that students would be required to spend between 37.5 and 45 hours per credit.

- If the learning experience is offered in a different time frame (e.g., six-week summer session), the student time required to complete the course should reasonably approximate 45 hours of combined direct instruction and student work per credit.
- If direct instruction is not the principal mode of learning for an academic experience (e.g., laboratory courses, internships, studio work, some on-line courses), the student time required to complete the course should reasonably approximate 45 hours of student work per credit.

Alternative, Outcomes-Based Approach

While it is rarely done at Montana State University, credit may also be awarded for an amount of learning “equivalent” to learning in a seat-time-based course as documented by intended learning outcomes and verified by assessment of student achievement.

Example: A traditional three-credit course (3 lectures plus 6 hours of on-their-own student work per week) is converted to a competency-based course. Since the course learning outcomes are identical for the two modes of delivery, students successfully completing the competency-based course would be awarded three credits. Successful completion of the competency-based course would be documented by direct assessment of student accomplishment of the course learning outcomes.

When there is no equivalent seat-time-based course for comparison, the equivalent effort required for the proposed number of credits must be established by the instructor when the new competency-based course is proposed. The equivalency will be reviewed and must be affirmed by the Curriculum and Programs Committee before the course is approved.