# **Credit Hour Committee Report**

January 2013

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To recommend policies that will ensure that The University of Iowa is in compliance with HLC recommendations regarding the definition of a credit hour, in particular:

* To develop a written policy for the awarding of credit that is appropriate for all delivery formats; this definition should be consistent with our current policy that one semester hour of credit is awarded for 750 minutes of contact time (one 50-minute period for 15 weeks) and 30 hours of out-of-class work.
* To provide an analysis of how this policy meets the requirement of the HLC.
* To create a list of courses that fall outside of normal parameters for course work on campus. This includes—but is not limited to-- those courses offering more than 4 s.h. of credit, those on truncated, compressed or accelerated schedules, and those otherwise falling outside the bounds of the proposed definition. This will have to take place over an entire academic year in order to capture all instances.
* To provide a rationale and process for exceptions to the established and accepted criteria—ongoing.

## Committee Members:

* Anne Zalenski, Division of Continuing Education
* Tanya Uden-Holman, College of Public Health
* Lon Moeller, Tippie College of Business
* Helena Dettmer, College of Liberal Arts and Sciences
* Larry Lockwood, Office of the Registrar
* Jan Brunstein, Office of the Registrar
* Joshua Hutchison, Office of the Registrar
* David Bills, College of Education
* Cindy Seyfer, Office of Student Financial Aid
* Lori Kayser, College of Dentistry
* Damien Ihrig, Carver College of Medicine
* Michael Kelly, College of Pharmacy
* Keri Hornbuckle, College of Engineering
* Jill Cawiezell, College of Nursing
* Eric Andersen, College of Law
* Pending, Graduate College
* Beth Ingram, University College

## Higher Learning Commission (HLC) Policy:

The institution’s assignment of credit hours shall conform to commonly accepted practices in higher education. Those institutions seeking, or participating in, Title IV federal financial aid, shall demonstrate that they have policies determining the credit hours awarded to courses and programs in keeping with commonly-accepted practices and with the federal definition of the credit hour, as reproduced herein for reference only, and that institutions also have procedures that result in an appropriate awarding of institutional credit in conformity with the policies established by the institution.

#### The Federal Credit Hour definition is as follows:

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 hour (50 minutes qualifies as an 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 a 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. As least an equivalent amount of work as required in paragraph (1) of this definition for other activities as established by an institution, including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours. (Higher Learning Commission, 2011).

#### Accreditors are asked to address the five following questions in assessing an institution’s integrity in awarding credit hours:

1. Does the institution’s policy for awarding credit address all the delivery formats employed by the institution?
2. Does that policy address the amount of instructional or contact time assigned and homework typically expected of a student with regard to credit hours earned?
3. For institutions with courses in alternative formats, or with less instructional and homework time than would be typically expected, does that policy equate credit hours with intended learning outcomes and student achievement that could be reasonably achieved by a student in the timeframe allotted for the course?
4. Is the policy reasonable within the federal definition as well as within the range of good practice in higher education? Note that the Commission will expect that credit hour policies at public institutions that meet state regulatory requirements or are dictated by the state will likely meet federal definitions as well.
5. If so, is the institution’s assignment of credit to courses reflective of its policy on the award of credit? (Higher Learning Commission, 2011).

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## Background and National Discussion:

In October 2010, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) published a set of regulations on various aspects of program integrity in higher education, not the least of which is a return to the definition of a credit hour. (Other key issues included misrepresentation, state authorization, incentive recruiting, and gainful employment—all critical but not germane to this discussion.) Institutions were directed to use the federal definition of the credit hour in order to continue to be eligible for Title IV financial aid. The regulations were to take effect in July 2011. While several challenges have been made, in particular with regard to state authorization, the USDE is working with accrediting bodies to be certain that the federal definition of a credit hour is written into a formal policy at institutions. Eligibility for financial aid is iportant for requiring the federal definition of the credit hour, one incident stands out as a clear trigger.

Briefly, in 2010 the HLC of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools were sent an “alert memorandum” by the USDE Inspector General for their granting accreditation to American InterContinental University (AIU), a for-profit online institution. During the accreditation process, the AIU had been found to have inflated the amount of credit earned for a set of courses. The HLC defended its decision to re-accredit AIU in part by noting that it had persuaded the institution to reduce the credit offered. And further, their testimony argued that the credit hour is not tied to student learning assessment. Finally, AIU is accredited by another regional institution, so the North Central HLC argued that they were more effectively controlling credit inflation by working with AIU to change their practices rather than disenfranchising them and losing any possible controls.

The action of the USDE created a flurry of activity in both the public and private higher education sectors, including thousands of editorials and blogs, multiple “Dear Colleague” letters, intense lobbying from distance education groups (most notably Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) and University Professional & Continuing Education Association (UPCEA)), and reactions from organizations like DGREE, which is sponsored by the Lumina foundation and dedicated to creating a new vision for higher education. While transferability, competence based learning, and outcomes assessment all figure into the discussion, the primary issue centered on how to assess online courses: what happens to the credit hour when students may never sit in a class, meet the instructor face-to-face, or meet classmates in a virtual classroom?

Amy Laitinen, the deputy director for higher education at the New America Foundation, published “Cracking the Credit Hour” in September 2012 (linked below). Laitinen argues that cost, time, and academic quality all intersect at the credit hour. Her report is interesting and provocative, but above all argues that the credit hour must be redefined to accommodate innovation in teaching and learning. Her essay continues to receive widespread attention, in part because the revised definition she provides for the credit hour is a moderate rewriting of the federal definition yet one that creates maximum flexibility for students, instructors and institutions. Interestingly, her definition echoes the definitions peer institutions have noted in the study referenced below.

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## Peer Institutions:

The committee felt that it would be useful to compare policy at our peer institutions. The Education Advisory Board offers a helpful document that provides some peer comparisons.

A member institution asked the University Leadership Council the following policy and procedure questions about credit hours:

#### Policy:

* What are the policies associated with the awarding of credit hours? What are these policies based on?
* Are policies differentiated by delivery format (e.g. lecture, laboratory, studio/experiential, web-based)?
* Do available policies include guidelines associated with learning outcomes?
* Do policies for traditional courses (campus-based) include expectations regarding seat time?
* What credit hour guidelines are in place regarding out-of-class expectations?
* How does faculty articulate their criteria and rationale for assignment of credit hours?

#### Procedure:

* What are the procedures for oversight of the awarding of credit?
* Who has primary responsibility for oversight of credit hour assessment?
* How are procedures codified (e.g. formal governance, college based, administrative)?
* How are policies developed with and communicated to faculty?” (p.2, Custom research brief).

Eight institutions were identified for this study, three of which are in the South and five of which are in the Midwest. All but one are public, research universities. Enrollments range from 3,000-51,000. One university has an unwritten policy and one has an informal written policy. Two have draft policies awaiting approval, one has a recently approved formal policy, and three have long-time formal policies. For those without long-term policies, contacts reported that the impetus for developing a policy for credit hours was related to a) an accreditation visit; b) the increasing number of online courses; and 3) the federal guidelines established in 2010 and enforced in July 2011. Five key observations from this study include (the brief is only 12 pages and can be linked to below):

* Most institutions generally follow both the federal and HLC recommendations (one hour per week per credit).
* Two hours of outside work are expected for one hour of lecture.
* Online courses are measured variously, using the on-campus counterpart as a way to assign credit, and using “total effort” as a way to assign credit.
* Learning outcomes are not a part of credit assignment.
* Credit oversight is most typically at the department level.

The University of Iowa falls clearly within the parameters of at least some peer institutions, particularly with regard to the impetus for reviewing the credit hour requirement.



## Proposed Policy

As the foregoing demonstrates, multiple approaches to providing instructional experiences bring into question the use of the standard assumptions undergirding the relationship of “seat time” to an earned credit hour. Further, most recognize the historical adoption of the credit hour was a way to document faculty time spent in order to: 1) plan pensions and 2) determine high school graduation and college admission requirements. It was initially intended neither to demonstrate learning outcomes nor to establish a relationship between seat time and credit earned. Nonetheless, even if, as Laitinen suggests, we radically re-think the Carnegie unit, it is too embedded in all facets of higher education to eliminate. The relationship between the Carnegie unit and federal financial aid, for example, is entwined and complex enough to make radical change a daunting prospect at best. And, again, as Laitinen suggests, there is in fact enough flexibility within the federal definition to open the door to experimentation.

The standard on our campus has been one hour of seat time and two hours of outside work per semester hour, as is true of most, if not all, institutions of higher education. Historically we have had variations of the traditional class, including workshops (requiring an instructional week for a semester hour), awarding credit for laboratory (two clock hours per week for a semester hour) and clinical experience (requiring three clock hours for one semester hour), as well as practica required as part of a student/administrative degree in education, social work, and professional schools.

The re-thinking student experience, taking advantage of technology, and acknowledging student expectations as well as accounting for the fact that the traditional student of today increasingly resembles the non-traditional student of a decade ago have all challenged the conventions that dominated universities for decades (although, to be fair, the Carnegie hour was challenged as early as 1906 as not being flexible enough). On the University of Iowa campus, recent instructional approaches include the “flipped” classroom, the TILE classrooms, an increasing number of on-campus students requesting and enrolling in online courses and on-campus classes relying on web delivery of some materials. The introductory year-long Spanish course offers a good example of the last delivery approach. Recently, first-year Spanish was increased from 4 s.h. to 5; while class time was reduced from four to three days, two hours of required online, interactive practice sessions have been added. The exams for these classes are conducted online.

Despite the obvious value of trying to integrate student outcomes assessment with course credit, we are not there yet. It remains the faculty’s responsibility to establish the work load and assess student learning. If credit must be awarded based on the instructional experience—the total amount of time associated with learning—we can reinforce and apply our common understanding of the existing formula to new technologies and delivery approaches and develop a common understanding of instructional units. Thus, a student can attend a live lecture, watch it online, and read an instructor’s prepared materials. The time devoted to any of these activities should take three hours per week (for a three semester hour course), and form one part of an instructional unit. Those hours must be accompanied by additional reading (two clock hours for each credit hour), and/or a laboratory period including preparation (again two clock hours per credit hour), and/or, pending collegiate approval, perhaps be met with an alternative activity such as service learning (to pick one example). This recommendation draws on historical strengths of the Carnegie Credit hour as well as recognizing its limitations. We fully understand the significance of assigned time, acknowledge that students do not learn at the same rate and in the same way, and understand that many faculty are requiring that students engage in material in more dynamic and interactive ways. Interaction and engagement are as significant as time in this policy.

To summarize, while accepting the Carnegie unit as our basic definition, we propose to expand it to account for the dynamic and innovative ways we teach in the 21st century. To specifically address online courses, we can 1) evaluate courses for their similarity to the on-campus version (which has been done) and assign the same amount of credit; or 2) we can specify interaction rather than instructional time; or 3) we can specify total effort rather than breaking it down between instructional time and student work.

#### Examples of comparable classes include:

* A standard lecture class with standard readings and assignments.
* A class in which students view the lectures in advance and class time is used to engage with peers in practice, problem solving, and research. Homework and additional readings are assigned.
* A Guided Independent Study (GIS) course in which students read, listen to, and/or view the instructional material online and complete coursework asynchronously within guidelines provided by the instructor. Students and instructors utilize online discussion and virtual office hours to establish a connection to the learning environment. Homework and readings are assigned.
* An online course in which students view lectures online, and then engage in online and synchronous discussions using Adobe Connect. Small group projects (using web-based meeting rooms and wikis), readings and assignments are required.
* A traditional campus class meeting substituting one instructional hour for an hour of online instruction (e.g., the method now used by the department of Spanish, which was designed to facilitate students’ use of language more often and more interactively).

#### Types of Classes

* Standard face-to-face class.
* Online: a class that uses web-based tools to deliver instructional material, and where 100% of the instruction and interaction between instructor and student is done online. Exams are proctored or online.
* Hybrid: 1) a class that is taught online, and has both synchronous and asynchronous elements (e.g. 5 required Adobe Connect sessions in a term).
* Blended: a class that is taught face-to-face on campus and has students participating synchronously via distance education technology.
* Web/Technology enhanced: a face-to-face course replaces face-to-face seat time with required web-based tools.

#### Definition of a Credit Hour

* Classes that meet in a face to face format must include one hour of contact time (50 minutes) and two hours of outside of class work for 15 weeks for each semester hour of credit.
* One hour of credit may be awarded for laboratory and discussion sections that meet a minimum of 50 minutes per week and a maximum of 150 minutes per week; no more than one credit may be awarded for lab and discussion sections without approval of the Office of the Provost.
* Classes that do not have the required face-to-face contact time (for example, hybrid or online courses) meet the credit hour standard if they meet one of the following criteria:
  + The course covers the same material in the same depth as a face-to-face version of the same course
  + The course has been evaluated by the department and college for content and rigor, and the department and college have approved the s.h. credit to be awarded; this approval must be documented.
* Workshops must meet the same credit hour calculation as face-to-face classes. If students work a maximum of 8.5 hours a day, the maximum they can work in 5 days is 42.5 hours. Thus the minimum number of days a workshop must meet for one earned credit hour is 5 days.

Standard courses on campus are offered for three or four s.h. credit. Some classes will be approved for four credit hours. All non-standard classes (including those that are offered for more than four hours) must be reviewed and approved by the Office of the Provost.

This policy allows for standard instruction, innovation, maximizes the use of instructional technology, and yet adheres to the requirements established by the federal government and the accrediting bodies.