



**NEW ENGLAND ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES
COMMISSION ON INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER EDUCATION**

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Statement on Credits and Degrees

The purpose of this statement is to provide guidance to institutions and evaluation teams on the Commission's expectations regarding credits and degrees; these expectations are based on common institutional practice in New England and are consistent with practices of regionally accredited institutions elsewhere in the United States. The statement is also intended to be helpful to members of the public and others interested in academic practices in regionally accredited institutions. This statement is a further explication of 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)

The credit system is the basis for degree structures in the United States. It 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.

While the definitions below provide the basis for the Commission's consideration of academic credit and degrees, other considerations are important. For example, some institutions may require more academic time than the norms defined below. Also, the Commission's Standards and practices do not preclude perceptive and imaginative innovation aimed at increasing the effectiveness of higher education. As stated in the Preamble to the *Standards for Accreditation*, "Institutions whose policies, practices, or resources differ significantly from those described in the Standards for Accreditation must present evidence that these are appropriate to higher education, consistent with institutional mission and purposes, and effective in meeting the intent of the Commission's Standards."

Definitions

Credit, Unit of: A quantification of student academic learning based on the amount of time a typical student spends engaged in academic study. One semester unit represents how much time a typical student is expected to devote to learning in one week of full time undergraduate study (at least 40-45 hours including, for example, class time and preparation or time engaged in asynchronous on-line learning). Thus a six-week summer session might, if fulltime, equate to six units. An alternative norm is one unit for three hours of student work per week (e.g., one hour of lecture and two of study or three of laboratory) for ten weeks per quarter or 15 weeks per semester. Some institutions require more student time per credit for certain forms of experiential learning. A full-time undergraduate student program should normally be 14 to 16 units, and, if fulltime, no less than 12 units. More time is expected to be devoted to study at the graduate level, typically more than three hours of study for every hour in class. A full-time graduate program is normally nine units or less. Considerable excess allowed on grounds of student ability or innovative means of instruction is subject to special analysis and approval.

Degrees:

Undergraduate degrees:

A.A., A.S., etc.: An undergraduate degree normally representing the equivalent of two academic years of full-time study (60 semester credits) or its equivalent in depth and quality of experience. The

B.A., B.S., etc.: An undergraduate degree normally representing about four academic years (120 semester or 180 quarter units) of college study. The B.S. usually implies more applied orientation and the B.A. more liberal education orientation, although these distinctions are not always clear.

Graduate Degrees: Graduate degrees are taught degrees; they 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 (30 semester or 45 quarter units). The distinctions between M.A. and M.S. are similar to those between B.A. and B.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.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. Entry level clinical practice degrees normally requiring three years more full-time study than a baccalaureate.

Ed. D., Psy.D., D.B.A., etc: 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., First professional degrees, generally requiring a baccalaureate degree for admission and three or more years of prescribed postgraduate work.

Ph.D.: 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 bachelors degree or higher for admission and usually requires three years or more of postgraduate work including an original research dissertation.

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.

Joint, Dual or Concurrent Degrees: 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.

Note: Institutions considering joint, dual, or concurrent degrees should consult the Commission's Policy on Substantive Change.