

Academic Credit: Colleges' Common Currency Has No Set Value

Colleges resist regulators' calls for consistency

By Sara Lipka | OCTOBER 17, 2010

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There's more than one way to get a credit. A weeklong service project in the Dominican Republic: 1 credit. An electromagnetic-energy lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology: 1 credit. A summer internship in fashion: 1 credit. A training program in "meeting facilitation" at McDonald's Hamburger University: 1 credit.

Such designations, based more or less on time, depend on institutional discretion. No Fort Knox backs the currency of credit.

Yet credit underlies vital calculations of academic progress, faculty workload, federal and state appropriations, and student aid. The "student hour" of weekly instruction over a semester, conceived in the

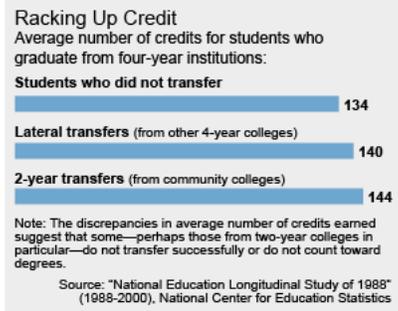
early 20th century to gauge colleges' industrial efficiency, still guides the assignment of credits to courses. But fewer undergraduates just sit through traditional lectures. As colleges value an expanding catalog of educational experiences, federal regulators wary of credit inflation and the overawarding of aid have proposed an official definition.

Higher-education leaders argue, however, that a strict standard of academic credit wouldn't guarantee quality of learning, and would threaten the variety and innovation that make colleges and universities in the United States so strong. The versatility of credit is not a liability, they say, but an asset.



Brendan Smialowski for The Chronicle

Registrars and academic departments are the gatekeepers of credit.



"The accommodation of an increasingly diverse array of students couldn't have happened without us being flexible," says Judith S. Eaton, president of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation. Given the needs of specific student populations, faculties can develop new options—an online course, an accelerated program—and weigh their content and rigor in assigning credit. "This is, at its heart, an academic judgment," Ms. Eaton says.

A test of the currency is whether it remains consistent enough for colleges and universities to trade it. For increasingly mobile students, transferring credit is hardly as easy as getting change for a dollar. That's the downside of a decentralized system. And that system is under pressure. Achieving President Obama's ambitious higher-education goals will most likely require broadening the concept of creditworthiness while ensuring that it carries over from one institution to another.

Higher education needs a currency that is stable but adaptable. It may not guarantee quality, but if it can do a decent job of accounting, colleges will look to better measures of learning.

Judgments of Value

The awarding of credit is traditionally a faculty prerogative. Curriculum-review committees tend to approve credit awards, which have become less a sum of seat time and more an approximation of content. Assigning credits is second nature, professors say: Everybody knows what a three-credit course looks like.

Accrediting agencies check up, but not as stringently as federal regulators would like. The U.S. Department of Education proposed a definition of credit hour in June, out of concern that the agencies have no minimum standards (the department had rebuked the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools in December for accrediting American InterContinental University, a for-profit institution, despite its nine-credit courses).

The proposal hews to the traditional measure, defining a credit hour as one hour of instruction and two of outside work each week for a semester—or "an equivalent amount of work" in a lab, studio, or internship, with equivalency "represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement."

But campus officials want to make determinations of creditworthiness themselves. Barring credit inflation, which they insist is not a problem, they trust the education and job markets to help standardize credit's value.

That value may not be apparent until credit is traded. Often, the credits that one college awards are not recognized by another. And even a credit accepted doesn't necessarily count toward general-education requirements or a major.

Transfer students tend to accumulate credits well beyond the 120 required for a degree. Among graduates of four-year institutions, students who start there earn, on average, 134 credits; those who transfer from other four-year institutions, 140 credits. Students who begin at two-year colleges rack up 144 credits, according to the most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics. Those excess credits represent wasted time and money, says a report calling for more credit "portability," to be released this month by the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning and the Center for American Progress, a think tank in Washington.

More than two-thirds of states have passed laws intended to ease the transfer of credit, by requiring, for example, common course-numbering systems at their public colleges. But most credit-transfer decisions still depend on "articulation": one faculty's determination of whether a course taken elsewhere is directly equivalent, or of equal quality, to its own. Hammering out an articulation agreement for all courses from one institution to another can involve philosophical discussions about, for example, what constitutes college-level algebra.

And are any two courses ever really equal? "When you start crossing institutional boundaries, there are some limits as to how seriously you can make this determination of equivalency," says Alexander C. McCormick, director of the National Survey of Student Engagement. "I don't think it traces all the way to broader learning goals that an institution aims for," such as global competence or critical thinking.

H. Elizabeth Braker, an associate professor of biology at Occidental College, has closely examined courses at other institutions, some abroad, to decide if and how they should count. Some don't meet the college's standards, and their credits don't transfer. "We think we're the best," Ms. Braker says. "If students are graduating with an Occidental College biology degree, we want to be behind that."

Uneven Trade

Even within a single university system, articulation is hardly automatic.

"We should be able to solve it here at CUNY, because we're one university, and we're all in one city," says Julia Wrigley, associate university provost at the City University of New York. "But there are still difficult problems."

Take a student who completes Technical Mathematics I for four credits at Bronx Community College, and consider the system's wacky credit-transfer rules. If that student transferred to CUNY's College of Staten Island, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, or New York City College of Technology, those credits would be accepted as if for a similar course offered there (although for only three credits at John Jay). At three other senior colleges in the system, the Bronx course would transfer only as elective credit, which tends not to count toward a major. Only Staten Island would apply the transfer credit toward general-education requirements. And five other colleges in the system wouldn't accept transfer credit at all—unless, in two cases, the student had completed an associate degree.

The system's transfer-planning Web site reveals further disparities. The course that John Jay considers equivalent, Modern Mathematics, would be accepted for transfer credit at all five of the colleges that rejected the original course from Bronx. And that John Jay course, if transferred back to Bronx, would count differently, as Trigonometry and College Algebra.

Where students flow more frequently, paths tend to be smoother, says Ms. Wrigley. But otherwise, transfer is uneven, she says. "Sometimes it turns on interpersonal connections between departments." Given CUNY's high levels of transfer, professors are making recommendations to streamline its articulation process.

California's public colleges have embarked on various efforts to simplify the transfer of credits, but some of their projects haven't had the intended results. Last year, for example, a comprehensive transfer review resulted in decisions by economics faculties on three of California State University's campuses to no longer accept credit for microeconomics and macroeconomics courses at community colleges where intermediate algebra wasn't a prerequisite.

Individual articulation agreements have become so confusing that the state passed a law last month that aims to standardize transfer through larger units: redesigned associate degrees.

Credit Alchemy

Some colleges promote liberal transfer policies, assuring prospective students that any credits they have already earned will count there, too. That approach, common at adult-oriented institutions and less-selective private colleges, seeks both to sustain enrollment and to help more students graduate.

Last year, to encourage transfer, California Lutheran University developed articulation agreements with 10 local community colleges. Staff members solicited the colleges' syllabi and consulted with its own professors, with the sense that most credits should transfer, says Maria T. Kohnke, registrar and associate provost of academic services. "Part of helping transfer students graduate on time," she says, "is making sure work they've done before they got here counts in every way that it can."

Maryville University, in St. Louis, regards regional accreditation as a seal of approval and accepts most credits from colleges with that designation. "It helps from a recruitment side," says Stephanie Elfrink, the registrar. "Students are more apt to go to an institution where it appears that they have accepted more credits."

For some students, the main goals are saving time and money. On online message boards, savvy students swap strategies for cobbling together credits.

"I've kind of learned how the system works," says Marianne Durling, a medical-coding instructor at Piedmont Community College, in North Carolina. Two years ago, with credits earned decades ago in other states, she was 18 shy of an associate degree. When she decided to pursue it, at the urging of her former boss at Vance-Granville Community College, she earned the necessary credits in one month through standardized tests from Excelsior College, a private institution known for online learning.

Since then, Ms. Durling has accumulated enough credits, mainly through tests, to complete two bachelor's degrees from Excelsior. Now she is pursuing online a master's in health administration from Bellevue University, in Nebraska, which will increase her salary, she says, and open up other opportunities for employment.

Ms. Durling and other students chart their progress on DegreeForum.net, a message board administered by InstantCert Academy, a test-prep company. They seem to know how to convert almost anything into credit.

One popular approach is taking free online courses through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's Independent Study Program. The American Council on Education recommends credit for some of them, but not all colleges will award it. Frederick Community College, however, usually will—and some of the same colleges that won't accept the credit "raw," as students say, will take it when transferred from Frederick, in Maryland. Students also favor "filtering" through Fort Hays State University, in Kansas, which will place courses from the online-learning company StraighterLine on a transcript, with letter grades, as its own.

A degree's worth of credits isn't necessarily an education. The 120 credits typically required to graduate should have coherence and structure, forming "not just a patchwork, but a tapestry," says Mr. McCormick, of the National Survey of Student Engagement.

Credit too easily granted can cause problems down the line. At the University of Maryland University College, many transfer students arrive with credit for introductory courses that another institution readily awarded for, say, a dubious workplace-training program. "It's a disservice to the students," says Susan C. Aldridge, the president. "If they haven't learned computational skills, problem solving, writing, math, ... then it becomes extremely difficult for them to succeed in their third and fourth year."

University College sometimes insists on placement tests, and it may not accept the transfer credit. "It would degrade the value and the quality of our degree," Ms. Aldridge says, "if we were just moving students along."

Credit for Training

A growing number of colleges of all types face the challenge of appraising students' existing knowledge. About 60 percent of institutions nationally now recognize "prior learning" and translate it into credit.

The practice began when a grateful nation welcomed soldiers back from World War I, and some colleges rewarded their military service by letting them start as sophomores. But they weren't necessarily prepared, and colleges called for closer matches between prior experience and academic course work. The American Council on Education started evaluating military training and issuing specific credit recommendations in 1945. Three decades later, as more adults enrolled in higher education, the group began assessing many forms of workplace preparation.

Its College Credit Recommendation Service sends teams of professors to appraise training courses, professional certifications, and apprenticeship programs—9,081 of them to date. They visit classrooms and labs, scrutinize curricula and tests, and consult the Education Department's Classification of Instructional Programs, a national database of courses.

"If we find that there is significant enough evidence that this is something that is now being taught in a college classroom, then we'll go forward," says James Selbe, assistant vice president for lifelong learning at ACE. The group will recommend a certain number of credits in a specific discipline to guide colleges' decisions.

"They're really a credibility check on the academic integrity of the courses," Ms. Aldridge says.

There are no overall data on how many recommended credits colleges accept, but the Servicemembers Opportunity Colleges, a consortium whose members offer academic credit for military training and experience evaluated by ACE, keeps track: 753,654 semester-hours awarded in the 2009 fiscal year.

A head start toward a degree is no small motivator. The Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education recently found that adults with some college rated credit for prior learning, by test or assessment of a portfolio of work, the top reason they would be more interested in pursuing a degree. And according to a national study by the adult-learning council, students who received credit for prior learning had higher graduation rates than other students, and completed their degrees faster.

'Learning Counts'

For institutions that specialize in assessing students' prior learning, like Empire State College, part of the State University of New York, the decision seems clear-cut. "If they demonstrate competency, then we award credit," says Tai Arnold, assistant vice president for academic programs at Empire State.

But the process is far from simple. A student's proposal and portfolio go from an assessment office to a faculty evaluator and finally to a faculty committee. According to its written guidelines, Empire State looks for learning that is theoretical as well as practical and is equivalent in quality to college-level work.

Fees vary for colleges' assessments of prior learning, but students tend to pay for credits they've proposed at one-third to one-half the normal per-credit tuition charge. For-profits in particular are luring students with all but promises of credit. Kaplan University and the University of Phoenix, among others, reach out to companies, offering to assess employees' training for creditworthiness, and looking to enroll them as new students. A partnership between American Public University and Wal-Mart states similar goals.

Further expansion of prior-learning assessment would improve progress toward national attainment goals, says Pamela Tate, president and chief executive of the adult-learning council. "The only way it's going to grow to the scale it needs to grow to is if we do this on the national level."

Next month the council will introduce an online service, called Learning Counts: College Credit for What You Already Know. It will feature a six-week course to help current and prospective students prepare portfolios of their previous work.

About 200 students will enroll in the pilot round, a few from each of 70 institutions, including Concordia University in Irvine, Calif.; South Seattle Community College, and the University System of Georgia. Students will finish with a credit recommendation from ACE for the course itself and from faculty evaluators for their portfolios.

"We've got a five-year business plan to serve tens of thousands of people," Ms. Tate says.

One of the first will be Juanita Ervin, an administrative associate in the Georgia system. She finished her associate degree a decade ago, and although she wants to return to college, she says, as a single parent she has struggled to find time.

In the portfolio course, she plans to focus on skills she gained not only at the university, but also as a logistical specialist in the Army and a manager at a Wendy's restaurant. A bachelor's in business administration may then seem more possible, she says. "Any credits that I can get would make it a shorter and easier experience."

Whole degrees based on carefully measured competencies was the founding principle of Western Governors University, in 1997. "We said, Look, what's important here is that we measure learning rather than time," says Robert W. Mendenhall, president of the online institution, which substitutes proficiency tests for credits.

At traditional colleges, a credit award and letter grade signal only vaguely a student's ability, argues Philip A. Schmidt, associate provost for academic programs at Western Governors. "If a student gets a C," he says, "I don't know what that means."

The competency tests, however, provide a certainty that Mr. Schmidt, a mathematician, finds reassuring: "When I say to someone, 'Student X has passed Calculus 1 at WGU,' I know exactly what that means."

Still, to operate in the higher-education system, the university had to develop a way to translate students' competencies into credits. It does that by plugging a test's objectives and level of difficulty into an algorithm, generating "competency units."

Mr. Schmidt enjoys explaining the competency-based system to faculty reviewers on accreditation committees: "When they see all of it in operation, what they say is, 'I'd like to bring it back to my own campus, because it really makes sense.'"

A Limited Measure

As an accounting measure, the credit hour has long sufficed. If it remains consistent enough to keep student-aid formulas and other calculations fair, that is all it can do, higher-education officials say.

"It has face validity but no content validity," says Jane V. Wellman, executive director of the Delta Cost Project, which studies college spending and revenue, and a co-author of *How the Student Credit Hour Shapes Higher Education* (Jossey Bass, 2003).

As a proxy for learning, credit doesn't hold up. Even a national standard couldn't make it a more significant measure.

"The idea that somehow having a federal definition of 'credit hour' is going to guarantee quality or even quantity of learning being delivered, if not being received, is a fallacy," says Sylvia Manning, president of the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools.

Credit is, after all, still only a container. Imagine lining up 120 cups for the credits a student needs to graduate, says Thomas Ehrlich, coauthor of the credit-hour book and a visiting professor at Stanford University's School of Education. "One of them may be a quarter-full; one of them may be half-full," he says. "One of them may be overflowing."

Colleges need to focus not on the cups, but on filling them, Mr. Ehrlich says.

The Association of American Colleges and Universities agrees. As part of its Greater Expectations project over six years beginning in 2000, it encouraged institutions to move beyond the credit hour as a mark of equivalence in transfer, and instead try to develop consistent learning goals.

Such efforts may result in assessments, maybe tests, as a supplement to the credit-hour system. "You will see more emphasis on competency-based requirements for degrees," says Clifford Adelman, a senior associate at the Institute for Higher Education Policy.

Still, competency tests cannot fully replace credits. For one thing, they produce a measure at the end of a course, but student aid must be disbursed at the beginning. Credit is an imperfect but indispensable measure.

"There's no other way to tie learning and resources together," says Ms. Wellman. "This does it in a nice way, unless people take it too literally."