

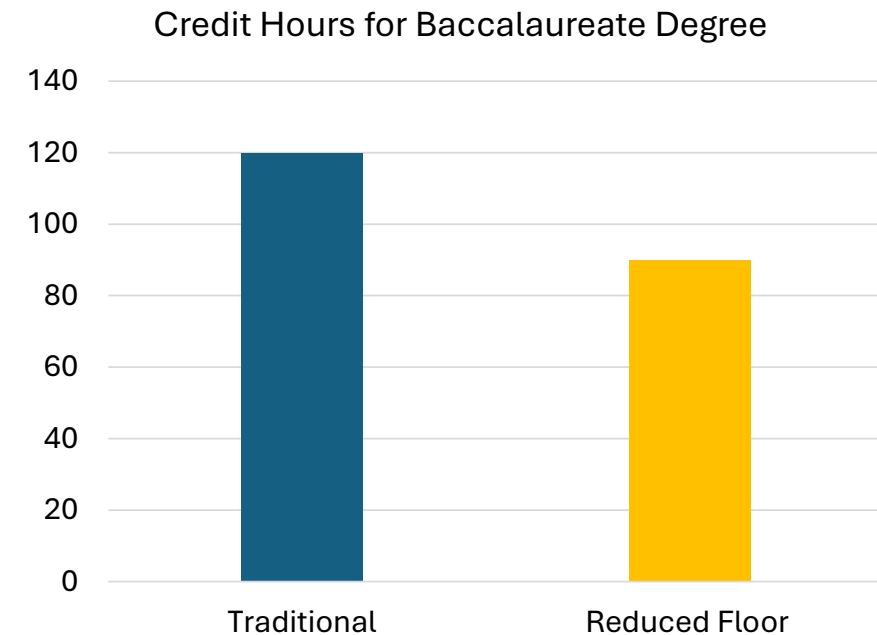


Time-to-Degree Innovation in Baccalaureate Programs

March 5, 2026

Reduced Credit Hour Baccalaureate Degrees: Scope

- What This Is
 - Purpose-built option for select programs and students
 - Often applied, workforce-aligned fields
- Who It Primarily Serves
 - Adult, transfer, and place-bound students
 - Cost- and time-sensitive learners
- What This Is Not
 - Not a systemwide replacement for 120-credit degrees
 - Not appropriate for all majors
 - Not a reduction in rigor



Reduced Credit Hour Baccalaureate Degrees: The Why and Guardrails



Why Have Systems and Legislatures Considered It

Shortens time-to-degree for specific students

Reduces excess credits and cost

Often aligned with clearly defined workforce needs



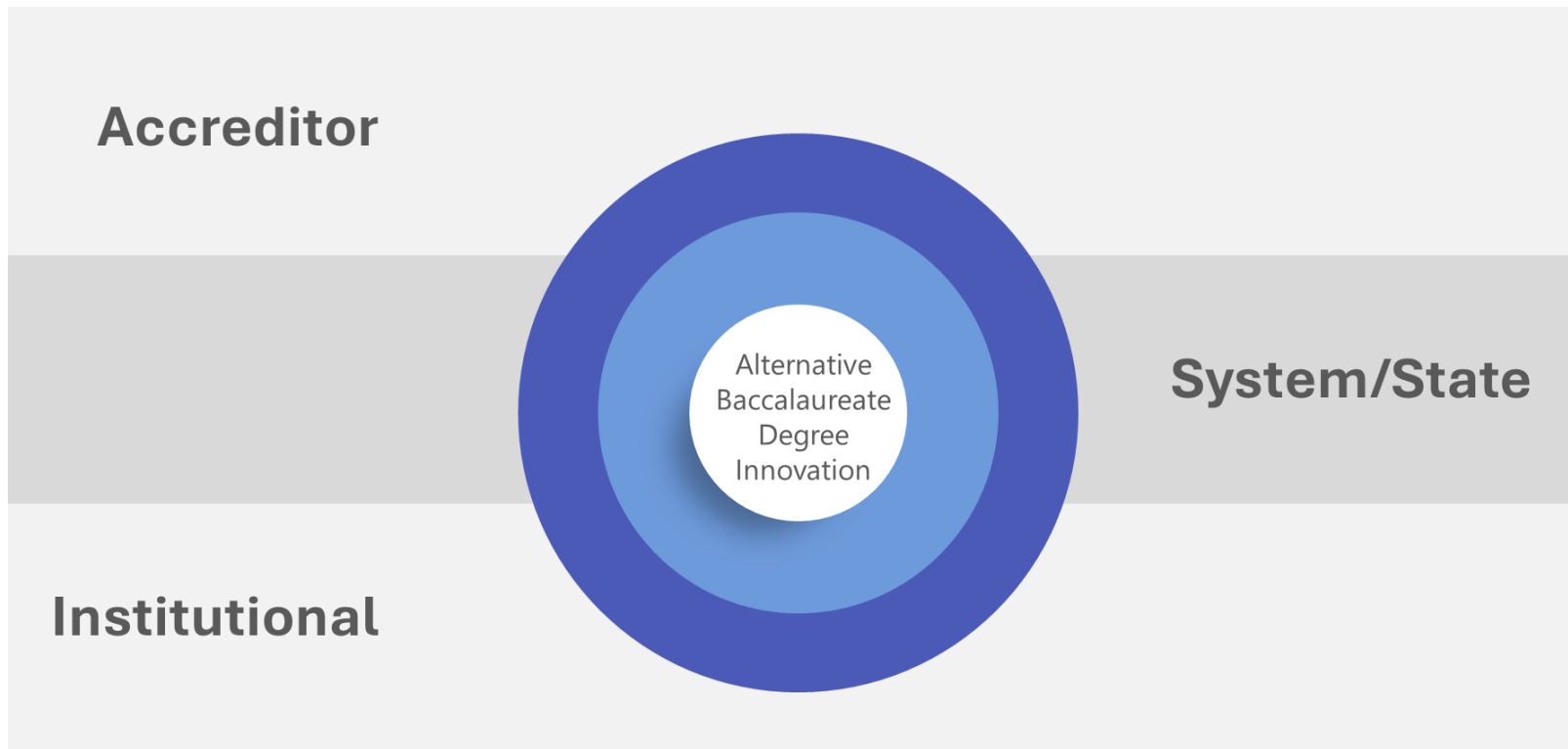
Guardrails

Program-specific approval

Accreditation & Title IV compliance

Pilot programs with greater oversight and assessment and evaluation

Reduced Credit Hour Baccalaureate Degrees Through Multiple Lenses



Reduced Credit Baccalaureate Degrees Through an Accreditor Lens

Many accreditors set (or historically assumed) 120 credit hours as the norm for baccalaureate degree completion — but now provide a structured pathway for exceptions below 120.

Higher Learning Commission

Historically assumes 120 credits for bachelor's, but issued reduced-credit guidelines with application/review expectations.

New England Commission of Higher Education

Guidance for degrees fewer than 120 credits; includes a 90-credit floor and expectations for advanced work and outcomes.

Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges

Defines reduced-credit degrees as typically 90–100 credits and provides evaluator guidance for approval and monitoring.

Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities

Expanded process to allow proposals for reduced-credit degrees tied to demonstrated learning outcomes.

First Group of Reduced Baccalaureate Degrees

BYU-Idaho (via BYU-Pathway Worldwide) was the first U.S. institution to receive regional accreditor approval for 90-credit, three-year bachelor's degrees, approved by NWCCU in September 2023.

Source: NWCCU

These included:

- Applied Business Management
- Applied Health
- Family and Human Services
- Communication
- Information Technology
- Professional Studies
- Software Development

State and System Actions Authorizing Reduced Credit Baccalaureate Degrees

Institution/State/System	Policy or Legislation	Programs Approved?
BYU-Idaho / BYU-Pathway Worldwide	Regional accreditor approval of 90-credit, three-year bachelor's degrees	Yes (first)
Utah (Utah System of Higher Education)	System policy authorizing accelerated and reduced-credit bachelor's degrees	Yes
Indiana	State law requiring each public institution to offer at least one three-year bachelor's degree	Yes
Maine (University of Maine System)	System approval of 90-credit applied bachelor's degree pilots	Yes

Sources: NWCCU; Indiana Senate Enrolled Act 8 (2024); Utah Board of Higher Education; University of Maine System Board of Trustees

Policy Focus Areas

Utah: Bachelor of Applied Studies (BAP)

- A bachelor's degree for which the major requirements plus the General Education and institutional requirements are fewer than 120 credits.
- A BAP degree must:
 - have a minimum of 90 credits and
 - measurably demonstrate disciplinary competencies, mastery of subject matter, and student learning outcomes comparable to and mapped to those of 120-credit degree programs in the same subject, with the elimination only of unstructured, non-essential electives from outside the major resulting in fewer credits.

Maine: Applied Bachelors Programs

- Limits 90-credit bachelor's programs to adult learners with prior college credit who have been away from higher education for at least two years, with verification in place to ensure traditional students are not diverted from 120-credit degrees.

Sources: Utah System of Higher Education Bachelor of Applied Studies Policy Definition and University of Maine's Enrollment Safeguards for 90-Credit Applied Bachelor's Degree Programs Document

Current Limitations and Opportunities for NSHE

Right Now

The standard number of credits required for receipt of a baccalaureate degree from an NSHE institution shall be 120.

-NSHE Board of Regents Handbook
Title 4, Chapter 16, Section 37.1

June 2026

Plan to request ARSA authorization to establish a limited pilot pathway allowing select programs to go below 120 credit hours.



Each request for an exception would be brought forward to ARSA for a thorough review and would be evaluated annually.

Will Work with
the Academic
Affairs Council to
Explore Possible
Areas for
Inclusion in Pilot
Design, Such As:

Purpose: Defined population, workforce outcomes, pilot scope

Quality: Comparable learning outcomes; assessment plan, etc.

Transparency: Clear labeling and student disclosures

Evaluation: Annual updates on enrollment, retention, completion, and employment outcomes (all when available); results will inform whether pilot status is lifted and the program transitions to regular status

First Potential Program: Great Basin College Bachelor of Applied Science in Project Management

**Office of
Workforce
Innovation**

#4

**Most Recent List of Top In-Demand
Occupations in Nevada**

**The Department of
Employment, Training &
Rehabilitation**

15.5%

**Projected Increase in Nevada
Job Openings Between 2022-2032**



Innovation in Completion: Utah's Jump into the Sub-120 Credit Degree

REDEFINING THE BACCALAUREATE FOR AFFORDABILITY AND WORKFORCE ALIGNMENT

GAIL NIKLASON, EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF INSTITUTIONAL EFFECTIVENESS AND ACCREDITATION
WEBER STATE UNIVERSITY, OGDEN UT

The 'Why?' – Drivers for Innovation

- **Affordability Crisis:** Reducing the total cost of a degree by 25% (saving 30 credits worth of tuition/fees).
- **Time-to-Degree:** Accelerating entry into the workforce by one full year.
- **Value Proposition:** Addressing growing public skepticism regarding the ROI of traditional 4-year degrees.
- **Workforce Needs:** Rapidly filling high-demand gaps in the Utah economy with skilled graduates. Demonstrate alignment with industry need.

Curriculum Design: Rigor vs Credits

- **Efficiency, Not "Lite":** Degrees are not "chopped" versions of old ones; they are built from the ground up.
- **90-Credit Strategies:**
 - **Elimination of Electives:** Some 90-credit programs remove "fluff" or general electives, focusing strictly on major requirements and core General Education.
 - **Learning Outcomes:** Must meet the *same* essential learning outcomes as a 120-credit program.
 - **Stackability:** May be designed to stack on top of a 60-credit Associate degree or allow stacking of related certificates plus Gen Ed.
 - **Interdisciplinarity:** Consider ways to creatively integrate courses from a number of programs to meet market demands.

Early Adopters and Program Examples

- **Weber State University (WSU):**
 - *Applied Politics, Philosophy & Economics (APPE)*
 - Strategy – interdisciplinary program built from the ground up
 - *Sound Production/Recording (Launching Fall 2026)*
 - Strategy – build on an existing, successful two-year program for upscaling
- **Utah Valley University (UVU):**
 - *Emergency Services Supervision*
 - *Professional Advancement*
 - Strategy – stacks into 120 CH Professional Advancement degree
- **Private Partners (pilots):** Ensign College and BYU-Idaho paved the way with 90-94 credit online degrees in Business, IT, and Communication.

Challenges and Critical Perspectives

- **Graduate School Acceptance:** Ongoing work to ensure master's programs (especially in specialized fields like Engineering or Medicine) recognize 90-credit degrees.
- **The "Two-Tiered" Concern:** Critics argue this could create a system where lower-income students get "shorter" educations while others get the full 4-year experience.
- **Accreditation Limits:** Not all disciplines are eligible; programmatic accreditors (e.g., for Nursing or Engineering) still largely require the 120-credit standard.

Conclusions and the Future

- **(USHE) Strategic Goal:** Increase timely completion by 3% over 5 years.
- **Expansion:** Expect more USHE institutions (like Southern Utah University or Utah Tech) to propose regional, industry-specific 90-credit pathways.
- **Be A National Model:** Utah's data-driven pilot is being watched by other states (like Maine and Indiana) as the blueprint for the 3-year degree.

Programs In Place and Pending

WEBER STATE

Approved at WSU:

- Early Childhood (non-licensure)
- Sound production/recording
- Applied Political Science, Philosophy, and Economics

In-process at WSU:

- Elementary Education
- Special Education
- Early Childhood Education (w/licensure)
- Early Childhood Education – Special Education (w/licensure)
- Outdoor and Community Recreation

OTHER USHE INSTITUTIONS

- Information Technology
- Human Resources Management
- Rural Entrepreneurship
- Professional Advancement
- Emergency Services Supervision

Resources and References

- [College-in-3 Exchange](#) – excellent resource for information and support
- [Why a 3-year Degree?](#)
- [USHE Official Announcement](#) – March, 2024
- [Three-Year Bachelor's Degrees in the U.S. ...Do They Lead to Graduate Study?](#)
- [NWCCU Opens Process for Accelerate Bachelor's Degrees](#)
(confirmed with the USDE that students in 90-credit programs remain fully eligible for Title (IV federal financial aid)
- [Three year Degrees at Ensign College](#)
- [BYU 3-Year Bachelor's Degree Overview](#)