

BOARD OF REGENTS
BRIEFING PAPER
Handbook Revision, 120-Credit Proposal

BACKGROUND & POLICY CONTEXT OF ISSUE:

In undertaking the initiative to improve effectiveness and efficiency across the Nevada System of Higher Education, the Chancellor is reviewing both academic and administrative areas in order to establish best practices. The NSHE *Plan for Nevada's Colleges and Universities* included among its strategies the limitation of 4-year degree programs to 120 credits and two-year degree programs to 60 credits with defined exceptions.

There are a number of complex institutional and individual factors governing the amount of time a particular student takes to complete a baccalaureate or an associate degree. However, baccalaureate programs requiring more than 120 credits or associate programs requiring more than 60 credits can extend a student's time to degree and is one variable that institutions and faculty can control. In order to ensure that students who enroll full-time and complete at least 15 credits per semester can complete their baccalaureate programs within four years and their associate programs within two years, the Chancellor recommends the adoption of a policy that supports the standard number of credits required for a bachelor's degree to be 120 and for an associate degree to be 60, with exceptions only for demonstrated licensure or program accreditation requirements that force the inclusion of more classes in order to ensure the necessary student learning. This change would be effective for the catalog requirements of Fall 2012.

SPECIFIC ACTIONS BEING RECOMMENDED OR REQUESTED:

Amend Board policy (*Title 4, Chapter 16, Sections 16 and 24, and new Sections 39 and 40*) to limit the number of credits for a bachelor's degree to 120 and 60 credits for an associate degree with exceptions for licensure or program accreditation, effective Fall 2012. (See attached Policy Proposal)

IMPETUS (WHY NOW?):

This proposal is brought forward in response to the Chancellor's on-going efficiency and effectiveness initiative and is included in the NSHE strategic plan – *Plan for Nevada's Colleges and Universities*.

BULLET POINTS TO SUPPORT REQUEST/RECOMMENDATION:

If adopted, establishing a maximum of 120 credits for a baccalaureate degree and 60 credits for an associate's degree, with some exceptions for licensure and program accreditation, will:

- Move students through their academic programs in a more timely manner – decreasing time to degree for students;
- Improve graduation numbers and rates;
- Reduce cost/savings for students in certain programs;
- Reduce cost/savings to the state for certain state-supported programs;
- Expand the availability of classroom space as students are required to take fewer courses;
- Generally match degree requirements to institutional accreditation standards;*
- Align Nevada policy with standards established in numerous other states including Texas, Maryland, Colorado, Georgia, Mississippi (see attached background material);
- Align NSHE graduation requirements with the Millennium Scholarship and the Nevada Pre-paid Plan; and
- Ensure compliance with the new standard through periodic reporting.

*The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities, NSHE's regional accrediting body, notes in its *Accreditation Handbook* that a bachelor of science or arts is "an undergraduate degree normally representing about four years (120 semester units) of college studies, or its equivalent in depth and

quality of learning experience,” and an associate of arts or science or an applied associate of science is “a lower division undergraduate degree *normally* representing about two years (60 semester units) of college studies or its equivalent in depth and quality of learning experience.” In defining the credit requirements for a bachelor’s or associate’s degree in this manner, Northwest acknowledges that there may be some circumstances for which a degree would require more than 120 or 60 credits to address licensure or other professional accreditation requirements.

POTENTIAL ARGUMENTS AGAINST THE REQUEST/RECOMMENDATION:

Based on conversations with the faculty and institutional administrators, the following points were noted in opposition to the proposal:

- Potential reduction in the quality of the degree;
- Infringement upon the faculty’s responsibility to decide degree requirements; and
- Unlikely to reduce time to degree since student choices mean more courses, e.g. part-time status due to full-time employment, etc.

ALTERNATIVE(S) TO WHAT IS BEING REQUESTED/RECOMMENDED:

Maintain the current policy where by the minimum number of credits for a bachelor’s degree is 120 credits and the minimum for an associate’s degree is 60 credits, thus allowing current degree requirements to continue.

COMPLIANCE WITH BOARD POLICY:

- Consistent With Current Board Policy: Title #_____ Chapter #_____ Section #_____
- Amends Current Board Policy: *Title 4, Chapter 16, Sections 16 and 24, and new Sections 39 and 40*
- Amends Current Procedures & Guidelines Manual: Chapter #_____ Section #_____
- Other: _____
- Fiscal Impact: Yes No _____

Explain: Over time, as students take fewer credits and thus less instructional cost is incurred, there will be a savings; however, it is not possible to estimate that savings with any accuracy. Additionally, the cost of a degree to students and families will be less if they declare a major early and take only required courses.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH: 120 Credits-to-Bachelor’s Degree Policies in other States

The survey of land-grant institutions reveals that most have policies setting 120 credit hours as the minimum number of credits required for the bachelor’s and leaves it to the academic units of the institution to establish the specific number. Degrees that deviate significantly from the 120 credit hour standard are, in general, those requiring professional certification, e.g. education or architecture, or those which have specifically been developed as 5-year programs.

The following table lists cases where the 120-credit rule has been established as a maximum for attaining the bachelor’s degree except in specific circumstances.

State Statutes: Some states have mandated through their state legislature that a bachelor’s degree program may be no more than 120 credit hours with noted exceptions:

State	State Statute	Source
Minnesota	In response to the passage of a bill from the 2007 legislature, the Minnesota State Colleges & Universities Board of Trustees adopted a policy which set the maximum number of credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree at 120 credits and the number of credit hours required for an associate degree at 60 credits. The board policy allows the Chancellor to establish a process for granting waivers for specific degree programs in which industry or professional accreditation standards require a greater number of semester credits.	Minnesota Session Laws 2007, Ch. 144 MNSCU Board Policy, Chapter 3.36, Part 3, Subpart C
Texas	State law provides that for any student entering from Fall 2008 on, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) accreditation agency minimum required credit hours for a degree (currently 120 hours) will be the maximum allowed required credit hours for a baccalaureate-level degree program. However, each institution can determine whether there is a “compelling academic reason” to allow a degree program to require additional credit hours, beyond the 120 credit hours provided for in the statute.	Texas Education Code Section 61.0515

System and Institutional Policies

	Policy	Source
Georgia University System	Georgia Board policy states that no bachelor’s degree program shall exceed 120 semester credit hours, exclusive of physical education activity/basic health or orientation course hours that the institution may require.	Georgia Board of Regents Policy Manual 3.8.1
Maryland University System	Beginning in 2005, Maryland’s university system established a standard of 120 credit hours for receipt of a baccalaureate degree. The Chancellor may grant exceptions to the policy based on the following instances: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The program is defined as a five-year baccalaureate program. • Professional accreditation requirements stipulate a higher number of credits or require coursework that cannot be realistically completed within 120 credits. • A program is governed by certification requirements that result in a need for credits in excess of 120 over four years. 	Maryland Board of Regents Bylaws, III-8.02
Montana University System	Requirements for baccalaureate degrees offered by institutions of the Montana University System (MUS) are limited to a maximum of 120 semester hours of credit. Exceptions to this policy must be recommended by the institutions, reviewed by the office of the Commissioner of Higher Education, and approved by the Board of	Montana Board of Regents Policy Manual 301.11(A)

	Policy	Source
	<p>Regents. Exceptions will be approved only on the basis of the criteria listed below:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Accreditation standards of the appropriate specialized accrediting agency mandate a baccalaureate program of over 120 credit hours. • Licensing standards of the profession involved require a baccalaureate program of over 120 credit hours. • Employment and initial success in the profession require a baccalaureate program of over 120 credit hours. 	
Tennessee University System	<p>Tennessee Education Commission policy states that credit hour requirements for new and existing undergraduate academic programs shall not be substantially more than 120 hours for baccalaureate degrees or 60 hours for associate degrees. As stated in the policy, the principle intent of credit hour standardization is to reduce the time and costs of earning a degree for individual students and taxpayers and, over time, improve graduation rates, as well as increase the higher educational attainment levels of Tennesseans. Exemptions may be granted to programs with accreditation or licensure requirements.</p>	<p>Tennessee Higher Education Commission, Academic Policies A1.0 (1.1.60A)</p>

POLICY PROPOSAL - HANDBOOK
TITLE 4, CHAPTER 16, SECTION 16
University Degree Requirements

Additions appear in *boldface italics*; deletions are [~~stricken~~ and bracketed]

Section 16. University Requirements for Graduation

1. A student enrolled at a university may elect to graduate under the catalog of the year of enrollment in a baccalaureate-level program or the year of graduation.
2. A university student who changes his or her major must choose the catalog of the year of the latest change of major or the year of graduation.
3. The catalog selected for the purpose of university graduation may not be more than 10 years old at the time of graduation.
4. Exceptions to this policy may be made on a case-by-case basis for NSHE transfer students as determined by the appropriately designated university official.
- ~~5. A minimum of 120 credits is required for a bachelor's degree. Additional credit requirements for graduation shall be defined by the institution and published in the catalog.~~

POLICY PROPOSAL - HANDBOOK
TITLE 4, CHAPTER 16, SECTION 24
Community College Graduation Requirements

Additions appear in *boldface italics*; deletions are [~~stricken~~ and bracketed]

Section 24. Community College Requirements for Graduation

The following requirements must be met by a student seeking to graduate from an NSHE community college:

1. Each associate degree student is required to satisfy the United States and Nevada Constitution requirement and six semester credits of Communications.
2. Each associate degree or certificate of achievement student is required to satisfy course requirements as defined in the college catalog.
3. A student may select the catalog year governing requirements for graduation under the following circumstances:
 - a.) the year in which the student enrolled; or
 - b.) the year the student officially selects a program of study; or
 - c.) the year in which the student will complete the curriculum requirements for an associate degree or certificate of achievement.

If a degree is offered for the first time after a student has enrolled, the student may choose the catalog year in which the degree or major was first offered. The selected catalog may not be more than six years old at the time of graduation for students receiving an associate degree or certificate of achievement, and not more than ten years old at the time of graduation for students receiving a baccalaureate degree.

4. A student must maintain a minimum cumulative grade point average of 2.0.
5. A student must complete a minimum of 15 semester credit hours within the college.
- ~~[6. The required minimum number of semester hours for the associate degree is 60; and for the certificate of achievement is 30.]~~

~~[7]~~6. A student must not have a financial or library obligation to the college.

~~[8]~~7. A student may earn multiple degrees and certificates of achievement provided all course and graduation requirements for each degree or certificate are fully satisfied as outlined in the college's course catalog.

POLICY PROPOSAL - HANDBOOK
TITLE 4, CHAPTER 16, *new* SECTION 39
Bachelor's Degree Requirements

Additions appear in *boldface italics*; deletions are [~~stricken~~ and bracketed]

INSERT THE FOLLOWING NEW SECTION 39:

Section 39. NSHE Bachelor's Degree Requirements

- 1. The standard number of credits required for receipt of a baccalaureate degree from an NSHE institution shall be 120. Credit requirements for each degree, including a four-year plan of study, shall be published in the institution's catalog.***
- 2. Institutions with a compelling reason for exceeding the 120-credit standard in a particular academic major may request an exception to the provisions of this section from the Chancellor.***
- 3. Exceptions to the 120-credit degree standard may be approved if evidence submitted to the Chancellor supports the necessity of more credits under at least one of the following circumstances:***
 - a. The program is appropriately defined as a five-year baccalaureate program;***
 - b. Professional accreditation requirements stipulate a higher number of credits or require coursework that cannot be realistically completed within 120 credits; or***
 - c. A program is governed by certification or licensure requirements that result in the necessity for credits in excess of 120 over four years.***
- 4. Institutions will report periodically to the Board of Regents the number of credits required by their academic programs and the rationale for continuing exceptions to the 120-credit standard.***

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This policy is effective Fall 2012.

POLICY PROPOSAL - HANDBOOK
TITLE 4, CHAPTER 16, new SECTION 40

Associate Degree Requirements

Additions appear in *boldface italics*; deletions are [~~stricken~~ and bracketed]

INSERT THE FOLLOWING NEW SECTION 40:

Section 40. NSHE Associate Degree Requirements

- 1. The standard number of credits required for receipt of an associate degree from an NSHE institution shall be 60. Credit requirements for each degree, including a two-year plan of study, shall be published in the institution's catalog.***
- 2. Institutions with a compelling reason for exceeding the 60-credit standard in a particular field of study may request an exception to the provisions of this section from the Chancellor.***
- 3. Exceptions to the 60-credit degree standard may be approved if evidence submitted to the Chancellor supports the necessity of more credits under at least one of the following circumstances:***
 - a. The program is appropriately defined as a three-year program;***
 - b. Professional accreditation requirements stipulate a higher number of credits or require coursework that cannot be realistically completed within 60 credits; or***
 - c. A program is governed by certification or licensure requirements that result in the necessity for credits in excess of 60 over two years.***
- 4. Institutions will report periodically to the Board of Regents the number of credits required by their academic programs and the rationale for continuing exceptions to the 60-credit standard.***

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This policy is effective Fall 2012.