

Portland State University Faculty Senate Motion  
6 February 2023

## PSU Credit Hour Policy - Language for Bulletin

### Motion presented by the Educational Policy Committee (EPC)

Faculty Senate approves the language/description of the PSU Credit Hour Policy (given below) for inclusion in the PSU Bulletin, in compliance with the federal financial aid definition imposed by the United States Department of Education's regulations [34 CFR 600.02 and 668.8, effective July 1, 2020] and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities accreditation standards and policies.

#### *New Bulletin Statement*

#### Portland State University - Academic Credit Hour Policy

This credit hour definition is based on the traditional Carnegie unit and aligns with the Federal financial aid definition mandated by the United States Department of Education's (USDE) regulations [34 CFR 600.02 and 668.8, effective July 1, 2020] and the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU) standards and policies.

As the basic unit of measurement of educational accomplishment the credit hour is used to measure student progress toward a degree, which in turn enables PSU's programs to be eligible for Title IV Financial Aid programs under the Higher Education Act.

These definitions rely on the '50-minute' credit hour when considering in-class meeting times. The PSU standard class scheduling time grid provides sufficient in-class time for both 3 and 4 credit classes.

#### **PSU Definition:**

The credit hour is conceptually framed as an amount of student work (i.e. a reasonable approximation of the total time commitment required of the typical student) associated with achieving intended learning outcomes. Under PSU's quarter system, one academic credit is given for a minimum of three hours of student work **per week** (i.e. a 1:3 ratio).

- For standard class sections, the 1:3 ratio requires a minimum of 1 hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of 2 hours of out-of-class student work each week for 10-12 weeks.
- For other credit bearing activities - such as labs, internships, practica, studio work, projects, mentor sessions - 1 credit requires at least an equivalent amount of student work (i.e. 1:3 ratio). The academic unit determines the structure of such courses and in some cases, the credit hour ratio may be higher or lower than 1:3, based on commonly accepted disciplinary standards/practice within postsecondary education.

Student work includes time spent in:

- **Direct Instruction**, where the core/primary course content is delivered, typically by faculty during synchronous class meetings, but also includes guided learning through core material via asynchronous online delivery,
- **Outside of Class** study time, reading assignments, homework, papers, group work, exam preparation, etc., and
- **Other Academic Activities** - typically credit bearing course sections designed to review, discuss, practice or apply the course (and program) concepts delivered via direct instruction. Other Academic Activities include the following course types: laboratory, internships, practica, studio, projects, and other supplemental support sections like mentored inquiry.

**Alternative Delivery Formats** - Hybrid, Online - No Scheduled Meetings, Partial Term

Classes that do not use synchronous meeting/contact times (for example, hybrid or asynchronous online courses) - or only meet for a partial term (i.e. for fewer than the standard 10 weeks) - will meet the credit hour standard if the course content and outcomes cover the same material in the same depth as a standard 10-week synchronous version of the same course, and the amount of student work is the same. Regardless of the length of the course or the amount of time spent in synchronous learning, the course learning outcomes, subject matter/content covered, and amount of student work must be equivalent to the amount of work/learning associated with the standard 10-week course.

### **Transferring Credit Hours**

PSU is on the quarter-system calendar and all credit hours listed in the PSU Bulletin and schedule of classes refer to quarter credits. Semester credits transferred to PSU from other accredited United States schools may be converted to PSU's credits by multiplying by 1.5 (e.g., 3 semester hours x 1.5 = 4.5 quarter credits). The 1.5 multiplication rule applies only to semester credits transferred from regionally accredited U.S. schools. Credits transferred from accredited schools outside the United States will be converted according to established international transfer credit guidelines and policies. PSU credits transferred out to a semester system institution may be converted by multiplying the number of quarter credits by .67 to determine the semester hour equivalent (e.g., 4 quarter credits x .67 = 2.68 semester credits).

## **Background, rationale, and preliminary discussions**

The current policy statement in the Bulletin is not incorrect, but is very minimalistic and does not include some of the nuance and detail articulated in recent clarifications from the NWCCU standards and the DOE regs for Financial Aid eligibility. It also does not provide enough guidance to help units and curriculum committees apply the standards to emerging formats that do not use standard in-person seat time models.

The EPC, the OAA Curriculum and Accreditation Coordinators, and the University Registrar have worked together to create a policy statement, along with examples

that can guide units in establishing appropriate course credit hours. This rewrite aligns with the NWCCU and Federal Regs, and was informed by reviewing examples from other universities. The expectation is that this clarification will help PSU be more compliant, maintain a more uniform application of the standards, and will help answer the frequent questions received by the Registrar and OAA from faculty and chairs.

This re-write creates a comprehensive definition that addresses the following things:

- It makes clear that the credit hour is defined through the lens of the student's achievement, learning and effort. related to the course, not faculty workload.
- It provides explicit guidance on out-of-class expectations.
- It references the fact that the standards are externally required by federal regulations for Financial Aid and accreditation from NWCCU.
- It points out the need for regular evaluation for continued accuracy.
- It provides guidance for applying the standards to alternative, emerging delivery methods that do not follow the traditional in-person seat time model (i.e. online asynchronous, hybrid)
- It makes explicit the unspoken "50 minute" hour.
- Apart from the rewritten policy, numerous examples are provided to help people apply the standards to various course structures.

### **NWCCU Considerations**

In accordance with the NWCCU policy, PSU faculty will determine the amount of work associated with a credit hour, by considering learning outcomes and by accounting for a variety of delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, degree levels, and commonly established standards/practices within postsecondary education.

PSU periodically reviews the application of its policy on credit hours across the institution to assure that credit hour assignments are accurate, fair, equitable and reliable across degree levels, academic disciplines, delivery modes, and types of academic activities.

*Supplemental Guidance and Examples that will be provided as a resource on the OAA Curriculum Management website - and linked to in the Bulletin copy.*

### **Undergraduate and Graduate Level**

There is no distinction in credit hour calculation between the graduate and undergraduate level. However, a course offered at both the undergraduate and graduate level (400/500 course) must include distinct requirements for undergraduate and graduate students. The syllabus must clearly specify how assessment of student work and the learning outcomes within the 500-level course provide a distinct graduate learning experience. The differences between graduate and undergraduate learning experiences should be clearly identifiable in both the stated learning outcomes and student evaluation sections of the syllabus. This

distinction cannot simply be that graduate students will perform “more work” or “that the graduate students will be held to a higher standard.”

### **Importance of following the established standards:**

It is important to use the minimal guidelines/standards established by PSU and NWCCU, unless there is a compelling, solidly articulated, documented reason as to why/how variance is in line with commonly accepted practice within higher education. It is important to comply in order to avoid risk of:

- incorrectly inflating credit hours on courses where students are paying for instruction they are not getting,
- incorrectly under awarding credit, causing students to put in more time than necessary for the amount of credit they are getting,
- jeopardizing access to federal financial aid support,
- jeopardizing NWCCU and/or program accreditation, and
- inaccurately representing the amount of credit/learning to consumers of the transcript when students send transcripts to transfer institutions, graduate schools, employers and others.

### **Examples of full - term/10-week courses:**

- Lecture - Seminar Type Credit - meeting fully in-person for 10 weeks
  - A 1-credit standard lecture class requires 30 hours of student work over the 10 week period, including a minimum of one- 50-minute class meeting or direct faculty instruction along with two hours of out-of-class work (i.e. study, reading, homework, papers, group work, exam preparation) - per week for 10 weeks- resulting in 30 hours.
  - A 3-credit standard lecture class requires 90 hours of student work over the 10 week period. This could take the form of 3 hours of direct faculty instruction via three 50-minute class meetings a week, along with 6 hours of required homework/class preparation time per week - resulting in 90 hours.
  - A 4-credit standard lecture class requires 120 hours of student work over the 10 week period. A class that meets 2 days a week for 100 minutes each period, along with 8 hours of required homework/class preparation time per week for 10 weeks will result in 120 hours.
- Lecture/Zero Credit Lab or mentored session combined
  - A 5-credit combined lecture/lab class requires 150 hours of student work over the 10 week period. In this case, the credit amount could be accounted for as follows:
    - Meets for lecture 2 days a week for 100 minutes each period, plus
    - 8 hours of homework/class preparation time per week, plus
    - a zero-credit, once a week meeting for a 3-hour lab for 10 weeks, with the lab credit rolling up to the lecture section.
  - A 5-credit combined lecture/mentored inquiry class requires 150 hours of student work over the 10 week period. Example as follows:
    - Meets for lecture 2 days a week for 100 minutes each period, plus

- 8 hours homework/class preparation time per week, plus
  - two zero-credit mentor inquiry sessions meeting 1 hour each time, plus
  - 1 hour of homework/class preparation time each week for the mentored session.
- Lab/Studio or Other Academic Activity - fully in-person for 10 weeks
  - A 1-credit lab needs a minimum of 30 hours of student work over the 10 weeks. This can be met with weekly 2 hour lab periods, along with an additional hour each week spent on pre-and post lab preparation work.
  - A 1-credit studio that meets weekly for 3 hours in the studio for 10 weeks does NOT require outside work.
- Practicum - for 10 weeks
  - A 3 - credit practicum requires 90 hours of work over the 10 week term. If the practicum requires 90 hours of onsite work experience over the term, then no outside preparation or work is required.
  - A 3-credit practicum that only requires 60 hours of onsite engagement across the term will also require 30 hours per term spent on related offsite work. For example - preparation, reading, and/or creation of reflection logs, portfolios or other artifacts to document learning.

**Examples: Alternative course delivery formats, with reduced in-person, no in-person/synchronous component, or compressed term length.**

- Five Week Compressed Timeline:
  - A 4-credit standard lecture class requires 120 hours of student work over the term. If the course meets across a compressed 5-week period the 1:3 ratio can be met by:
    - meeting 2 days a week for 200 minutes each period, and
    - including 16 hours of required homework/class preparation time per week.
  - A 3- credit practicum requires 90 hours of student work over the term. If the practicum occurs across a compressed 5-week period the 1:3 ratio can be met by requiring:
    - 14 hours of onsite engagement each week (for a total of 70 hours over the five weeks), and
    - 20 hours spent over the term on preparation and/or creation of reflection logs or other artifacts to document learning.
- One- or two-day workshops, short courses, field trips:
 

These types of courses will not qualify for academic credit unless there are extensive pre- and/or post- activities or assignments included to meet the required 1:3 ratio. For example, a 1 credit class meeting one weekend during the term will require 30 hours of student work. A course that meets one weekend (i.e. 4 hours on Friday afternoon and 6 hours on a Saturday) could meet the 30 hour requirement with the following components;

  - Meeting in class for 10 hours of direct instruction, plus
  - 10 hours of required reading prior to the class meeting, plus
  - 10 hours of post class writing, reading and homework assignments.