

July 8, 2016
Lexi Anderson, Policy Analyst
landerson@ecs.org

Your Question:

The two questions you asked of Education Commission of the States were where did the 180 quarter credit/120 semester credit degree requirement for a baccalaureate degree originate and how institutions have engaged in accelerated degree programs, specifically three-year programs or programs at the four-year institution?

Our Response:

Regarding the 180 quarter credit/120 semester credit degree requirement there is not much to be found in the history of the origins. A New America Foundation [publication](#) from 2012 suggests that the use of time-based units in higher education branched off of Andrew Carnegie's free pension system which created the "Carnegie Unit" used for high school graduation course requirements. The paper argues that the time-based units were used to determine faculty workload thresholds for the pension program.

An article in The Journal of Higher Education noted that the University of Michigan catalog of 1901 stated "the B.A. degree is conferred upon students securing 120 credit hours". The article explains how traditional higher education evolved when Harvard University implemented an elective system to provide a variety of courses for students to take. Providing more options then meant institutions needed to provide a structured process for students to follow pathways to degrees. This created credit requirements toward degrees. The author explains how the addition of elective courses and multiple pathways increased student mobility and the need to have "quantitative units of educational accomplishment".

Additional research found that some states set their credit limits in state statute either by credit hour or per the accrediting body. Two state examples include [Louisiana](#) and [Texas](#). In reviewing requirements per accrediting bodies I found

that the language surrounding credit limits is vague. The [Higher Learning Commission](#) states that "the institutions conform to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associate's degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelor's degrees, and 30 semester credits beyond the bachelor's for master's degrees." [Middle States Commission on Higher Education](#) also states that "a typical bachelor's degree on a semester calendar requires at least 120 credit hours to be earned by the student." This indicates that accrediting bodies are not setting the minimums rather following the historical assumption that 120 credits should be the minimum to earn a bachelor's degree.

Although this does not provide a definitive answer to where the 120 credit hour threshold came from, it sheds light on the history of credit hours in higher education and why we measure learning by hours in the classroom.

Additional data & links

The article *The Credibility of the Credit Hour: The History, Use, and Shortcomings of the Credit System* can be accessed through [JSTOR](#).

A [chapter](#) from *New Directions and Continuing Education*, no. 97, Spring 2003, pp.5-15 provides an overview on the accelerated learning trend.

The Ohio Department of Higher Education provides a [webpage](#) dedicated to 3-year degrees.

Jobs for the Future released a new [report](#) providing case studies of institutions using meta-majors to increase completion.

An AASCU [publication](#) provides insights and campus examples of three-year bachelor's degree programs.

Accelerated Degree Programs

In an effort to provide multiple options toward college completion, states and institutions have begun to incorporate accelerated degree programs or tracks for students to follow. Accelerated degree options are a new trend along with meta-majors (see [Florida College System](#)), [intrusive advising](#) and degree maps. These completion mechanisms provide students with specific program expectations in order to complete their baccalaureate degree in the shortest amount of time possible.

[Ohio](#) decided to create accelerated degree programs through legislation with [Ohio Revised Code 3333.43](#). This code requires all state institutions that offer baccalaureate degrees to describe how each major may be completed within three years. Some ways institutions can offer three year baccalaureate degrees include advance placement credit, international baccalaureate program credit, waiver of degree and credit-hour requirements, completion of coursework during the summer or a waiver of foreign-language degree requirements based on proficiency. The code does not specifically set out a degree map for the three-year baccalaureate option but requires institutions to make this information available to incoming students.

Other institutions provide three-year baccalaureate options through online learning and competency-based assessments/programs. Online programs allow students flexibility in scheduling as well as multiple course delivery options. Competency-based programs can provide an expedited baccalaureate program depending on a student's previous experience both in education and the workplace. [Western Governors University](#) is a prime example of how a competency-based program can benefit students from multiple backgrounds and accelerate their program timeline.

The majority of accelerated programs exist in online education platforms. They can be housed within four-year institutions or can be stand alone institutions. Lindenwood University is a prime example of a four-year institution that houses a [School of Accelerated Degree Programs](#) aimed to help adults complete a baccalaureate degree at an accelerated pace. The school provides courses mainly at night and online for scheduling flexibility. Other states and institutions may have three-year baccalaureate degree programs in an informal format. These instances typically include accepting dual-credit, AP and IB scores to satisfy BA course requirements. The majority of specified accelerated programs are aimed at working adults instead of "traditional-aged" students attending higher education full-time.