

## EDITORS' NOTES

Embedded in both the academic and administrative spheres, the student credit hour is truly the coin of the realm within higher education. This ubiquitous measure translates virtually all aspects of academic life into commonly understood public measures. The credit hour not only measures classroom time and student learning, it also is the basic measure for faculty workload; it provides the basis for calculating student "FTE-ness" (fulltime equivalence). This in turn becomes the building block for public funding, the foundation for most measures of institutional performance, and the basis for awarding degrees. The credit hour is the vehicle that allows students to transfer credits from one institution to another. It is a tool for translating the complex activities of diverse institutions into a common language, which (along with accreditation) knits together an otherwise diverse and diffused system of institutions of higher education. And it may be one of the biggest obstacles to institutional change because it perpetuates an accounting structure that was developed in the last century and may well have outlived its usefulness.

Higher education did not always have the student credit hour, and it still does not exist in most countries outside the United States, although it is coming in numerous nations, as shown in Chapter Eight. It has dual origins, one academic (the need at the turn of the twentieth century for standard measures of high school courses as the basis for college admissions) and the other administrative (the invention of foundations wanting to promote competition and productivity in higher education). Over the twentieth century, it had rapidly morphed into a public accounting device, a measure of workload that could be used to measure costs and efficiency in higher education. Now, more than a century later, the credit hour has a presence in every aspect of postsecondary policy: articulation between high school and college, student transfer, student-learning assessment and outcomes, content and integrity of the college degree, distribution of resources, and public accountability. Whether the credit hour actually defines and perpetuates some behaviors or simply shapes the way we talk about things, it has a powerful role.

The work described in this volume was begun because of a suspicion by the authors that the credit hour is an increasingly imperfect measure that may be causing or contributing to bad habits within higher education. These habits in turn may be getting in the way of improvements in teaching and institutional productivity tied to a more efficient use of resources to produce learning outcomes. The most obvious imperfections lie in its usefulness as a measure for student learning because time in the classroom is clearly no longer a sound basis for awarding academic credit to students, assuming it

ever was. But the distortions between measure and purpose are not solely on the academic side. In fact, the measure of the credit hour is embedded in state and federal regulatory schemes for higher education, budget formulas, and accountability reporting. So even if a breakthrough in alternative ways occurs to measure student learning, the external administrative bureaucracy will continue to enforce standards based on a time-based measure.

With support from the Spencer, Hewlett, and Teachers Insurance and Annuity Association–College Retirement Equities Fund (TIAA-CREF) foundations, a research project designed to document the primary uses of the credit hour began, codirected by Thomas Ehrlich, of The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, and Jane Wellman, at the Institute for Higher Education Policy. Our goal has been to document the ways the credit hour has come to be used and to inquire whether the measure perpetuates behaviors in higher education that get in the way of educational change. The work has been designed to investigate the following research hypotheses:

The credit hour is a barrier to innovation in teaching and learning.

The credit hour is a basic element of state budgets, and the measure gets in the way of budget reform.

The credit hour is more often enforced as a regulatory measure in public institutions than in private institutions and within the public sector in two-year institutions more often than in four-year institutions.

Innovative institutions work with and around the credit hour as a measure of student learning, but relatively few alternatives to the credit hour have occurred with respect to faculty workload.

Credit hours are awarded inconsistently, with little internal policy guidance or external review about the basis for awarding them.

Based on advice from an advisory committee (see the appendix at the end of the Editors' Notes) convened to help steer the work, we began by mapping the credit hour and identifying those aspects of its use that are most important from an educational policy perspective. To simplify the mapping, we distinguished between "internal" and "external" uses of the credit hour, as follows (see Table A).

Using the outline as a starting point, we explored the credit-hour regions that we and our advisors thought would be most fruitful. The chapters in this volume present the results of our explorations. It begins with the work of Jessica Shedd, who traces the development of the credit hour from its early days to the present. The results of an institutional survey of current policies and practices with respect to awarding credits for work are presented in Chapter Two. Thomas Ehrlich then considers whether the credit hour has been a barrier to institutional innovation through interviews with leaders of a dozen institutions widely believed to be innovators in higher

**Table A. Credit Hour Uses in Postsecondary Education**

<i>"Internal" Institutional Uses</i>	<i>"External" Applications</i>
Degree requirements, number of units required in general education versus in a major, etc.	U.S. Department of Education: Title IV Enrollments (credit hour is not reported but must be used to convert FTE and head count)
Measures of course credits recorded on transcripts	Clock or credit-hour requirements
Calculations of grade-point averages	Academic calendars
Faculty workload, compensation, and workload policies	Distance-learning (off-campus) status
Admissions requirements	Federal oversight of accreditors
Determination of enrollment status (full-time or part-time)	Review of academic progress
Residency requirements for degree attainment	Definitions of branch, off-campus, or correspondence teaching
Classroom assignments	Internal Revenue Service (eligibility for tax credits)
Staffing allocations	Interinstitutional student transfer
Financial reporting	State licensure requirements
Budget allocations	Rankings services (reporting)
Internal accountability reports	Accreditation standards for degrees, certificates, and diplomas
Building and space utilization standard	
Financial audits and program reviews	

education. The role of the credit hour as a measure of faculty work is then explored in another chapter by Ehrlich. Jane Wellman analyzes the administrative and regulatory uses of the credit hour in chapters that look at the role of accrediting agencies in enforcing it, state funding and the credit hour, and the federal government's enforcement of the measure. An analysis follows by Thomas Wolanin of some international dimensions of the credit hour. He examines how other countries that do not have the credit hour manage to cope without it. Finally, Chapter Nine summarizes what we have learned and presents some recommendations for the future.

### **Appendix: Members of the Advisory Committee**

Lou Albert, Vice Chancellor, San Jose/Evergreen Community College District, San Jose, California

Judith Eaton, President, Council on Higher Education Accreditation, Washington, D.C.

Russ Edgerton, Director, Pew Forum on Undergraduate Learning, Washington, D.C.

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Ann Ferren, Radford University, Radford, Virginia

Ruth Flower, Director, Government Relations, American Association of University Professors, Washington, D.C.

Merle Harris, President, Charter Oak State College, New Britain, Connecticut

Ronald J. Henry, Provost and Vice President of Academic Affairs, Atlanta  
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