

Credit Hour as a Proxy for Learning

by

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The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching is discussing the future of the credit hour and will have its work completed and circulated for comment sometime in 2014. The usefulness of the credit hour is addressed in both Amy Laitinen's article, "Cracking the Credit Hour" (New America Foundation, 2012), and in Carol Geary Schneider's article, "Is It Finally Time to Kill the Credit Hour?" (*Liberal Education*, 98:4, Fall 2012). The credit hour began as a payment method for faculty pensions, and over time evolved into segments of learning that designated degree completion within academic disciplines. Essentially, the Carnegie unit evolved as a way to organize and measure seat time and credential completion.

Neither the credit hour nor the assignment of a letter grade upon completion of a course can tell us much about what students have learned. The credit hour, a proxy for learning and still the coin of the higher education realm, cannot tell us exactly what students know and are able to demonstrate as a function of learning. Letter grades tell us nothing about integrated and complex learning, nor the rigor expected in a course or program; instead, letter grades provide only a comparison that represents some assumed level of mastery.

Nationally, conversations among higher education academic officers are focused on competencies and designated levels of mastery expected of each student at different points in their education. These competencies are expected to build upon one another, resulting in more sophisticated and complex levels of demonstrated learning. Some institutions, such as Utah State University and Southern New Hampshire University, and a national organization, the American Historical Association, are working towards coherent sets of competencies that move students to the next level of learning. Tuning and the Degree Qualifications Profile also assist faculty in this effort.

Tuning is a process in which faculty collaborate to develop successively sophisticated learning outcomes as students progress through the study of a discipline or professional field, marked by more demanding competencies along a continuum of credentials (associates, bachelors, and masters). The Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP) is a tool that captures the entire undergraduate experience across a continuum from an associate's degree through the master's level, including general education, electives, internships, etc. The DQP is a visual representation of learning outcomes and competencies that are both coherent and complex. Because the DQP is a visual representation of expected learning outcomes and competencies, parents, students, policy makers, and employers will actually see what students must know, understand, and be able to do to earn a degree; in addition, the DQP demonstrates what graduates know and are able to do not only as future employees but also as contributing citizens involved in their

communities. High impact practices in assessment of learning – practices that fully engage students such as e-portfolio development, research papers, group projects, etc. – not only demonstrate explicit levels of mastery, but provide continuous student learning through formative and summative assessments. Successively sophisticated work prepares students for the next level of learning as they move through their chosen disciplines. Thus, the DQP clearly defines what we can expect of a person who earns an associate's, baccalaureate or master's degree instead of providing a definition based on the number of required credit hours.

What do learning outcomes, competencies, and high impact practices imply for the credit hour? The work cited above is experimental; it concentrates on student learning and how, as faculty, we intentionally develop coherence and depth of learning in our curricula. Does the credit hour help us? Not so much, as it only defines the amount of time we have to do our work but not the substance of the work. Are we as a complex educational enterprise able to switch from artificial limits of time to a competency-centered paradigm, one that includes all of student learning – general education, discipline content learning, extracurricular learning, etc.? Not yet, although we have Tuning, which makes faculty more intentional in aligning their class work with discipline-specific competencies and learning outcomes, and the DQP, which potentially demonstrates visually what students are learning and expected to learn and do throughout their undergraduate education.

Time as an element of learning should not be disregarded. Many students need time in the classroom to fully learn concepts through repetition and interactions with other students and faculty. Repetition can occur by nesting concepts in a variety of paradigms and examples. Classroom time as workspaces for learning can be found in projects such as the Interstate Passport, an initiative facilitated by the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in which faculty from five participating states collaborated to identify learning outcomes, competencies and methods of assessment for lower-division work in written communication, quantitative literacy and oral communication. The Passport project will enable students to transfer this block of learning outcomes/courses seamlessly, without having to repeat the courses, among the participating institutions in the five pilot states. The Quality Collaboratives project, sponsored by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, and funded by the Lumina Foundation for Education, partners community colleges and universities to identify learning outcomes based on the AAC&U Essential Learning Outcomes (ELOs), competencies and assessments using Value Rubrics and the DQP. The ELOs form the foundation for the Passport and Tuning as well. All three projects depend upon faculty collaboration to identify learning outcomes, competencies, and assessment within the credit hour and class time needed by students to succeed in the courses identified for each project.

Perhaps the task ahead is to embrace a competency-centered paradigm of learning which fully engages students, is faculty driven, visually represented through the DQP, and intentional as faculty identify learning outcomes, successively more complex competencies, and appropriate assessments. Currently, we have the credit hour that segments rather than informs our work. As Schneider reflected, there is no other mechanism of apportioned time at this juncture. We would be better served by capturing the richness and entirety of all student learning through a

competency-centered paradigm. For now, the credit hour remains the coin of our realm. We look to the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching to energize the discussion and offer insights to move beyond the current proxy for learning.

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