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Abstract

A study of U.S. Department of Education (DOE) and accrediting commissions' policies was conducted to learn how the credit hour metric is applied to asynchronous online education. No research was found addressing this issue. Findings indicate that the credit hour definition and use are not uniform and that local institutions and faculty are most responsible for credit hour determinations. Also indicated by data is that an alternative metric is possible since the credit hour is an inappropriate system.

Introduction

The history of higher education in the United States includes providing alternative access for adult learners. Distance education is one such format. Over the years, learning at a distance used correspondence, off campus lectures, community-based events, and many other practices. A contemporary distance education modality is commonly known as online education. Using computer technologies and Internet access, learning is made possible through asynchronous courses in which instructor and learners are separated by time and space. Enrollment in asynchronous online education continues to increase, and more courses and degrees are being offered to meet learners' needs. Therefore, examination of policies is warranted to ensure just and equitable credit hour praxis.

Another historical element found within American education is the use of the credit hour system. Originally named the Carnegie Unit, the credit hour has been used for over a century within the U.S. education system. One credit hour is traditionally defined as one instructional hour in a classroom setting with instructor and learners. A commonly practiced application of a credit is for each hour of classroom instruction that a learner would spend a minimum of two hours of study or preparation resulting in three learning hours per credit hour. Since its adoption into the American education system, the credit hour meaning has remained static. Additionally, the credit hour now provides a metric for more than learning. Credits are used to set budgets, faculty work load, financial aid, and other administrative measures.

Problem and Purpose

Education is no longer limited to the traditional face-to-face classroom with teacher and students together. Instead, learning is possible through a format such as asynchronous online education. Because of its differences, online learning has been scrutinized and evaluated against traditional education. Asynchronous online education does not include the measurable class time, or seat time, for which the credit hour is based. Credit hour values are assigned to online courses although there was no definable contact or seat time hours. No research was found that addressed the translation of asynchronous online education into credit hours.

Therefore, a study was conducted to determine how "class time" for asynchronous online higher education courses was determined. Specifically, the question raised: What methods do national and regional accrediting commissions' policies set forth for translating asynchronous

online education into credit hours? Examination of the U.S. Department of Education and the six regional accrediting agencies' policies and documents was conducted. Interviews with persons representing the various organizations were conducted and used to triangulate findings from policies and documents.

During the last part of the study, the U.S. Department of Education released the Program Integrity Issues (2010) ruling. The regulation was issued to address several concerns within higher education and included placing a definition of a credit hour into federal rules. Information pertinent to this study from the ruling was integrated into the findings discussed in the following sections.

Review of Literature

A review of pertinent literature began the project. Readings found were from library sources and databases. One search focused on credit hour definition, use, and practice. An additional search conducted pertained to asynchronous online education. This search was found limiting and was widened to incorporate distance education with attention to online learning. Throughout the process, synonyms of the two primary subjects, credit hours and asynchronous online education, were used to create the broadest search and review possible. A guiding principle of the review was how online education courses were associated with credit hours. The relevant information is provided in the subsequent sections.

Credit Hour Definition. The late 1800s and into the early 1900s, American education experienced several changes that caused lasting effects. The United States Bureau of Education was formed in response to the creation of land grant universities by the *Morrill Act* (1862). Subsequently, centralized governance and standards for education began to develop providing the foundation for the U.S. K-12 and higher-education systems known today. This transition also provided reason for the National Education Association's recommendations to address the need for standards and minimal requirements for enrollment in secondary education. A standard of 14 units of credit became required for college entrance with each unit of credit equaling a minimum of 130 instructional hours (Heffernan 1973; Lorimer 1962; Shedd 2003a; 2003b; Wellman and Ehrlich 2003a; 2003b; Wolanin 2003). The 14 units were equivalent to four years of high school education. Also, each unit represented an instructional hour. The units were designed to provide a uniform process of measuring learning between all schools.

According to the Carnegie Foundation (2008) and Maeroff (1994), the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching greatly influenced adoption of the National Education Association's standard units. The Foundation stipulated that institutions had to use what became known as the Carnegie Unit in order to receive funding for teacher pensions. The Carnegie Unit, according to Shaw (1993) and Watkins (1991), promoted and established national education standards and uniformity to the length of classes, school terms, and admission standards. The traditional five 40–55 minute classes per week became part of American education. Mullin (2001) further indicated that because of the ease of use, the credit hour quickly became a vital part of the U.S. education system and used for administrative decisions such as budgets and faculty work loads.

Asynchronous Online Education. Remote or distance learning is not new to higher education. Other modalities include correspondence, the Lyceum movement, Chautauqua, Society to Encourage Studies at Home, Correspondence University, and Extension services (Larreamendy-Joerns and Leinhardt 2006; Pittman 1991; Watkins 1991). VanKekerix and

Andrews (1991) discussed how technology impacted on educational offerings along with the various results. In the 1990s, the introduction of the Internet brought a shift in distance education (Eaton 2002; Shale 2002; Web-Based Education Commission 2000). Online education is a mix of human–computer interaction, cognitive science, and instructional technologies (Distance Learning Task Force 1999; Hrastinski 2008; Parsad, Lewis and Tice 2008). For this discussion, the definition of online education provided by Parsad et al. (2008) is used:

"formal education process in which the student and instructor are not in the same place, thus, instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous, and it may involve communication through the use of video, audio, or computer technologies" (p. 1).

Martindale and Ahern (2001) discussed how online education provided an alternative format and access to higher education. The new system, according to Wingard (2004), provides the opportunity for learners with Internet access and computer to acquire educational materials nearly any time and any place.

The Web-Based Education Commission (2000) projected that online nontraditional adult (age 25 years and older) enrollments would steadily increase. In a report for the National Center for Education Statistics, Parsad et al. (2008) reported for the academic year 2006–2007 that 29% of 4,200 surveyed institutions made available degree programs online. From those same institutions 17% offered online certificate programs. More recently, Allen and Seaman (2010) indicated how online education enrollment during 2008 increased 17% over 2007 online education enrollments. Snyder, Dillow and Hoffman (2008) indicated that technologies and online education were better suited to meet busy adult learners' needs in a rapidly changing society and workplace by reducing barriers of time and place. Discussion provided by Abel (2005) and Martyn (2003) described how employees were expected in today's global market to obtain quality education quickly. Abel (2005), Lim, Morris, and Kupritz (2006), and Martyn (2003) also discussed how asynchronous online education may meet modern learning needs because of flexibility in scheduling and the possibility of "just-in-time" learning.

Incompatibility with the Credit Hour. Asynchronous online education is not based on a time measurement or set instructional time and place. Paradoxically, credit hours are designed on a measurement of instructional time in a designated place, but are used to measure asynchronous online education. The concern, therefore, is the awarding of credit hour values to instructional forms that do not have a set class time or a measurable amount of instructional time. Eaton (2002) emphasized how contemporary courses such as asynchronous online education no longer fit the definition of a credit hour, and thus cannot be measured in that way. Similarly, Meyer (1975) argued that credit hours do not measure learning and cannot justifiably do so with nontraditional education.

In 2009, Scott, Office Inspector General of The United States Department of Education issued two memorandums concerning the determination and use of credit hours. The first went to the Middle States Commission Higher Education. The second was issued to Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools. Scott (2009b; 2009c) reported to both commissions that there were insufficient guidelines in place to assure that credit hour values were consistent and met minimal requirements. A third memorandum by Scott (2009a) addressed to the Higher Learning Commission of the North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, reported that the Higher Learning Commission did not provide sufficient guidance for credit hour determinations. As a result, the commission could not guarantee the quality of education.

Methods
Policy and document analyses were determined appropriate for this study addressing the research question: What methods do national and regional accrediting commissions' policies set forth for translating asynchronous online education into credit hours? In addition to the U.S. Department of Education, the six regional accrediting commissions were used in this project. The agencies included: (a) Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools; (b) New England Association of Schools and Colleges, Commission on Institutions of Higher Education; (c) North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, The Higher Learning Commission; (d) Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities; (e) Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, Commission on Colleges; and (f) Western Association of Schools and Colleges, Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (U.S. Department of Education 2009).

Commissions' policies and documentation were expected to reveal the current standards and praxis of assigning credit hour values to asynchronous online education. This procedure would allow for agency comparison and would show which commissions had existing policies and practices. Additionally, this method allowed for understanding of current educational circumstances. The content of the policies and documents provided a collection of descriptive data. Each of the commissions was examined in a "systematic, purposeful, and disciplined process of discovering reality" (Merriam and Simpson 2000, 5) concerned with credit hour production and use with online education.

Policy analysis, as a formal discipline in education (Musick 1998), is comparative in nature by reviewing one document against another (Musick 1998; Rose 2002). Musick (1998) also defined this method as an evaluation of programs, policies, and methods relational to the proposed outcome and its impact. Smith (2002) reiterated the point by indicating analysis and evaluation cannot occur without the other in understanding all the dynamics of policy and use. Collecting policies and documentation in a rigorous and systematic form permitted the researcher to generate a scientific understanding from data (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2006).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with a purposeful sample comprised of regional accrediting commission persons to triangulate findings from policies and documents. Collecting information from more than one source allowed the researcher to determine trustworthiness of data (Bogdan and Biklen 2007; McCulloch 2004). Through interviewing persons directly related to the subject, the researcher was able to add another layer of data comparison and deeper understanding (Denzin and Lincoln 1994). In order to protect confidentiality, persons interviewed were assigned a designation of 'P' followed by a randomly assigned two-digit number. Although separation of persons from their respective commission was not completely possible, all efforts were made to protect participant confidentiality by removing any identifying characteristics from the transcribed text and any quotations used in this report.

Guiding questions were used during data collection and interviews. The questions were designed to provide data relevant to the research purpose and to provide structure to interviews. Also, the questions assisted in the research to learn how agencies guided its organizations in credit hour value assignment to traditional and online education. These directive questions were: (a) Did the agency provide a published definition of the credit hour to its institutions/organizations? (b) What published policies did the agency have for calculating credit hour value for traditional and asynchronous online education courses? (c) In the absence of published materials, what were established guidelines and practices to address the above

questions? (d) Who was responsible to ensure consistent application and use of credit hours? (e) As related to credit hour values, what changes did the organization foresee, or made, as the result of the U.S. Department of Education's *Program Integrity Issues: Final Rule*, October 29, 2010 (34 CFR Parts 600, 602, 602, etc.)?

Results

The purpose of this study was to determine what policies exist to guide the translation of asynchronous online education class time into credit hours. This report provides the results from data collected from the U.S. Department of Education and the six regional accrediting commissions. Collection and analysis of data occurred by a systematic search of agency policies and documents. Interviews of regional persons were conducted in order to validate findings from policies and documents. There are three primary findings from data collected. These discoveries are presented in the following sections and organized by credit hour definition, responsibility for credit hour determinations, and translation of credit hours for asynchronous online education. (As a reminder, in order to protect interview participants' confidentiality the letter 'P' followed by a randomly assigned number distinguishes interview participants.)

Credit Hour Definition

Understanding the meaning and use of credit hours was crucial for this study. During the research, many details were found that were not discovered in the literature review. Literature and research data provided an enlightened understanding of credit hours and use with asynchronous online education. A common understanding of credit hours was found. However, variations on the use and interpretation of credit hours occurred due to credit hour determinations made with subjective elements. In other words, comparing similar classes between institutions most often did not exactly correspond resulting in interpretive differences on credits and the course content.

As discussed, the Carnegie Unit became what is known today as the credit hour. A credit hour, in general, is one instructional hour plus two student study hours per course per week for the term, which equated to 45 learning hours per credit hour (U.S. Network for Education Information 2008b; 2008c). One definition read that a credit was the representation of "a mathematical summarization of all work completed, and are not the same as the actual classroom contact or instruction hours" (U.S. Network for Education Information 2008c, 2). The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2009d) indicated that students received credits when successfully completing courses. More detailed information from Middle States Commission on Higher Education defined a credit hour as *"a unit of measure representing the equivalent of an hour (50 minutes) of instruction per week over the entire term"* [italics in original] (2009d, 49). Another commission indicated that credit hours were a measure of "engaged learning time expected of a typical student" (New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2005, 1). P11 discussed that the credit hour "is a commonly accepted quantification of academic learning." Further explanation included references to the commission's documents. P11 specified that all credit hours had to be "consistent with institutional policies that reflect generally accepted norms or equivalencies in higher education." During interviews, participants clearly indicated that one credit should equal a minimum of one instructional hour per week per term. Half of the participants included student study time, which

totals 45 learning hours per credit per week per term (P11, P15, P21). The allotment of 45 hours per week was also found in commissions' documentation (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2009d; New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2005; Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities 2010). The Higher Learning Commission and Commission on Colleges did not specifically provide a credit hour definition. During interviews, P13 and P15 discussed how the credit hour does not properly measure learning and that their commissions placed focus on learning outcomes.

Found in the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2009e) documentation defined five types of credit hours and the related learning format. First, a laboratory credit hour would include class or lecture with designated time for student work in a laboratory setting and student study time. A second type, practice credit hour, would have supervised clinical experience, teaching, fieldwork, and visual or performing arts. Third, an internship was comprised of an established set of time and duties followed by an assessment of student work. Fourth, an independent study credit hour was negotiated time and outcomes between an instructor and student. Fifth, competency-based credit hours were explained as a collaborative effort between instructor and student to meet predefined objectives that may or may not have a defined time for completion. Specific traits of these descriptions were the amount of time allotted for each instructional format.

Lecture or seminar credits had one hour of instruction plus two hours of student study each week resulting in 45 learning hours per term per credit hour. This follows the traditional credit hour definition explained previously. Laboratory courses required more learning time. It was explained that one instructional hour plus two student study hours plus one to two additional hours in the laboratory each week. This format required 60–75 learning hours per term per credit hour. Instructional credit hour types for internship and independent study required three to four independent and/or supervised work totaling 45–60 learning hours per term per credit. Finally, learning time associated with competency-based credit was explained as relevant time for student completion of work to meet course objectives. Similar findings were in the Department of Education's information provided through U.S. Network for Education Information (2008a; 2008b; 2008c; 2008d). The New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (2005) data. Classroom credit hours were explained as a combination of instruction and student study to equate 45 hours per term per credit. Experiential learning credits were to be a minimum of 45 learning hours per term per credit. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (2003; 2010) was similar to New England, but provided the range of 40–45 learning hours per term per credit. Specific information was not found in Western Association of Schools and Colleges Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities documents'. However, P11 described 40–45 learning hours per term per credit as the norm for the region and no distinguishing between classroom and non-classroom credits. The North Central Association of Colleges and Schools—Higher Learning Commission and Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges did not have specific time assigned to credit hours. In both documentation and interviews, the emphasis was on learning outcomes and that schools were required to associate learning to commonly expected credit hour practices.

Following the *Program Integrity Issues* (2010) ruling a credit hour became the intended amount of work that occurs within one classroom instructional hour plus two student study hours resulting in 45 learning hours per term per credit. For other instructional modalities, such as

laboratory, studio, practicum, and the like, one credit hour was defined as the represented learning that would occur in a minimum of 45 learning hours per term. The text of the ruling also indicated "credit hours at one institution will not necessarily equate credit hours at another institution for a similar program" (Program Integrity Issues 2010). Further description elaborated that the new flexibility provided minimal basics so that credit hours would be more equitable between institutions. The ruling and the new credit hour definition were clarified more in a letter from Ochoa (2011), U.S. Department of Education Assistant Secretary, Office of Postsecondary Education. In the letter, Ochoa described the new credit hour definition as noninvasive and that it removed the former credit hour's "seat time." Thus, institutions were permitted the freedom in instruction as long as the learning outcomes and achievement were reasonably equal to the learning of one instructional hour and two student study hours per week per credit. The new credit hour definition did require assessment showing student achievement as related to learning outcomes.

P11 discussed during the interview how the credit hour was based not only on time, but also on "commonly accepted quantification of academic learning." Another characteristic of credit hours was how an institution's credits had to be "consistent with institutional policies that reflect generally accepted norms of equivalencies in higher education" (P11). This was similar to documentation as institutions were obligated to assign "academic credits based on generally accepted practices in degree-granting institutions of higher education" (Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010b, 7). The commission provided peer reviewers the "Eligibility Review Panel Scoresheet" to use during an institution's review (Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010a). Reviewers would rate a school's ability in meeting various principles listed on the form. One of the criteria rated an institution's documents concerning assignment of credit hours included criteria that "represent good practice in higher education" (p. 2). The Middle States Commission on Higher Education (2009a) provided discussion about credit hours and related course work. Institutions were required to ensure that "appropriate academic content, breadth, length, and rigor" (p. 4) were provided in all courses and associated credit hour assignments.

Responsibility

The accreditation process found in American education is unique. Accrediting commissions and the Department of Education (DOE) act as overseers to ensure that standards are maintained. It is through a self-evaluation and peer review process that evaluation of institutional compliance to standards occurs (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2002; New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2009a). The system places great responsibility at the local level for providing quality education. Decisions are made concerning courses and credits through faculty, curriculum committees, and institutional administration. In essence, each institution maintains the most control and duty for credit hours and related learning.

Each institution has its own process for developing, reviewing, and approving course work and credits. When accreditation reviews occur, institutions are evaluated on how well standards are met relational to the school's mission and purpose. Peer reviewers assess credit hours, course content, instructional formats, assignments, and assessments (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2002; New England Association of Schools and Colleges

Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2009a). This was emphasized by P21 when discussing how each institution was reviewed based on its mission and goals comparative to how well appropriate content, learning outcomes, varied assessment methods, and qualified faculty for subject and teaching are used to ensure quality education. Explained by P15, standards were in place to establish minimal requirements and expectations for attainment. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools' "Principles of Accreditation" (2009) indicated established standards for the region's institutions. Wheelen (2009), then president of Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, responded to a report issued by Scott (2009c), Assistant Inspector General, U.S. DOE. In the letter Wheelen stressed that the commission, through evaluations and peer reviews, held "institutions accountable for the academic quality of ***any and all*** [emphasis in original] course work or credit recorded" (p. 2) by a school. It is through the peer review process that quality education is ensured and is related to the institution's mission. Peer reviewers evaluate an institution's courses and learning outcomes and degree programs are suitable for the collegiate level (Wheelan 2009).

Although responsibility for determining credit hour values and maintaining academic rigor was at the institution level, the accrediting commissions were liable for ensuring compliance to prescribed standards. Credit hour variance between institutions was expected. Within New England commission's documentation, discussion on how peer reviews work in favor of supporting quality education. Yet, the commission realizes that the accreditation and review process are "not an equalizing force, measuring every institution by a uniform set of quantitative standards" (New England Association of Schools and Colleges Commission on Institutions of Higher Education 2009a, 4). The DOE explained that credit hours would vary. The reliance of following acceptable higher-education practices permitted variance, but assumed basic academics were compatible (U.S. Department of Education 2010a; U.S. Network for Education Information 2008b).

The Western Association of Schools and Colleges require institutions to prove themselves and that "academic credits [are] based on generally accepted practices" (Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010b, 7). As with other commissions, the Western Association requires institutions to demonstrate that any alternative instructional format is comparable to traditional in-class learning (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions 2009; Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010c). Institutional proof and demonstration was also required in New England (2009a; 2009b) and Middle States (2009a; 2009b; 2011b) associations. At the institutional level decisions are made that impact on credit hours and the associated learning. The regional commissions then evaluate institutional determinations and practices to ensure quality education.

As presented, the responsibility of credit hours is at the local level. A common theme in the interviews is that accreditation reviews look for the appropriate academic content and rigor. P13 discussed at length the importance of awarding accreditation based on how well institutions meet learning objectives appropriate to the academic level. P11 also emphasized many times that "content and rigor" were the focus of the region's evaluations. Both Manning (2009; 2011a; 2011b) and Wheelan (2009) described how each region, respectively, was more concerned about learning and outcomes. Accreditation reviews would assess each institution's ability to provide appropriate academic content, length, and rigor in curricular choices. Although credit hours were used as a metric, reviewers looked for demonstrated evidence that an institution's choices were comparable to other higher-education institutions.

Translation Policy

The third finding of the study was that no policy or practice translating asynchronous learning into credit hour values was found. Documentation and responses from interviews indicated that online education followed the same process as classroom instruction. More specifically, online courses used classroom curricula and standards to promote the same rigor and content as traditional learning.

Accreditation standards of the Middle States required that all instructional modalities were "comparable to those offered in more traditional formats" (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2002, 44). Other documents indicated that institutions were solely responsible to ensure all educational formats met the same standards found with traditional classroom learning (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2009c; 2011a; 2011b). The Northwest commission required schools to maintain the same academic standards regardless of delivery format and that institution could equate its course work to commonly held praxis (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities 2003) ensuring "both the rigor of the programs and the quality of instruction" (p. 45). Additionally, the learning time would be equitable to three hours of student work (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities 2010).

How credit hours were not appropriate as a metric for learning was discussed during the exchange with P15. Instead, the commission, regardless of the instructional format, would focus on learning outcomes, course content, and rigor. Similar statements were found in documents by Manning (2009; 2011a; 2011b) representing the North Central Association and Wheelan (2009) from the Southern Association. Proposed North Central Association standards changes included that all educational modalities would maintain the "substance, rigor, and relevance appropriate to its mission and to higher education" (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools— Higher Learning Commission 2011a, 5). P11 and the related association documents also required institutions to ensure online courses were comparable to traditional classroom instruction (Council of Regional Accrediting Commissions 2009; Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010c). Institutions were required to demonstrate for all learning formats that content and rigor were comparable with standards and commonly held higher-education practices (P11).

Discussion and Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to learn what national and regional policies exist to translate asynchronous online education into credit hour values. Knowledge of the credit hour meaning and use was required in order to understand what is stated in policies and how credit hour determinations are made. Data collected from documents and during interviews indicate three factors: (a) credit hours measure time and not what is learned; (b) responsibility for choosing credit hour values is at the local institution level; and (c) no policy exists that translate asynchronous online education into credit hours. During data analysis a theme emerged in documentation and discussed greatly during interviews that indicate an alternative metric is possible.

The credit hour measures the amount of learning time involved. This is learning traditionally based on one hour of classroom instruction plus two student study hours per credit per week each term. This has remained static since the introduction of the credit hour and continues through the most recent definition published by the U.S. DOE's *Program Integrity Issues* (2010), which did not alter the time element within the U.S. education system. Instead, the

ruling indicated the amount of learning involved in three learning hours (one instructional hour plus two student study hours) would be the basis for one credit hour. Criteria for a credit hour must now be quantified by "intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement" (Program Integrity Issues 2010). Ochoa (2011) explained in a *Dear Colleague Letter* that the ruling did not drastically change existing practices. Rather, the ruling emphasized the importance of learning content, outcomes, and assessment, but continued to use the credit hour as metric that "is a proxy measure of a quantity of student learning" (Ochoa 2011, 2).

Greatest responsibility for credit hours is on the local institution: faculty, committees, and administration. The DOE reaffirmed local duty in the *Program Integrity Issues* (2010). Also, the DOE reiterated that accrediting commissions were obligated to ensure member institutions were meeting standards. The DOE's ruling also requires institutions and commissions to have procedures in place indicating how consistent credit hour choices are made. Within commissions' policies, institutions were required to have policies for their credit hour decisions and proof that demonstrated their values were acceptable to higher-education practices. Information was not found in data that would equate how much learning should occur within the time associated with credit hours. Instead, continued propagation of arbitrary measures of rigor, robust, appropriate content, and consistent with higher education praxis were assigned to learning and related credit values. Commissions and the DOE expect that choices made about course work and credits assigned would vary, as persons would make judgments based on perception of academic offerings. In fact, this same point was made by Manning (2009; 2011a; 2011b) and Wheelan (2009) when giving response to the DOE's assessment of commission policies and determinations.

Actual translation policies were not found. Instead, institutions were required to ensure that any instructional format met the standard of classroom learning. This practice is the foundation of the DOE's *Program Integrity Issues* (2010). All learning, as defined in the ruling, must be equivalent to the learning that would occur within one instructional hour and two student study hours. This is the same parameters of the traditional credit hour and is set as a benchmark for measuring U.S. education. Therefore, the credit hour, as historically defined and used, continues to be the metric of the U.S. educational system.

A prevalent theme occurred during the course of the study that may provide an alternative to the credit hour metric. The subject was found in commissions' documents, but became prevalent during interviews. Data indicate that using outcomes or competencies based metric is being voiced and is a theoretical element of accreditation review and credit hour definition. The challenge, however, is for institutions and agencies to concretely associate competencies to credit hour values. No benchmarks were found, nor how much learning should occur within credit hour parameters.

The Middle States commission included in its standards that student learning was measurable by "learning goals and objectives, including knowledge and skills" (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2002, 39). Other data found that appropriate higher-education knowledge, skills, and competencies were assessed to ensure quality education (Middle States Commission on Higher Education 2002; 2011a). In a similar manner the Northwest commission required members to ensure that rigor and content were acceptable for academic level and followed common higher education practices (Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities 2003). During the interview, P21 discussed how student learning and outcomes were important factors of higher education and accreditation. The Southern Association also relied on outcomes as an important basis of standards. This was most evident in the communication

between DOE and Wheelen (Scott 2009c) discussed previously. In response to a DOE report, Wheelen (2009) stated that the region placed emphasis on learning and that institutions were held accountable for their academic offerings. An institution's course work and learning outcomes were evaluated during peer review processes.

Two regions clearly indicated the importance of learning over credit hours. The North Central and Western Associations incorporated review of student learning, course objectives, and assessments as part of accreditation reviews. The North Central commission proposed a standard change to specifically address course substance and rigor. The new standard would require institutions to demonstrate appropriate academic caliber and level through stated core competencies and proven by student assessments (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools—Higher Learning Commission 2011a). During the interview, P13 elaborated that the commission was focused on student learning and that the amount of time spent "learning" was not a true indicator students' gained knowledge and skills. Simply put by P13, "we are more interested in learning than in seat time." Further discussion indicated the need for a new metric that used stated objectives and competencies. The credit hour created a challenge on "how to decide when a 3 credit course has substance and rigor" (P13). Discussing more, P13 referenced the commission's standards indicating that regardless of the format learning takes place, student learning and outcomes were important for quality education. Learning methods may change, but standards provide the foundation for quality education (North Central Association of Colleges and Schools—Higher Learning Commission 2011a; 2011b; n.d.). Due to the nature of current accreditation practices and credit hour methods, the commission relied on learning outcomes when reviewing institutions. As indicated by P13, common learning standards and competencies provide instructors the foundation for courses, but allowed freedom to use multiple methods and tailor curriculum to learners. Similar discussion occurred with P11. Even though the Western Association did use the credit hour as a basic metric, according to P11, the commission focused on student learning and outcomes as an element of review. P11 referenced *How to Become Accredited: Procedures Manual for Eligibility, Candidacy, and Initial Accreditation* (Western Association of Schools and Colleges Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities 2010b) during the discussion associating points made with regional policies. During this process, program goals and objectives, methodologies, course goals and objectives, and assessment that aligned with outcomes were examined closely to ensure the region's membership met accreditation standards.

The credit hour is part of the U.S. education system genetic code and has been a useful tool as the American educational structure developed and grew. Application and continued use of the credit hour may not be in the best interest of learning with the many instructional formats now available. The challenge for the U.S. education system is to make a change for a metric that is based on learning. Information gathered during this study indicates that an alternative metric based on competencies is possible. As indicated in the data, the credit hour is relied on greatly. Historically, any proposed changes and any practices were ultimately forced into the credit hour metric. Thus, perpetuating a system that has been proven as inappropriate.

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