

**9.2**

**The institution offers one or more degree programs based on at least 60 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the associate level; at least 120 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the baccalaureate level; or at least 30 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the post-baccalaureate, graduate, or professional level. The institution provides an explanation of equivalencies when using units other than semester credit hours. The institution provides an appropriate justification for all degree programs and combined degree programs that include fewer than the required number of semester credit hours or its equivalent unit.**

*(Program length)* [CR]

### Rationale and Notes

This Core Requirement reflects the generally accepted means of determining academic credit required for degrees in higher education. The requirement uses as its basis the semester credit hour or its equivalency. In instances where an institution relies on other means of determining “academic credit” other than semester hours, it must demonstrate that its approach adheres to generally accepted practices described by this Core Requirement. In addition, an institution needs to justify any degrees that include fewer than the required number of hours. See Standard 10.7 (*Policies for awarding credit*) in this *Manual* for more details on the definition of a semester credit hour.

In the case of graduate programs, the expectation is that the first graduate degree (usually the master’s) requires a minimum of 30 semester credit hours. Higher degrees should contain progressively more hours. If that is not the case, then an appropriate justification should be provided.

This standard applies to all programs, including competency-based programs, whether the program is based on the credit hour or not. Common examples are medical programs, where credit hours are not always utilized, and direct assessment programs, where a set of specific competencies are demonstrated rather than the student earning credit hours. In these cases, the institution should provide an appropriate justification that establishes an equivalency of outcomes consistent with the standard. See SACSCOC policy [Direct Assessment Competency Based Educational Programs](#).

Another area in which appropriate justification is often required is combined programs, where students earn multiple degrees while progressing through a program, either at the same level or at different levels. Such combination programs often involve degrees earned from different institutions (dual degrees) or two degrees earned from the same institution (combination degrees). In these types of degrees, some of the same course credit hours are essentially “double-counted” by different institutions or within the same institution. When these programs involve transfer of credit articulation across institutions, care should be taken that the institution follows its own policies and procedures for transfer of credit [see Standard 10.8 (*Evaluating and awarding academic credit*)], but generally articulated transfer of credit programs pose few problems under this current standard.

For combination degrees offered by a single institution, excessive “double-counting” of credits can affect the integrity of the degrees offered. As an example, consider an institution that offers two

distinct master's degrees that require 30 semester credit hours each (the minimum allowed under this standard). If the institution allows a student to earn both degrees by taking 42 total semester credit hours (double-counting six three-semester credit hour courses as applying to each degree), then the institution may face a high burden of proof in justifying this arrangement from an academic perspective. A reasonable reviewer might view this acceptable as a second major under the same degree, but have difficulty accepting that degrees were earned in separate fields.

Another common situation is to allow students to begin graduate work before completing the undergraduate degree, then "double-counting" some of the graduate work to award both a baccalaureate and a master's degree upon completion of the work. For exceptional students, a limited amount of this activity could easily be academically justified. However, if the combined coursework falls far short of 150 total semester hours, or if any student can take part in the program regardless of academic merit, it calls into question the integrity of the undergraduate degree and/or the rigor of the graduate degree. These circumstances require an appropriate justification under this standard. Institutions and reviewers must use their professional judgment in such cases.

### NOTES

*Institutional credits for coursework that is not at the collegiate level (e.g., developmental courses) do not count as part of the total credit hours needed to earn a degree.*

*The issue of "double-counting" discussed above does not apply to the application of hours from an associate of arts or associate of science degree to a baccalaureate degree, as these associate degrees are explicitly designed for transfer of credit into the next degree; that design is not the case for the combination degrees discussed above.*

### Questions to Consider

- If using the semester credit hour as the common measure of course completion, does each degree program meet this standard? If not, is there an appropriate justification?
- What are the institution's policies and procedures related to the establishment of new programs and do they include reference to minimum length for programs at each level?
- If an academic unit other than semester hours is used, what is the unit equivalency to semester credit hours and how does the institution make this determination?
- Are there some programs at the institution that do not rely on the semester credit hour even if most programs do (e.g., medical schools, direct assessment competency-based programs, hybrid programs)?
- How does the institution determine appropriate program length in the case of combination programs and dual degree programs?
- How is program length established and monitored?
- How does the institution justify degrees that include fewer than the required number of hours?

