

Advice on interpreting the Federal definition of a Credit hour as you create fall 2020 courses

BACKGROUND

- The Dept. of Education ‘standardized’ the amount of work / contact with students the needs to happen for an institution receiving Federal financial aid to assign “one credit.”
- When an accredited institution undergoes accreditation review, one team member performs a “Federal Compliance” review.
- An important element of this review is to look at ~20% of all syllabi (randomly selected) for the courses the institution offers in order to verify that the course requires students to engage in a level, amount, and intensity of work / study that corresponds to the number of credits a course is worth.
- Also included in an accreditation review is an evaluation of online classes. A review team member logs into a random sample of ~20% of online courses offered to see 1) if the instructional design is of sufficient quality, 2) if the online courses meet the Federal credit-hour requirements for the number of credits assigned, and 3) if the level of learning aligns with the degree level. I’ve typically been the member of the team that takes on this role, so I’ve done this type of review for roughly 37 universities--and counting.
- The advice that follows is based on my 20+ years of experience serving as a Federal Compliance reviewer for the Higher Learning Commission. I say this because the Federal definition is argued about, interpreted, and re-interpreted endlessly. Why? Because it is nearly impossible to define in language something that is, in part, ephemeral in nature.

SDBOR Policy

BOR [Policy 2:32 Definition and Assignment of Credit Hours](#) repeats the Federal definition, so the BOR policy is used here for reference.

The policy states (accurately) that the “[credit hour value for a course is determined primarily by the amount of time, the intensity of the educational experience, and the amount of outside preparation required by the student.](#)”

The word “intensity” instantly queues one into the somewhat ephemeral nature of the definition.

That said, the policy attempts to define what “one credit hour” means in Section 2.B. Regarding online or hybrid classes, the policy says the following in 2.B.8:

[“Credit hours for courses delivered using online \(distance\), hybrid, and other nontraditional modes are assigned based on competencies or learning outcomes that are](#)

acquired through coursework and are equivalent to those of students in a traditional classroom setting. As a general rule, an equivalent of forty-five (45) hours of work by a typical student is required for each credit hour.”

So, for a 3-credit semester-long class, the course needs to be designed such that all students devote 9 hours of work per week to achieving the course outcomes. Further, the 9 hours of work needs to be at a level of learning appropriate to college-level learning and the nature of the program, e.g. BS, MS, or Ph.D.

In Section 2.B.1 of the policy, a credit hour is defined in the context of a regular face-to-face classroom, hence the reference to “contact hours.”

One could conclude from the language of 2.B.8 that no actual instructor-student contact hours are required in an online class. This would be wrong because a course without regular and scheduled student-instructor and student-student contact is a “correspondence course,” and SD Mines is not authorized to offer correspondence courses (even if they were a good idea).

So, where does this leave you as you prepare your fall courses????

Below I offer advice, but I cannot cover all permutations of all courses. If you have questions, email me Kate.Alley@sdsmt.edu . If you can, send me your syllabus, and I can evaluate it as a Federal Compliance reviewer would and offer an opinion on whether it passes muster—or not.

1. Perform a wholistic evaluation of your course starting with the higher-level Objectives right down to the measurable and far less abstract Learning Outcomes. In the Teaching Online 101 class being offered to SD Mines faculty this summer, these topics are addressed in modules on course mapping and evaluating your learning outcomes with Bloom’s taxonomy to ensure the “intensity” or level of learning is appropriate to the degree level.
2. Once you have ALL the learning a student is to achieve over the 15 weeks of the semester, break down the learning into weeks.
3. Based on the number of credits a class is worth, you will come up with a different number of hours of work per week required. So, for example, if you have a 3-credit-hour class that meets Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, you have 9 hours per week you must account for. My advice in this instance would be to break down your course map into 3 “chunks” of 3 hours each per week. I would design the class for 3 “modules” per week, and make sure each module requires at least 3 hours of work.
4. Now, switching to good instructional design principles, I advise you to ensure that some portion of each module requires student-instructor contact and that most of them require some student-student interaction.

5. The instructor-student contact does NOT include online office hours. This contact can be achieved in many ways. Here are some examples:
 - Live/synchronous lectures with student enabled to post or ask questions.
 - Recorded lectures / voice-over screen casts or other media the student takes in and responds to in some required (and assessed) manner
 - Scheduled all-class presentations (perhaps via Zoom) in which a guest presenter is the “teacher”

6. In sum, design your class to include (and document) ALL following elements:
 - Student interacts directly with instructor
 - Student interacts directly with the course content via reading, simulations, research, field work, whatever
 - Student interacts with other students in the class in a non-casual manner, i.e., in a manner designed to advance learning and in a manner that “counts,” i.e., is for credit and is measured

It’s up to you to figure out the proportions and timing of all this. But your syllabus and your grading / assessment system is key. You cannot just assert that “X amount of time is spent doing Y” without requiring it and measuring it. You must document in your syllabus what occurs in a class to meet the Federal credit hour definition. “Documentation” in the eyes of a Federal Compliance reviewer mean that the activity “counts,” i.e., is for credit and the activity or work product is assessed.

Again, if you want a second opinion on this, send me your course map and/or your syllabus, and I’ll put on my compliance reviewer glasses and tell you what I see.

--As Scooby Doo says, “Rotsa Ruck!”