



UNM

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Timely Completion at the University of New Mexico: Excessive Credits and Baccalaureate Degree Program Minimums

Academic Affairs Policy Report 2013-001

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1 Introduction

This report addresses the issue of timely completion of baccalaureate degrees at the University of New Mexico (UNM), with a focus on the number of credit hours required by UNM degree programs. In this section we provide some background on this problem, along with the relevant policies at UNM that govern graduation requirements. In Section 2, we provide recent UNM data related to student success; more specifically, we provide data describing the number of credit hours on average accumulated by UNM graduates. Next, in Section 3, we compare this UNM data to similar data in other states and at other institutions. In addition, we describe a number of state efforts aimed at addressing timely completion of baccalaureate degrees. Finally, in Section 4, we provide some recommendations for policy and curricular changes that will facilitate more timely degree completion at UNM.

There are three manuals containing policies related to the governance and operation of UNM. These are the Board of Regents' Policy Manual, the Faculty Handbook and the University Administrative Policies and Procedures Manual. None of these manuals contain any policies related to the number of credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree at the University of New Mexico. Rather, the only policy we have discovered related to the minimum number of credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree program at UNM is contained in the UNM University Catalog. This policy states, under the Graduation Requirements section, that [3]:

“Candidates for an undergraduate bachelors degree must meet the following University minimum degree requirements and are subject to the following University limitations:

–A **minimum** of 128 semester hours of earned credit is required. . . .”

The Office of the Secretary at UNM has performed a search for any actions taken by the UNM Faculty Senate on the number of credit hours required for a degree. The archives were searched dating back to 1976, the earliest date that Faculty Senate minutes are available electronically, with no records found pertaining to any actions or discussions related to this topic.

2 UNM Student Success

In order to set the context, in this section we provide some recent data related to degree completions at UNM. Specifically, Figure 1 shows the average number of credit hours, by college, for students that graduated with a bachelor's degree from UNM during the 2011-12 academic year. The gray line in this figure shows the range of credit hours required. Thus, any credit hours above this line are in excess, and provide a measure of inefficiency in the production of UNM bachelor's degrees. Although the three colors used to construct the bars in this figure—corresponding to credits earned at an institution other than UNM,

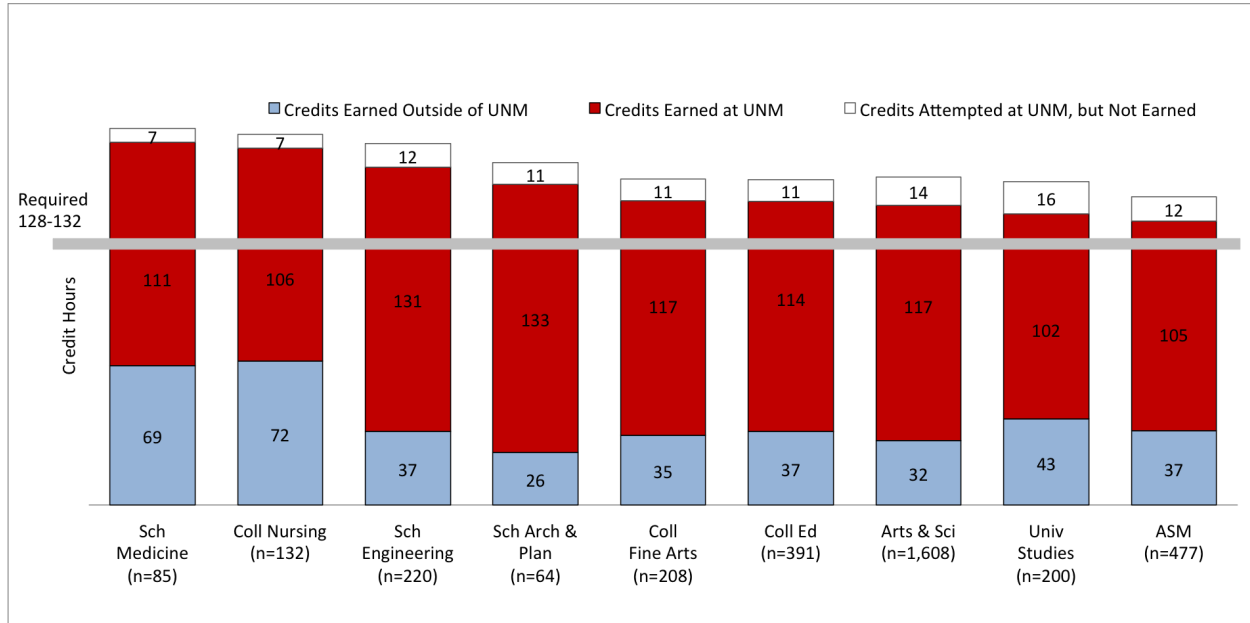


Figure 1: The average number of credit hours by college for bachelor's degree recipients at UNM during the 2011-12 academic year.

credits earned at UNM, and credits attempted but not earned at UNM—are shown on top of one another, it is important to recognize that these are *not* intended to imply a temporal relationship. That is, the credits earned outside of UNM do not all necessarily occur prior to earning credits at UNM, and the unsuccessful attempts at credit hours could have occurred at any time during students' progress towards degrees. Indeed, it is common for UNM students to intersperse credits over time between those earned at UNM and those earned elsewhere.

Figure 1 demonstrates that the excess credit hours accumulated by students in many colleges at UNM are significant. For instance, students that graduated with baccalaureate degrees in the 2011-12 academic year from the School of Medicine, the College of Nursing, the School of Engineering and the School of Architecture and Planning accumulated on average 187, 185, 180 and 170 credits hours, respectively. In the largest unit at UNM, the College of Arts & Sciences, students in this graduating class averaged 163 credit hours. To put these numbers in perspective, consider that a bachelor's as well as a masters degree are often obtained with 150 total credit hours—assuming 120 credit hours for a bachelor's degree, and 30 credit hours for a masters degree, the minimum requirements at many institutions.

Figure 2 shows the total number of earned credit hours, by degree program, for students that graduated with a bachelor's degree from UNM during the 2011-12 academic year. For each program, the low end of the line corresponds to the 25-th percentile and the high end to the 75-th percentile of the population that graduated with a particular degree. In addition, for each program, the center point of each circle corresponds to the median, and the size of the circle corresponds to the number of degrees awarded. Only programs that awarded more than 10 degrees during this time period are shown. Although many programs in engineering

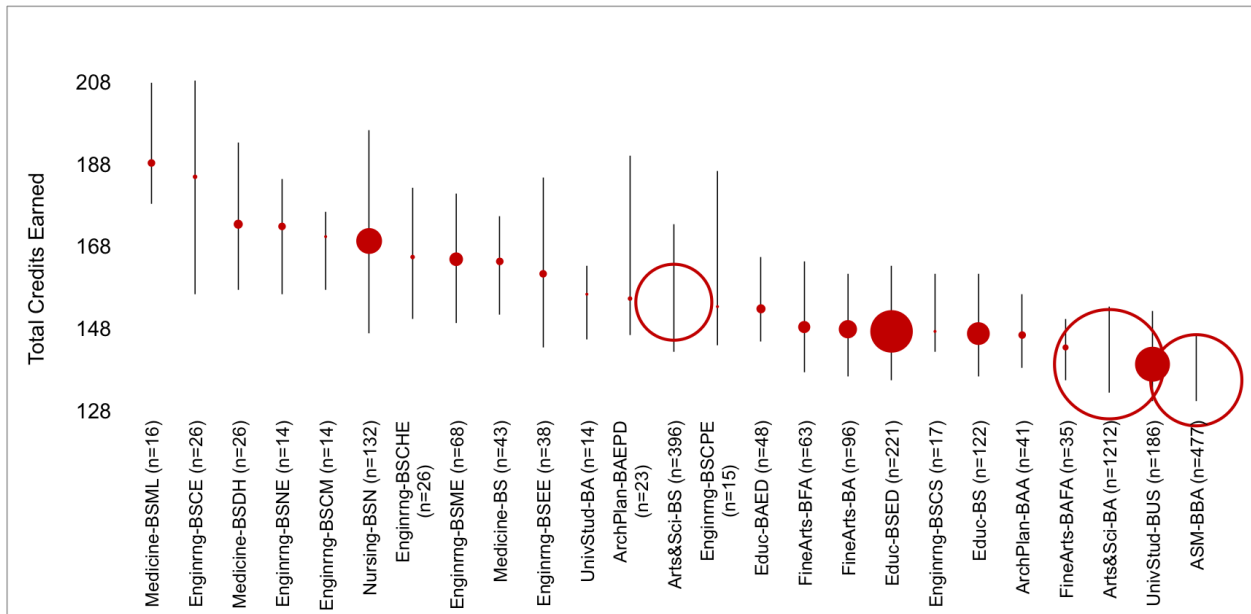


Figure 2: The total number of credit hours earned by program for bachelor's degree recipients at UNM during the 2011-12 academic year. The low end of each line corresponds to the 25-th percentile and the high end to the 75-th percentile. The center point of each circle corresponds to the median, and the size of the circle corresponds to the number of degrees awarded. Only programs that awarded more than 10 degrees during this time period are shown.

and medicine are on the high end in this chart, the number of students these programs graduate is small. The bulk of students at UNM graduate with degrees from the College of Arts & Sciences, and Figure 2 shows that students in bachelor of arts programs are far more efficient than those in bachelor of science programs.

3 Comparisons to Other States and Institutions

For the high school graduating class of 1972, the national average for the number of credit hours accumulated in the pursuit of a bachelor's degree was 130; by 1982, this rose to 134, and by 1992, it was 138 [4]. In the mid-1990s, a number of states began to investigate the problem of "credit creep," and this problem was addressed in many cases through legislative actions. In this section we summarize a few of the more prominent cases, and then we provide comparisons between UNM and a number of institutions in other states.

In 1995, the State of Florida legislated that all baccalaureate degree programs at all state institutions, with exceptions allowed, be reduced to 120 credit hours. Prior to this, the state policy was that programs were not to exceed 128 credit hours. This legislation also mandated that all general education requirements be reduced to 36 hours, and that common degree program prerequisites be standardized, offered and accepted by all of the state's public universities and community colleges. In addition, the timeline provided for completing this work was only one year. Within six months of enacting this legislation, the statewide inventory of degree programs by credit hour had been reduced by 1,571 credit hours [5]. At the University of Florida, the largest university in the state at the time, this change translated into a savings of nearly 56,000 credit hours annually, which equated to approximately 400 additional four-year degrees without changing the overall enrollment level.

In 1993-94, the University of Wisconsin enacted curricular reforms similar to those instituted in Florida. Over the next sixteen years, the average number of credit hours attempted by graduates was reduced from 145 to 132. This change allowed the University of Wisconsin to accommodate 15,000 additional students in 2009-10, as compared to what would have been possible in 1993-94 [4].

In 2005, the State of Texas enacted legislation that placed a limit, with exceptions, on the number of semester credit hours that a public university in that state may require for any bachelor's degree. The statute in the case reads [2]:

"To earn a baccalaureate degree, a student may not be required by a general academic teaching institution to complete more than the minimum number of semester credit hours required for the degree by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools or its successor unless the institution determines that there is a compelling academic reason for requiring completion of additional semester credit hours for the degree."

Furthermore, this statute “does not prohibit the institution from reducing the number of semester credit hours the student must complete to receive the degree.” Similar to all other higher education accreditation commissions we are aware of, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools assumes a minimum requirement of 120 credit hours for any baccalaureate degree program.

In addition, it should be noted that both Texas and Florida have passed laws requiring universities to charge additional tuition for excessive undergraduate credit hours. Specifically, in 2009, the State of Florida enacted legislation which requires universities to add a surcharge on each credit hour taken in excess of 120% of the total hours required for a degree [1].

Upon searching the State of New Mexico Constitution, Administrative Code and Statutes, we have not found any requirements or guidelines from the state regarding credit hours for degree completion for institutions of higher learning; however, the Higher Learning Commission, the institutional accreditor for UNM, outlines minimum expectations in the Assumed Practices section of their criteria. Specifically, the minimum credit hour guidelines for degrees are listed in Section B.1.a. as follows:

“The institution conforms to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associates degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelors degrees, and 30 semester credits beyond the bachelors for masters degrees. Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.”

A search of the minimum credit hour requirements for degree completion was conducted for UNM’s newly proposed peer list. A majority of UNM’s peers set the minimum credit hour requirements for a bachelors degree at 120 hours, with the exception of New Mexico State University (128), and the University of Utah (122). Most of these peers also set a minimum requirement for a second degree at 30 hours, although Texas Tech University requires 24 hours. A majority of the institutions also state that the minimum requirements for specific bachelors degrees may vary by college and degree. A summary of these results is provided in Figure 3, where we have also listed the minimum credit hour requirement for four-year institutions in New Mexico. Note that all but one of the seven four-year institutions in New Mexico require a minimum of 128 credit hours for a bachelor’s degree. The exception is New Mexico Tech University, which requires a minimum of 130 credit hours.

In addition, the Office of Institutional Analytics at UNM contacted a few of our peer institutions in order to obtain data related to the actual number of credit hours attempted by graduates. The results are shown in Figures 4 and 5. Figure 4 shows the average number of credit hours accumulated by degree recipients at three of UNM’s peer institutions, Arizona State, University of Houston and University of Tennessee. It is interesting to note that Arizona State University has the minimum value for all colleges across all four institutions shown in the figure. Not only does Arizona State University have a 120 credit hour minimum for the baccalaureate degree, but the university has mandated that *all* programs, including those in architecture and engineering, must meet the minimum with their degree requirements. Contrast this to the University of Houston. Even though the State of Texas

Institution	Min. Credit Hours bachelor's Degree	Notes
Arizona State University	120	Policy allows for exceptions; however, <i>all</i> programs, including those in architecture and engineering, meet the minimum.
University of Arizona	120	
University of California–Riverside	180 (quarter system)	Equates to 120 semester credit hrs.
University of Colorado–Boulder	120	
University of Colorado–Denver	120	
Florida International University	120	
University of Iowa	120	
University of Kansas	120	
University of Missouri–Columbia	120	
University of Nebraska–Lincoln	120	
University of Nevada–Las Vegas	120	
University of Oklahoma	120	
University of Tennessee (Texas System)	120	120 credit hours is the legislated maximum, with exceptions allowed. Texas State Law on Excessive Undergraduate Hours assesses a penalty for exceeding 30 hours beyond those required for degree.
Texas A&M University–College Station		
Texas Tech University		
The University of Texas at Arlington		
The University of Texas at Austin		
The University of Texas at El Paso		
University of Houston		
Oklahoma State University	120	Some programs are as high as 150 credit hrs.
University of Utah	122	
<i>New Mexico Institutions</i>		
Eastern New Mexico University	128	
New Mexico Highlands University	128	
New Mexico State	128	At least 48 hrs. numbered 300 and above.
New Mexico Tech University	130	
Northern New Mexico College	128	
Western New Mexico University	128	
University of New Mexico	128	

Figure 3: The minimum number of credit hours required for a bachelor's degree at UNM peer institutions and other four-year institutions in New Mexico.

	UNM		Arizona State		Univ Houston		Univ Tennessee	
Degree Year	'11-'12		'11-'12		'10-'11		'11-'12	
Min. Credit Hours for Degree	128		120		120		120	
<u>Average Credit Hours by Coll.</u>								
School Medicine	180.5							
Coll. Nursing	177.7		Nursing & Health Innovation	153.0			Coll. Nursing	148.5
School Engineering	168.1		Engineering	147.0	Cullen Coll. Engineering	166.2	Engineering	151.0
School Arch. & Planning	159.5		Design & The Arts - Design	136.0	School Architecture	177.8	Architecture & Design	171.7
Coll. Fine Arts	151.5		Design & The Arts - Fine Arts	137.0				
Coll. Education	151.3		Teachers Coll.	134.0	Coll. Education	160.5		
Coll. Arts & Sciences	149.3		Liberal Arts & Sciences	133.0	Coll. Liberal Arts & Soc Sci	152.5	Arts And Sciences	141.1
University Studies	145.1		Letters & Sciences	129.0				
Anderson Schools Management	141.5		Business	134.0	Bauer Coll. Business	155.2	Business Administration	135.0

Figure 4: The average number of credit hours accumulated by graduates of specific colleges at UNM, Arizona State University, University of Houston and University of Tennessee.

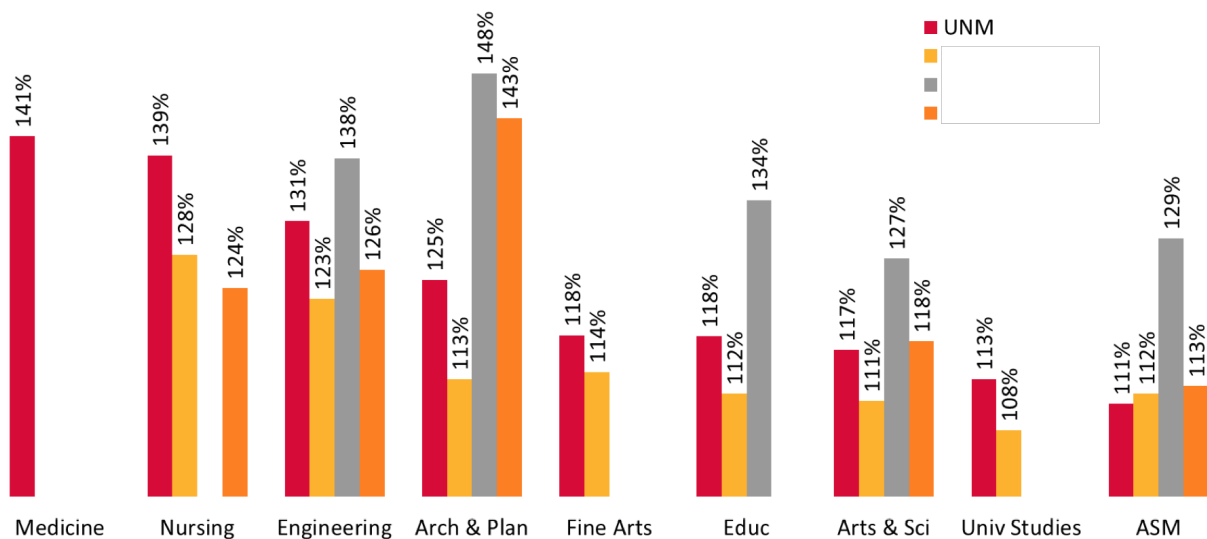


Figure 5: The excess credit hours for graduates of specific colleges, as a percentage of the minimum required for the degree, at UNM (2011-12), Arizona State University (2011-12), University of Houston (2010-11) and University of Tennessee (2011-12).

mandates a 120 credit hour minimum, exceptions are allowed, and the University of Houston makes use of them. For instance, in the Cullen College of Engineering at the University of Houston, degree programs have between 127 and 131 required credit hours. The Bachelor of Architecture degree at the University of Houston is a five-year 160 credit hour program.

4 Recommendations

Complete College America provides three policy recommendations aimed at reducing time to degree. These include [4]:

1. Control credit creep by limiting program length.
2. Establish model four-year semester-by-semester road maps for all programs.
3. Guarantee the transfer of general education curriculum.

UNM should follow the examples set by other states, as well as the recommendations of Complete College America, in order to streamline our curricula and address the excess credit hour issue that exists on our campus. This should be accomplished through the following actions:

- Work with the UNM Faculty Senate to create a policy that reduces the minimum number of credit hours required for a baccalaureate degree at UNM from 128 to 120. Many of our peer institutions have demonstrated that this is possible while also maintaining program quality.
- Once the previous policy is in place, work with the UNM Faculty Senate Curriculum Committee and academic departments to review all degree programs, with the goal of reducing degree requirements in order to match the 120 credit hour minimum, with exceptions allowed if compelling academic reasons are provided.
- Work with academic units at UNM to create four-year semester-by-semester road maps for all programs, and provide mechanisms for tracking the progress of students relative to these road maps.
- Create degree road maps that may be customized to a student's particular circumstances—e.g., that start at the math course a student tests into, or that incorporate work completed at other institutions in the state (taking into account articulation agreements).

References

- [1] Florida Statutes. www.leg.state.fl.us/Statutes, 2012. 1009.286 – Additional student payment for hours exceeding baccalaureate degree program completion requirements at state universities.
- [2] Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. <http://www.thecb.state.tx.us>, 2013. 61.0515 – Statutory Limitation on Semester Credit Hours Required for a Baccalaureate Degree.
- [3] UNM Catalog. <http://catalog.unm.edu/catalogs/2012-2013/undergrad-program.html>, 2013.
- [4] N. Johnson. Three policies to reduce time to degree. Technical report, Complete College America, Washington, DC, February 2011.
- [5] R. E. LeMon and G. W. Pitter. Standardizing across institutions: Now that we all look alike, what do we look like? Technical report, Office of Academic Program Review, State University System of Florida, Tallahassee, FL, 1996.