



THE UNIVERSITY of
NEW MEXICO

Office of the Provost



WEDNESDAY COMMUNIQUÉ

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The Real Story of the Credit Hour: We have been conditioned to think about an undergraduate degree as a collection of courses, which in turn are a collection of credit hours. The credit hour is deeply embedded in all that we do and count at the university, from assigning workloads, to measuring student progress, determining funding from the state, and charging tuition. The credit hour started out as [the Carnegie Unit](#) and had a much more modest aim:

“The Carnegie trustees concluded that college entrance requirements should be ‘designated in terms of units, a unit being a course of five periods weekly throughout an academic year of the preparatory school.’” ... “In higher education, students receive ‘credit hours,’ a metric derived from the Carnegie Unit and based on the number of ‘contact hours’ students spend in class per week in a given semester. A typical three-credit course, for example, meets for three hours per week over a fifteen-week semester. A student, then, might earn fifteen credit hours per semester (fifteen is standard full-time registration for a semester, thirty for an academic year) en route to a four-year bachelor’s degree requiring a total of 120 credits.”

So the intent for credit hours (now termed “student credit hours”) was to standardize high school preparation *and* to measure the contact hours in a classroom so that professors would qualify for pension benefits. In recent years, with the introduction of non-traditional teaching mediums — online education, Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), competency education, and so on — and the focus on output metrics, such as student learning and skills rather than contact hours, the credit hour’s status as the only coin in the realm is being revisited.

As described in the [recent article](#) from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, the credit hour unit “was instituted by the foundation in 1906 primarily to determine a faculty member’s eligibility for a pension. It measures faculty time spent both in the classroom, teaching students, and outside the classroom, preparing for class. It was never intended to be a measure of the quality of learning.” And, “The Carnegie Unit does not generally impose significant barriers to innovation, with one exception: federal student aid. Federal financial-aid regulations are closely tied to the credit hour.”

I again encourage you to participate in an ongoing dialogue about potential innovations and the University’s mission by leaving your comments to last week’s Communiqué [here](#), and to this week’s [here](#).

On Rankings: The season of university rankings is upon us. There are many rankings of U.S. colleges by various publications and companies including U.S. News & World Report, The Washington Monthly, Kiplinger, The Princeton Review, Money Magazine, Forbes, and the most recent one by The Business Journals. There are also international rankings, such as those of Times Higher Education, QS (Quacquarelli Symonds) World University, Shanghai Jiao Tong, Leiden Ranking, and the U.S. News Global University Rankings. Last week, I was invited to serve on the board of the [Center for Measuring University Performance](#) (MUP), which collects various university research metrics but does not provide rankings. Here is the description located on their homepage: “*The Center for Measuring University Performance (MUP) is a research enterprise focused on the competitive national context for major research universities. The MUP work relies heavily on the initiative and insight of its advisory board and draws on the insight and recommendations of many colleagues throughout the country who contribute data, information, and perspective.*” In fact, the MUP methodology includes a variety of metrics that, depending on what is being measured, generate significantly different university rankings and show the futility of using any single one. The MUP [2013 Top American Research Universities Report](#) is now available.

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