

Credit Hour Change to Opportunity Scholarship Program

When the Opportunity Scholarship was established, the Legislature specified in the statute that recipients must “Complete fifteen credit hours of instruction per semester. The student shall enroll in and complete at least fifteen credit hours of instruction in each consecutive spring and fall term.” As the program has unfolded, the 15 credit hour requirement has continued to cause a number of unintended consequences including the need for students to complete unnecessary coursework or request an exemption from the executive director of the Board of Regents. To address this change, the 2010 legislature modified the statute to read:

“Earn thirty credit hours prior to the beginning of the second year of instruction, sixty credit hours prior to the beginning of the third year of instruction, and ninety credit hours prior to the fourth year of instruction.”

Rather than asking students to complete 15 credit hours during both the Fall and Spring semesters each year, credit hour benchmarks were established which would allow recipients greater flexibility in meeting the credit hour requirement. Beginning with the Fall 2010 semester, students must now complete the credit hours specified below to maintain eligibility into the equivalent year of the scholarship program:

- 30 Credit Hours - Sophomores or those receiving 3rd and 4th term funding
- 60 Credit Hours - Juniors or those receiving 5th and 6th term funding
- 90 Credit Hours - Seniors or those receiving 7th and 8th term funding

If students have completed the credit hours specified for their term of eligibility in the Opportunity Scholarship program identified above, 15 credit hours is not necessary each semester as long as they have completed enough credit hours to meet the credit hour threshold for the forthcoming year. For example, if a sophomore in the program has completed 30 credit hours of coursework, then he/she is eligible to receive funding for the sophomore year. Credit hours can be earned during the fall, spring, and summer terms to then meet the 60 credit hour requirement needed to obtain funding for the Junior year (5th and 6th terms in the program). As long as students continue to maintain a 3.0 GPA at the start of each term, they will be able to maintain eligibility, and campus representatives will be responsible for monitoring that students have met the necessary credit hour threshold at the start of each year.

Because this change to the statute results in a dramatic shift in the way campus personnel are asked to monitor student credit hour completion, a number of Frequently Asked Question Responses have been prepared. If you have additional questions not addressed in the responses below, please feel free to contact me directly.

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Frequently Asked Questions

1. *Are students required to be full-time (or other enrollment) in the fall and spring semesters to get the respective SDOS award?*

Students must be enrolled and completing coursework at a participating institution at the time funds are distributed. The new statute does not put a specific credit hour requirement for each term, which allows for greater flexibility by students to meet the new 30, 60, and 90 credit hour thresholds. Currently, students in their senior year have been granted exemptions to fall below the 15 credit hour requirement, many of which did not take 12 or more credit hours to be classified as a full-time student.

2. *What measurement is used for students starting in the spring semester?*

While the majority of recipients begin in the Fall term and are continuously enrolled, roughly 30 students begin the program during the spring semester each year. A student who enrolls in the spring semester will need to meet the 30 credit hour threshold prior to the semester they anticipate receiving the 3rd installment. When funding requests are submitted each semester, campuses are asked to identify the funding term for students. They can continue to use this metric for determining which credit hour threshold should be met to be eligible (3rd term = 30 credit hours, 5th term = 60 credit hours; and 7th term = 90 credit hours).

3. *Do AP, CLEP, and HS concurrent credits count in the initial credit evaluation?*

Any transcribed credit earned by a student can count toward meeting the 30, 60 or 90 credit hour thresholds. This includes AP coursework, dual credit courses in high school, transfer credit, CLEP examination, etc.

4. *What counts as a completed course?*

Any course that a student has attempted and then completed (with three exceptions) can be counted toward meeting any of the three credit hour thresholds including credit hours that:

- A student has completed but received an F or U grade;
- Are completed at an external institution whether it applies toward institutional graduation requirements (note that students are required to complete the work necessary to have the course transcribed by their home institution);

Three exceptions exist for determining recipients overall total including:

- Credit hours that are earned through remedial or developmental coursework;
- Credit hours that have a W or I assigned;
- Credit hours earned by repeating an existing course that has been used in the past to meet credit hour thresholds;

5. *Do all courses that count toward the credit hour requirement have to be graded?*

In the past institutions were required to obtain an exemption from courses that awarded Satisfactory/Unsatisfactory (S/U) or Pass/Fail grades. Under the new statute, any credit hours with an assigned grade (excludes W and I) can be counted as earned credit.

6. *Many students start college with credits earned in high school (i.e. AP and CLEP); thus, some students may start college enrollment with more than 30 credits- would they be considered freshmen or sophomore level?*

The term of eligibility (3rd, 5th and 7th) will be the primary driver for determining student academic standing. While a student may be classified as a senior due to the number of completed credit hours, the funding mechanism in the statute has always been tied to the year of attendance (e.g., One thousand dollars for the first year of attendance, etc.), and will continue to follow this methodology for making awards.

7. ***Would we still verify the 15 credits for the 1st and 2nd semesters to verify that a student qualifies for the first year?***

Under the new statute, students simply need to be continuously enrolled at one of the 16 participating institution during the 1st and 2nd term of eligibility. They will need to develop a class schedule that will ensure that they will meet the 30 credit hour threshold at the start of their 3rd term. Students should be encouraged to take 15 credit hours each semester if no coursework is brought in before the 1st term, but they are not required to do so to meet eligibility requirements during the first year.

8. ***When does this go into effect and what about existing students already in the program- do they go by the old rule or the new legislative rules?***

Students who entered into the program prior to the start of the Spring 2010 semester must still complete 15 credit hours at the end of that term to maintain their ongoing eligibility in the program. However, starting with the Fall 2010 semester all recipients will be under the new policy. A recipient who entered into the program at the start of the Fall 2009 term, must have earned 30 credit hours to be eligible for the 3rd and 4th semesters of funding. All new recipients who start during the Fall 2010 semester must have 30 credit hours earned by the start of their second year in the program.

9. ***If a student had become permanently ineligible prior to the time this legislation past, could they be reinstated if they had met the required 30, 60, or 90 thresholds for their cohort?***

The answer to this question is no. Changes to any statute are not retroactively applied and once a student has been placed on permanent ineligibility status that cannot be rescinded to re-establish eligibility in the program.

10. ***Is it possible for me to place my eligibility status on hold in a term when I have not meet the new threshold requirements, and then re-establish eligibility once I have met the required credit hour threshold level?***

The answer to this question is no. When a student fails to meet the credit hour threshold for their term of eligibility in the program, then they become permanently ineligible for future funding. For example, if you have not completed 30 credit hours before the start of the 3rd term in the program, then you automatically become permanently ineligible. Eligibility can't be re-established once the student has completed 30 credit hours. Such is also the case in situations where a student has lost eligibility during their sophomore year and then seeks to re-establish during the junior year having completed 60 credit hours.

11. ***Can summer courses be applied to meeting the credit hour requirement, and if so can they be attached as either a header or a trailer to an academic year?***

The answer to the initial question is yes, and summer courses can conceivably be applied in three different scenarios. First, student enters into the program as normal during the Fall semester which would mean they could use the Fall, Spring and Summer courses to earn the 30 credit hours necessary for the sophomore year. Second, for those students who might enter into the program for the first time during the Spring semester, they could use the Spring, Summer and Fall courses to earn the 30 credit hours needed. Finally, there are students who may begin taking coursework right after high school

graduation and they then enroll as a recipient for the first time during the Fall semester. In this situation they can use the Summer, Fall, Spring and Summer to meet the 30 credit hour threshold. They can also use AP coursework they had completed in high school to meet the requirement.

12. If I decide to take part in an internship or study abroad experience that is sponsored by my institution, can I receive a waiver from the credit hour thresholds?

Students who plan to take part in an internship, cooperative educational, or study abroad experience are asked to request a persistence waiver from the Executive Director. A persistence waiver places a hold on the eligibility timeframe for students who chose these educational opportunities, and then receive continued funding once they return to the institution to continue their academic program. For instance if a student decided to take part in an internship during the term they would have received 3rd year funding, a persistence waiver can be granted that allows them to receive the 3rd year funding once they return (assuming they have met the 30 credit hour threshold). They would then proceed with receiving the final installments for the scholarship for a total of 8 terms as spelled out in the statute.

Students who will not be adversely impacted by taking part in these educational opportunities (i.e., they have acquired the necessary credit hours to meet the various thresholds without a persistence waiver) can receive uninterrupted funding as long as the activity is sponsored through their home institution.

13. Does this new credit hour threshold requirement, change the way that institutions determine my cumulative grade point average?

Institutions are asked to determine a student's cumulative grade point average at the start of each academic term before funding is distributed. If a student takes coursework in the summer or winter interim, then grades earned from those courses will be used in calculating the GPA for eligibility purposes.