

# Evaluating Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs

## Background

The Higher Learning Commission's (HLC's) Assumed Practice B.1.a provides that:

The institution conforms to commonly accepted minimum program length: 60 semester credits for associate's degrees, 120 semester credits for bachelor's degrees, and 30 semester credits beyond the bachelor's degree for master's degrees. **Any variation from these minima must be explained and justified.**

(emphasis added)

In September 2024, HLC launched a substantive change application dedicated to an institution's request to offer a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. This application allows HLC to review the institution's plan regarding a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program in a comprehensive manner specific to that offering.

These guidelines provide information to (1) assist institutions when initially seeking to offer, and then subsequently offering, a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program; and (2) assist peer reviewers when evaluating an application from an institution that is

seeking to offer, or when evaluating an institution that is then subsequently offering, a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program.

The guidelines include examples of relevant evidence that can be used by institutions to demonstrate compliance with HLC requirements in relationship to a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. Note that for some of the examples, it would not be possible for the evidence to be available until after a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program is in operation. Institutions that are seeking to offer a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program may use these examples to help guide their plans for the program and could, as applicable, provide evidence of their related plans and development. For example, an institution seeking to offer a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program could explain how it plans to review learning outcomes for the program in its substantive change application. If the program is approved, at its next comprehensive evaluation the institution could then provide evidence demonstrating how it implemented those plans for review of learning outcomes after the program was implemented.

The guidance and examples are not intended to be determinative or conclusive evidence of ongoing compliance with the Criteria for Accreditation.

Additionally, evidence regarding other HLC requirements, such as the Assumed Practices, may also be applicable depending on the circumstances.

Note: These guidelines only apply to reduced-credit bachelor's degree programs. However, similar considerations could potentially apply in situations where an institution is seeking to offer, or is offering, a reduced-credit degree program other than a bachelor's degree program that is less than the typical minimum program length in HLC's Assumed Practices.

## Examples of Evidence

The following sections provide examples of potential evidence that an institution could provide to demonstrate ongoing compliance with HLC requirements with respect to a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program.

### Criterion 1 — Mission

- How offering a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program aligns with and furthers an institution's mission.
- How offering a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program aligns with the characteristics and needs of the student populations served by the institution.

### Criterion 2 — Integrity: Ethical and Responsible Conduct

- The institution's overall approach for communications regarding the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. Special attention should be given to the intentional strategies that the institution will utilize to ensure transparency as to any differences between the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program and the same program at a traditional length with respect to issues such as admissions, prerequisites, program content, program requirements, program learning outcomes, transfer pathways, etc. (Core Component 2.B)
- The institution's comprehensive and intentional approach for ensuring that prospective students and current students have readily available accurate and complete information regarding all aspects of the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. Special attention should be given to issues such

as transfer pathways, opportunities for graduate education, and any implications for licensure, as applicable. (Core Component 2.B)

- The institution's plans for coordinating ongoing compliance with respect to any state authorization or approvals, including as required for licensure; and any accreditation with any other recognized accreditors. If the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program that might otherwise typically have such approvals for licensure or accreditation is not eligible for or does not have licensure or specialized accreditation, information about how the institution communicates this to prospective students and current students. (Core Component 2.B)

### Criteria 3 and 4 — Teaching and Learning

- How the institution develops and reviews learning outcomes at all levels for the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. To the extent that the institution offers the same program in a reduced-credit format and at a traditional length, this could include evidence as to how the learning outcomes are comparable or differentiated between the program types. (Core Component 3.A, Core Component 4.A)
- How the institution establishes and maintains appropriate rigor and quality for a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program and affirms student performance is suitable to the credential level and to any discipline-specific standards applicable to the program. (Core Component 3.A)
- The institution's policies and processes for adequately incorporating general education, and the associated breadth and depth of student learning, into the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. (Core Component 3.B)
- The institution's policies and processes for faculty oversight of the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program, both at the program development stage and then on an ongoing basis. (Core Component 3.C, Core Component 5.A)
- How the institution offers appropriate student support services as necessary to attend to the needs of students participating in a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. (Core Component 3.D)

- How the institution incorporates the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program into its program review process. (Core Component 4.A)
- The institution's plans if assessment reveals that particular outcomes for the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program are not being satisfactorily obtained. (Core Component 4.B, Core Component 4.C)
- How the institution monitors and evaluates the overall effectiveness and quality of the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program, and how the institution uses this evaluation to improve the program. (Core Component 4.B)
- How the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program is incorporated into the institution's processes for assessing student learning. (Core Component 4.B)
- The institution's approach to pursuing improvement of student success outcomes with respect to the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. (Core Component 4.C)
- To the extent that the institution offers the same program in a reduced-credit format and at a traditional length, the strategies the institution uses to differentiate between the programs to facilitate accurate assessment of student learning and improvement of student success outcomes. (Core Component 4.B, Core Component 4.C)
- How the institution incorporates any measures of student success unique to the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program format into its policies and processes. (Core Component 4.C)

## Criterion 5 — Institutional Effectiveness, Resources and Planning

- The institution's campus-wide engagement efforts regarding the development and implementation of the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program, including faculty engagement through appropriate faculty governance structures and processes. (Core Component 3.C, Core Component 5.A)
- The institution's resource-planning for the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program, including with respect to viability, sustainability and future growth. (Core Component 5.B)
- The institution's planning with respect to any impacts on the institution's overall resource base as a result of offering the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program, including potential impacts on enrollment projections for other programs. (Core Component 5.B)
- The institution's focused, ongoing planning related to the reduced-credit bachelor's degree program. This could include, for example, considerations of the institution's rationale for offering the program, advantages/disadvantages of offering the program, analysis of student demand and post-graduation opportunities, etc. (Core Component 5.C)
- How the institution has considered offering a reduced-credit bachelor's degree program as part of its overall institutional strategic directions. (Core Component 5.C)

