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## The Number of Credit Hours Required for Bachelor's Degrees at Christian Colleges and Universities

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# THE NUMBER

## OF CREDIT HOURS REQUIRED FOR BACHELOR'S DEGREES AT CHRISTIAN COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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**Key Words** *CCCU, Christian institutions of higher education, degree completion rates, degree requirements, trends in higher education*

### **Abstract**

Trends in the minimum number of credit hours required to complete a bachelor's degree have been studied at four-year public institutions and appear to have been moving steadily towards a 120-hour standard for the majority of programs. The existence of such trends at Christian institutions have not previously been investigated nor has credit hour data been collected and made publicly available. If Christian institutions are not moving towards 120 hours, as state schools are, it could signal an emerging dichotomy in higher education requirements. This paper presents both the data and the trends in the minimum number of credit hours required to complete a bachelor's degree at institutions who are members of the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCU). An analysis shows that Christian institutions are likewise reducing their degree requirements but at a slower pace than public four-year institutions.

## Introduction

As higher education has become increasingly accessible, the number of hours required to complete a bachelor's degrees has come under increasing scrutiny, mainly due to the significant number of students who do not complete their degree within the usually assumed four-year time period. In fact, less than 10% of all public four-year institutions have a four-year graduation rate of at least 50% for full-time students (Complete College America, 2014), costing Americans billions of dollars a year (Complete College America, 2012), and over 30 million students have dropped out of college without receiving a degree or even a certificate so far this century (Shapiro, 2014).

Many reasons are given as to why students often need more than four years to graduate with a bachelor's degree, including lack of preparedness (especially in mathematics), lack of availability of quality advising, a tendency for students not to take the necessary number of credit hours to graduate on time, and "excessive" degree requirements—that is, requiring more than 120 hours for a bachelor's degree (Complete College America, 2014).

In order to combat what is viewed as excessive degree requirements, there has been a national trend to reduce the minimum number of credit hours at four-year public institutions for a bachelor's degree to 120 hours (Johnson, 2012). However, it was unknown if the trend to reduce to a 120 hours minimum was also happening at Christian institutions, which are not directly under the auspices of State Regents and often have additional required courses not found at public institutions. These additional courses are ones that make the institution distinctively Christian, and they are considered essential to advancing the school's mission. This paper presents the results of our investigation into the credit hour requirements for bachelor's degrees at Council for Christian Colleges & Universities member institutions.

## Methodology

The data analyzed was collected from CCCU member institutions during the spring of 2017 (Lang, 2017). We collected the minimum

credit hours required for bachelor's degrees for the academic years 2006-2007, 2011-2012, and 2016-2017 from official university catalogs and direct calls placed to various registrar offices, as needed.

We decided to collect the data directly from the official institutional sources to attain as complete and as accurate information as possible. However, finding the minimum credit hours required for bachelor's degrees at the selected institutions was not trivial. The data, if available online at all, was typically within the university catalog in PDF format and so could not be scraped using typical scripts. Some data, especially the historical data, was not available online at all and required us to place multiple phone calls to registrar's offices around the country. The data provided consists of minimum credit hour values for 145 CCCU institutions of which 123 had values available for all three years: 2007, 2012, and 2017.

## Results

Current minimum credit hours for bachelor's degrees for CCCU schools mainly vary from 120 hours to 128 hours (140 schools) with just a handful of schools requiring more than 128 hours (figure 1). Over time, clusters have formed at 120, 124, 126, a cluster not seen nationally (Johnson, 2012), and 128 hours with the majority of CCCU institutions now requiring a minimum of 120 hours, the minimum number of credits generally required for accreditation.

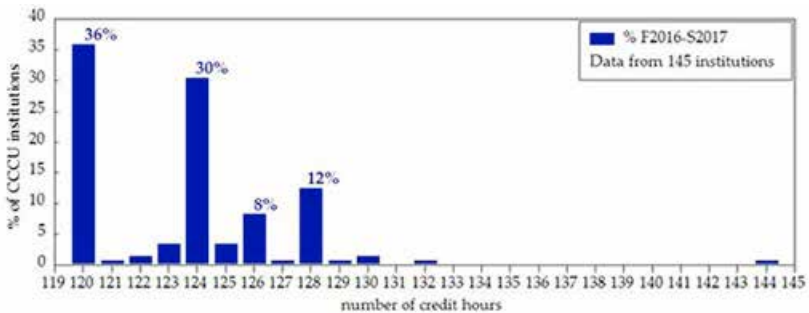


Figure 1. *Entire dataset: Minimum requirements for bachelor's degrees at CCCU schools (2017).*

Examining the subset of institutions for which we have data for all three years—2007, 2012, and 2017—we see an overall trend in the declining number of credit hours required for a bachelor’s degree. This is true both from 2007 to 2012 and again from 2012 to 2017 (figures 2, 3, and 4).

From 2007 to 2017 the percentage of CCCU schools that have a minimum 120 credit hour requirement has risen from 11% to 32% (36% if we use all 2017 data) (figure 1). The percentage of schools requiring 128 credit hours has dropped from 26% to 13%, almost a complete reversal in numbers.

Comparing the 2012 results of CCCU institutions (figure 2) with the national results from the 2012 survey of four-year public institutions (Johnson, 2012), we see that CCCU institutions seem, in general, to be moving more slowly than average towards the 120-hours now standard at the majority of four-year public institutions. In fact, in 2012, only 18% of CCCU institutions had a minimum 120-hour requirement, whereas the majority of four-year public institutions had already moved to 120 hours.

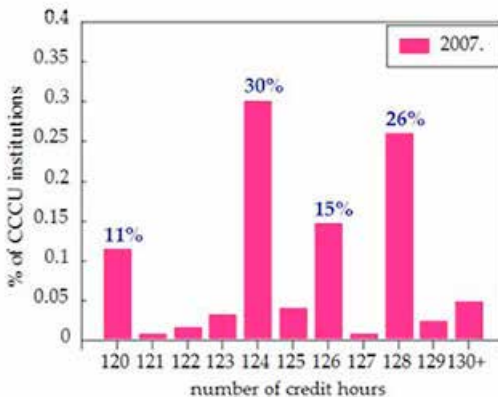


Figure 2. *Minimum requirements for bachelor’s degrees at CCCU schools (2007)*

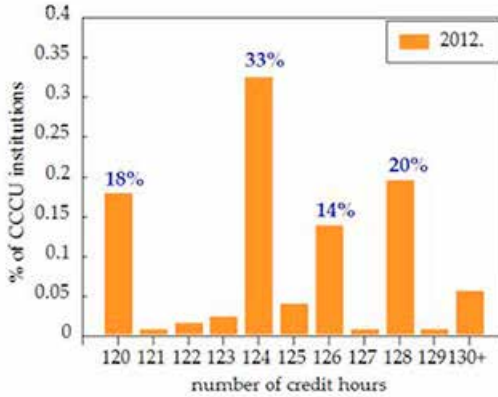


Figure 3. Minimum requirements for bachelor's degrees at CCCU schools (2012)

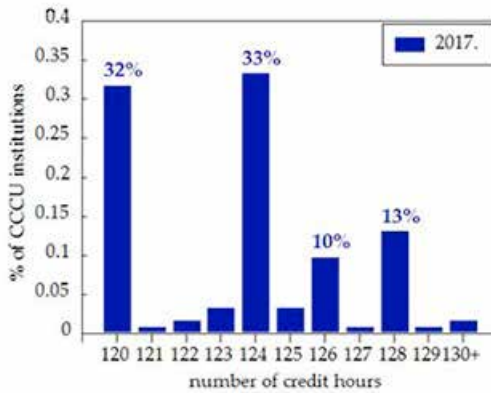


Figure 4. Minimum requirements for bachelor's degrees at CCCU schools (2017)

Figures 5, 6, and 7 illustrate how institutions have changed credit hour requirements over time, with nodes corresponding to minimum credit hours and arrow thickness corresponding to movement count.

From 2007 to 2012, 13 institutions (11%) changed their minimum credit hour requirements. All except one reduced the number of credit hours. Mid-Atlantic Christian University initially increased their credit hour requirement but has since reduced it to a 120-hour minimum. Those institutions with a minimum credit hour requirement of 128 or 129 hours migrated to both 124 and 120 hours (nine institutions),

whereas institutions with a minimum credit hour requirement of 123, 124, and 126 migrated to 120 hours (three institutions).

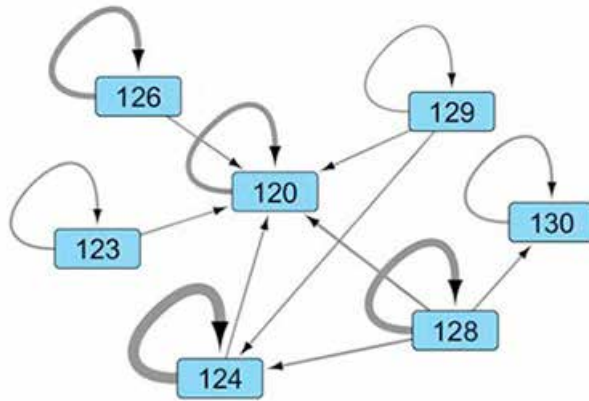


Figure 5. *Change in minimum credit hour requirements 2007-2012*

From 2012 to 2017, 28 institutions (23%) changed their minimum credit hour requirements. All except two, Arizona Christian University and Corban University, reduced the number of credit hours. Institutions with relatively high credit hour requirements of 128, 129, and 132 hours dropped to 120, 124 and 126 hours (13 institutions), three institutions dropped from 126 to 124, and 10 institutions with a minimum credit hour requirement of 124, 125, and 126 dropped to 120 hours.

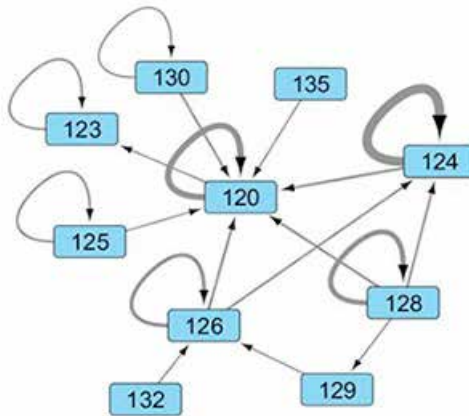


Figure 6. *Change in minimum credit hour requirements 2012-2017*

Overall, over the last 10 years, 39 CCCU institutions (32%), for which we have data, changed their minimum credit hour requirements—with only one institution (< 1%) increasing the number of credit hours required. Of the 39 institutions that changed their minimum credit hour requirements, 31 (80%) began with a requirement of 126 hours or higher. In fact, 50% of CCCU institutions that had a minimum requirement of 126 credit hours or higher in 2007 have reduced their minimum credit hour requirements in the last 10 years.

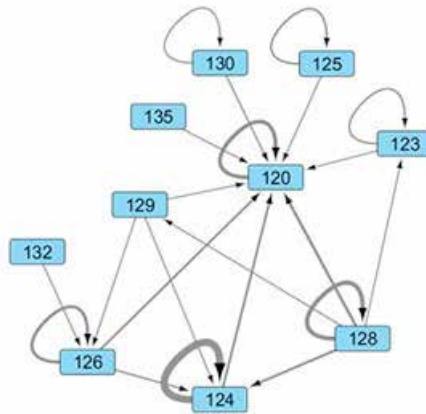


Figure 7. *Change in minimum credit hour requirements 2007-2017*

For CCCU institutions, roughly equal numbers of institutions have moved from 128 hours to 124-126 hours as have moved from 124-126 hours to 120 hours. Thus, even though the number of institutions at 128 hours has significantly dropped by a factor of two (26% to 13%) and the number of institutions at 120 hours has significantly increased by a factor of three (11% to 32%), the combined number of institutions with 124 and 126 hour requirements has remained roughly the same over the last 10 years (figure 8). This is potentially due to feelings among faculty and administrators, as experienced at our home institution, that moving directly from 128 to 120 may be too big of a jump.



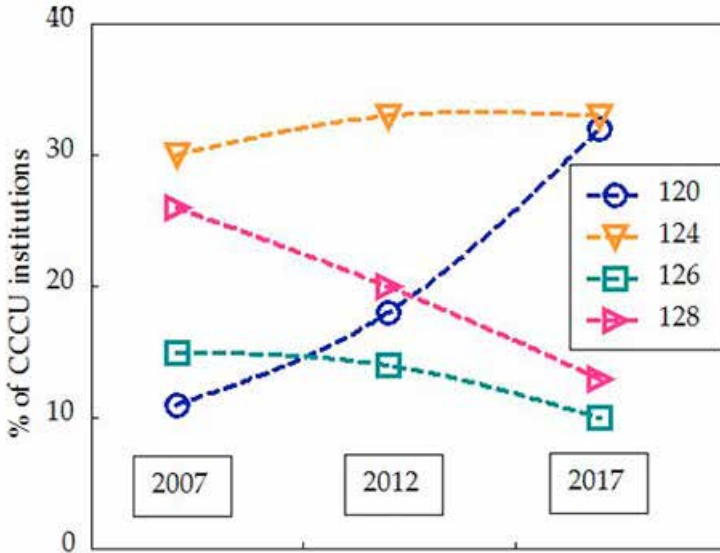


Figure 8. *Minimum credit hours required for bachelor's degrees at CCCU institutions (2007-2017)*

## CONCLUSION

The minimum number of credit hours required for bachelor's degrees at CCCU institutions has trended toward the national norm of 120 hours in spite of the extra requirements usually found in CCCU undergraduate programs. We conjecture that the trend to move to 120 hours will continue both nationally and at CCCU schools and that eventually, for most programs at most institutions, 120 hours will be the standard number of hours for a bachelor's degree program.

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