
May 2021

Definition of Higher Education Terms

Have you ever wondered what is meant by a particular word or phrase when talking about college course and degree programs? Here is a quick reference guide to define various terms.

Higher Education: Education provided by universities, vocational universities (community colleges, liberal arts colleges, and technical colleges, etc.) and other collegial institutions that award academic degrees.

Accreditation: The U.S. Department of Education says it best: “The goal of accreditation is to ensure that education provided by institutions of higher education meets acceptable levels of quality.” Accreditation is your insurance policy that the credits and degree you earn will be recognized and accepted in your field of employment. Colleges and universities can have regional or national accreditation. In North Dakota, the *North Central Association of Colleges and Schools* is the main accrediting organization.

Credit: One credit hour means one hour of classroom time per week for one term (usually a 15-week semester). Thus, to earn one semester credit, a student must attend 1 hour of class each week for 15 weeks. Another way to look at this is to say that one semester credit is equal to 15 clock hours. Most college courses are three credits (three hours of class-time per week for 15 weeks). Class-time should not be confused with study time outside the class room. The study time will depend on whatever it takes to get a good understanding of the subject content and class assignments.

Certification: Certification means that you have passed an exam or met other requirements that certify you to practice a trade or profession. A certificate is not a degree and will not qualify you to be employed in the same positions that will be possible with a degree. Certification may be available through a college or university but more often it is often overseen by agencies affiliated with the field of employment.

Certificate of Achievement: Focuses on job-specific skills. A Certificate of Achievement is typically half the credits of an Associate’s degree. With this certificate, students typically take very limited general education courses (maybe only English and math). Later, if a student wants, they can go on to get an AAS degree (*see below*).

Semester: A 15- or 16-week period during which students complete classes for which they’ve registered. Most colleges and universities offer three semesters each year: Fall, Spring, and Summer. The Registry converts all for-credit coursework to semester hours when adding this information to an individual’s record.

Program of Study: A program of study is also referred to as a **major**. Your major is the field in which you are preparing to be employed. To complete your program of study – or your major – you must complete a set of requirements and specific classes to earn a degree in that major.

Diploma: Diplomas are similar to certificates, and are often awarded through community or technical schools. They take less time to complete than a degree, typically do not include general education classes such as English and Math, and are qualification for a more narrow range of employment options.

Degree: A degree is an academic award given based on completion of a series of requirements, or program of study. Degrees are awarded by colleges and universities. Only degrees issued by accredited colleges and universities are considered acceptable for employment. Earning a degree opens up more potential doors to a student than a certificate or diploma. Many careers require that the applicant has earned at least a bachelor's degree; several career options require more than this.

Associate of Arts (AA): The Associate of Arts degree is designed for students who are planning to transfer to a university to complete a Bachelor of Arts degree. With an Associate of Arts degree, students are qualified to transfer to a four-year college or university with junior standing.

Associate of Science (AS): The Associate of Science degree is designed for students who are planning to transfer to a university to complete a Bachelor of Science degree. The Associate of Science degree provides the math and science background students need to transfer to a four-year college or university with junior standing.

Associate of Applied Science (AAS): An Associate of Applied Science (AAS), generally attainable in two years, is considered a “terminal” degree. In other words, it is a degree someone might get if they have no intention of continuing on to get a Bachelor’s Degree. (Not all the credits will transfer into a Bachelor’s degree program.) It is also considered “vocational.”

Bachelor of Arts (BA)/Bachelor of Science (BS): A Bachelor’s Degree is usually an undergraduate academic degree awarded for a course or major that generally lasts for three, four, or in some cases, five or six years.

Master of Arts (MA)/Master of Science (MS): A Master’s degree is a postgraduate academic degree awarded after the completion of a program of one to three years in duration. A Bachelor’s degree is a required prerequisite. Completion of a Master’s degree, including the Bachelor’s degree, comprises about 5-8 years of university study in total.

Postgraduate Education: Often known as graduate education, involves studying for degrees or other qualifications for which a first or Bachelor’s degree is required before a student is admitted to the program. This level is generally referred to as graduate school.

Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.): An advanced academic degree.

Registrar: The office in an academic institution (college, university, or secondary school) that handles student records. Typically, the registrar’s office processes registration requests, schedules classes and maintains class lists, enforces the rules for entering or leaving classes, and keeps a permanent record of grades and marks.