



UTAH SYSTEM OF  
HIGHER EDUCATION

# MEMORANDUM

March 21, 2024

## Shortened Bachelor's Degree Task Force Report

In December 2023, the Utah Board of Higher Education assigned its member, Aaron Skonnard, to work with Utah System of Higher Education academic leadership to continue a conversation on shortened bachelor's degrees. In January, Board member Skonnard met with the academic vice presidents and other senior academic staff from the eight USHE degree-granting institutions and Academic Affairs staff within the Commissioner's office. The group discussed the possible benefits and consequences of lowering credit limits for bachelor's degrees.

In February, institutions sent the Commissioner's office ideas on the specific programs they might consider offering if shortened bachelor's degrees become possible. The Commissioner's office also polled institutional chief academic officers on their preferences for the categories of bachelor's degrees that might be appropriate for reduced credits in Board policy.

### **Background: Bachelor's degree program approval authority**

Utah code grants institutional boards of trustees the authority to approve certificate and degree programs within the parameters defined by the Utah Board of Higher Education. [Board Policy R401, Approval of New Programs, Program Changes, Discontinued Programs, and Program Reports](#), requires 120-126 semester credits for bachelor's degrees. Although trustees cannot approve programs that do not meet or exceed those parameters, institutions may currently seek Board approval for those exceptions. The Board asked the task force to explore policy options that would allow institutions to develop bachelor's degrees with fewer than 120 credits should their accreditor, the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), allow that possibility in the future.

### **Shortened Bachelor's degrees and accreditation**

Currently, NWCCU will not consider requests to offer shortened bachelor's degrees from the Utah System of Higher Education or other institutions. It has authorized pilots of shortened bachelor's degrees offered through the BYU Pathways Program, beginning spring term 2024, which will run for three years. After assessing those three-year pilots, NWCCU will determine whether it will authorize shortened bachelor's degrees at other institutions. If the Board does make changes to its policy, institutions will not be able to seek accreditor approval for shortened bachelor's degrees until after NWCCU has decided whether to authorize them. NWCCU informed USHE in November of 2023 that it would likely not make that determination until 2027.

## **Recommendations from the Shortened Bachelor's Degree Task Force**

Several USHE institutions are interested in exploring and possibly proposing shortened bachelor's degrees in the future. However, there is no consensus across the institutional academic leadership that lowering the credit limits is a good idea. The task force unanimously recommended that if the Board decides to lower credit limits, it should allow reduced credit requirements only in particular categories of bachelor's degrees rather than in all bachelor's degrees. Based on the conversations in the task force and the polls conducted by the Commissioner's office, one option, the creation of a new category for Bachelor of Applied Studies/Bachelor of Applied Practice, was the only category of possibly shortened bachelor's degrees that did not raise objections.

## **Commissioner's Recommendation**

As the Board deliberates lowering the credit limit on bachelor's degrees, it could explore the following options:

1. Take time to study the issue while the three-year NWCCU pilots run and then decide how to allow shortened bachelor's degrees in policy to align with accreditor requirements;
2. Keep shortened degrees as exceptions to standard bachelor's degree structures and keep the approval level with the Board rather than institutional trustees;
3. Lower the credit limit for bachelor's degrees in [Board Policy R401](#) and grant approval authority to institutional trustees:
  - a. Option 1: lower the credit limit for all bachelor's degrees to 90 credits (not recommended by the task force)
  - a. Option 2: Create a new category of bachelor's degree, the Bachelor of Applied Studies (BAP), with a 90-credit minimum (recommended by the task force if the Board decides to update the policy before the completion of the NWCCU pilots).

## **Attachments**

R401 Redlines – Option 1

R401 Redlines – Option 2