



# PA State System of Higher Education Board of Governors

Effective: October 18, 1990

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## Policy 1990-06-A: *Academic Degrees*

**See Also:**

**Adopted:** October 18, 1990

**Amended:** July 18, 1991, April 11, 2002, July 22, 2010, January 19, 2012, and July 12, 2018

### A. Purpose

To establish broad educational policy for the respective councils of trustees, administrators, and faculty of the universities of the State System of Higher Education, governing criteria and definitions for earned academic degrees. (The policy does not address professional certification standards or definitions, except as they may coincide with degrees.)

### B. Degree Designations

An academic degree is an earned degree. Degree designations used within the State System of Higher Education may include the following:

1. Associate Degrees: Associate degrees indicate that the holder has developed proficiencies sufficient to prepare for advanced<sup>1</sup> collegiate work or to enter directly into a specific occupation. Associate degrees are awarded only for completion of a coherent program of study designed for a specific purpose. They reflect satisfactory achievement of a minimum of 60 semester hours of credit, in two parts: a general education component, and an area of concentration or major component. General education requirements should be consistent with the Statewide Transfer Credit Framework.
  - a. Associate in Arts (A.A.): An Associate in Arts degree program is designed primarily for transfer into baccalaureate degree programs in the arts, humanities, social or behavioral science fields, or in professional fields based upon these disciplines. The general education component of Associate in Arts degrees comprises at least 30 semester credit hours.
  - b. Associate in Science (A.S.): An Associate in Science degree program is designed primarily for transfer into baccalaureate degree programs in one of the mathematical, biological, or physical sciences, or into one of the professional fields with these disciplines as its base. The general education

component for Associate in Science degrees comprises no less than 24 semester credit hours.

- c. Associate in Applied Science (A.A.S.): An Associate in Applied Science Degree program is primarily designed to prepare students for immediate employment or career entry. The general education component for Associate in Applied Science degrees includes no less than 21 semester credit hours.
  - d. Other Associate Degrees: Specialized associate degrees may be authorized within certain professions; some are career entry, and others lead to transfer. Examples include the Associate in Science of Nursing (A.S.N.), and Associate in Engineering Technology (A.E.T.). The general education component for these degrees should include no less than 21 semester credit hours.
2. Baccalaureate Degrees: Baccalaureate degrees require 120 semester credit hours unless (1) otherwise required by statute, regulation, or accreditation, and (2) approval by the chancellor. Baccalaureate degrees consist of two principal components, general education and study in depth in a major, which taken together, are designed to prepare the student for a productive career, involved citizenship, and continuous growth:
- a. General education consists of a broad program of study in the liberal arts and sciences, such that at least 40 semester credit hours are focused on competencies consistent with the liberal education learning outcomes as defined in Policy 1993-01: *General Education at State System of Higher Education Universities*. These competencies are typically met through study in the areas of humanities, fine arts, communication, social and behavioral sciences, mathematics, and the natural/physical sciences. In addition, general education requirements should be consistent with distribution requirements of the statewide Transfer Credit Framework. Transfer credits up to 30 semester hours will be applied to the general education requirement assuming the courses meet the standards of the Transfer Credit Framework and are designated as equivalent through identification of comparable competencies attained by students. Certain majors have specific requirements prescribed by external agencies that may pertain to general education requirements.
  - b. The program for the major consists of at least 30 semester credit hours and provides depth of knowledge in an academic disciplinary or interdisciplinary program.
  - c. The remainder of the curriculum may consist of coursework related to the major, advanced coursework (see endnote) in the liberal arts and sciences, or electives. At least 42 semester credit hours must consist of advanced coursework.

**Note:** Definitions of advanced coursework are institutional, and may or may not be inherent in course numbers. The object is to ensure that a significant portion of a student's studies prepare the student to develop advanced competencies requiring depth of knowledge of the discipline. During program review, the program unit is expected to review its curriculum against this general standard. Programs that have articulation agreements with community colleges or other entities must demonstrate that articulated courses approved to meet this standard address the acquisition of advanced competencies with adequate depth and academic rigor; and if so, these courses can be applied toward this requirement.

- (1.) Bachelor of Arts (B.A.): The Bachelor of Arts degree is the common degree in the arts and humanities, typically offered through the liberal arts and sciences. Bachelor of Arts degrees emphasize breadth and depth of study, and encourage aesthetic, ethical, and intercultural inquiry. The major program should not exceed 42 semester credit hours, including required cognate courses, unless approved by the chancellor. Cognate courses are those courses in related disciplines required for the major. For example, a major in sociology might require a cognate course in social psychology taught through Psychology.
- (2.) Bachelor of Science (B.S.): The Bachelor of Science degree is the common degree in mathematics, the natural sciences, and many of the behavioral and social sciences. The Bachelor of Science degree generally represents a more structured major program, and more direct orientation toward professional preparation than the Bachelor of Arts degree. The courses required by the major, including required cognate courses in related disciplines, must comprise at least 40 semester credit hours but no more than 60 semester credit hours, unless approved by the chancellor. Cognate courses are those courses in related disciplines required for the major. For example, a major in biology might require a cognate course in biochemistry taught through Chemistry.
- (3.) Professional Baccalaureate Degrees: Professional degrees may be approved and granted in certain professional fields, and may reflect standards of professional societies or accrediting agencies as well as requirements of the university. The general education component may be specifically adapted to the profession, but must be consistent with the competencies appropriate for all students at the institution.

Only a limited number of professional baccalaureate degrees will be recognized. These include Bachelor of Fine Arts (B.F.A.), Bachelor of Music (B.Mus. or B.M.), Bachelor of Science in Nursing (B.S.N.), Bachelor of Social Work (B.S.W.), Bachelor of Science in Business Administration (B.S.B.A) and the Bachelor of Science in Education (B.S.Ed.). No other degree designations may be used unless approved by the chancellor.

3. **Master's Degrees:** Master's degrees represent advanced study beyond the baccalaureate degree and signify mastery in a discipline or professional field. A master's program requires a minimum of 30 semester credit hours and usually includes three basic components: (a) a common core of courses related to the discipline or field of study; (b) a concentration or specialization in a focused area of the discipline; and (c) cognate courses which broaden perspective or mastery, or provide special skills such as statistics or foreign language. Master's degree programs will also be required to demonstrate that all students have participated in a culminating experience. This requirement may be met through a thesis, research project, or comprehensive examination, or in some cases this requirement can be met through integrative experiences, such as practica, internships, and other field work that synthesize theory and practice. At least 50 percent of coursework (excluding thesis, research or internship hours) to complete a master's degree must be identified as primarily directed at graduate students with the majority of students in the course obtaining graduate credits.

Master's degrees include:

Master of Arts (M.A.)

Master of Liberal Arts (M.L.A.)

Master of Science (M.S.)

Master of Business Administration (M.B.A.)

Master of Fine Arts (M.F.A.)

Master of Physical Therapy (M.P.T.)

Master of Public Administration (M.P.A.)

Master of Science in Library Science (M.S.L.S.)

Master of Science in Nursing (M.S.N.)

Master of Social Work (M.S.W.)

Professional Science Masters (P.S.M.)

Master of Education (M.Ed.), or Master of Science in Education (M.S.Ed.)

The Master of Education (M.Ed.) degree is intended for the person who has been working within the preK-12 environment and desires to acquire advanced or updated knowledge within the discipline, human development, assessment and/or pedagogy.

Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.)

The Master of Arts in Teaching (M.A.T.) degree is intended for the person with expertise in a discipline (e.g., chemistry or history or music) who needs to develop the skills and strategies to convey an understanding of the discipline to children and adolescents within the preK-12 context.

4. **Educational Specialist (Ed.S.):** The Educational Specialist degree is intended for the person who requires advanced knowledge of research and practice in selected specialty fields in education and such programs are grounded in extensive field work to develop the appropriate level of clinical practice. The educational specialist degree provides focused study beyond the master's level and is designed to develop skills in special areas of professional practice. For certain areas it may be considered a terminal professional practice degree and

not all Ed.S. coursework is compatible with doctoral study. As this degree typically represents advanced study, all of the coursework should be designed for graduate students with backgrounds in related areas of study.

5. **Doctoral Degrees:** The doctorate is the highest academic degree awarded in American higher education and is of two general types: the Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) and the Professional Doctorate. Though the primary distinction is that the Ph.D. is a research degree and professional degrees are applied degrees, most doctoral programs include both research and applied studies. The doctoral program usually follows completion of a master's degree, except in some fields where admission after the baccalaureate degree is permitted or encouraged. The common components of a doctoral program include a core of increasingly advanced subject-area studies, culminating in seminars involving research. Research skills necessary for such studies, e.g., foreign languages, statistics, or computing, and/or internships or practica in applied fields should be required. Culminating experiences such as comprehensive examinations and a dissertation are required.

The Doctor of Philosophy is offered only through Indiana University of Pennsylvania (IUP); jointly in cooperation with IUP; or jointly with another institution approved to offer Ph.D. degrees assuming approval by the chancellor. The number of hours beyond the baccalaureate degree (including dissertation hours) required for the Doctor of Philosophy degree must meet the typical expectations of the discipline unless approved by the chancellor.

### **C. Implementation**

All new degree programs submitted for approval after August 10, 2010, must comply with the above definitions, and all previously approved programs must be in such compliance by conclusion of the next program review cycle after July 1, 2012, with all programs in compliance by August 1, 2015. The chancellor has the responsibility to take action to ensure compliance with this document.

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1 Advanced coursework in this context usually refers to courses with advanced depth of content knowledge in the field and carry the expectation of more complex competencies identified in the expected student learning outcomes. These courses often have prerequisites and are usually beyond the “Introduction to...” level. Most courses with at least two prerequisites will be “advanced.” The complexity of competencies is often reflected in the higher levels of understanding, analysis, synthesis and application of content to novel situations (see various models rooted in concepts similar to Bloom’s taxonomy). Thus, whereas an introductory or foundational knowledge course might use learning outcomes framed as “demonstrate familiarity with” or “demonstrate knowledge of”; advanced level courses might use: “demonstrate ability to critically analyze and synthesize” or “ability to apply content knowledge to novel situations.” Some disciplines use the model of three levels of “introductory,” “intermediate” and “advanced.” In this case, courses labeled as “intermediate” as a second of a two course sequence providing basic or foundational content knowledge in a discipline would likely not meet the definition of “advanced” as used here but that is to be determined on a course by course basis.