

2/26/26

BOARD OF REGENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM

Education Committee

Via Zoom Videoconference

Thursday, March 5, 2026

10:15 a.m. – 10:45 a.m.

- A. Calling of the Roll
- B. Declaration of Conflicts
- C. Proposed Consent Agenda:
 - 1. Approval of the Minutes of the February 5, 2026 Meeting of the Education Committee
- D. Second Read and Approval: Revisions to Regent Policy Document 4-12, "Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System"

**REGENT POLICY DOCUMENT REVIEW:
RPD 4-12, "ACADEMIC PROGRAM PLANNING, REVIEW, AND
APPROVAL IN THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN SYSTEM"**

REQUESTED ACTION

Adoption of Resolution D.

Resolution D. That, upon the recommendation of the President of the University of Wisconsin System, the Board of Regents approves the amendment of Regent Policy Document 4-12, "Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System," to establish standards for the required credit hours associated with degree types conferred by the UW System institutions.

SUMMARY

Chapter 36 of Wisconsin statute gives the Board of Regents the authority to "ensure the diversity of quality undergraduate programs." In fulfilling this statutory role, the Board has oversight over UW System Administration and UW institutions to ensure that these entities meet their respective roles and responsibilities, which are outlined in Regent Policy Document (RPD) 4-12 and System Administrative Policy (SYS) 102, "Policy on University of Wisconsin System Array Management: Program Planning, Delivery, Review, and Reporting."

This proposal requests that the Education Committee consider revisions to RPD 4-12, "Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System" to include the commonly accepted minimum credit hour requirements for degree types conferred by UW institutions. Further, the revisions allow for the development of academic degree programs that are less than the minimum credit hour requirements, when justification is provided. The proposed changes align with the revised Higher Learning Commission (HLC) assumed practices that went into effect on September 1, 2025, and allow UW institutions the opportunity to develop reduced credit bachelor's degree programs.

Presenter

- Johannes Britz, Senior Vice President for Academic and Student Affairs, Universities of Wisconsin

BACKGROUND

In summer 2011, the President's Advisory Committee on the Roles of UW System Administration undertook a broad reconsideration of the roles of UW System Administration. In response to the Advisory Committee's report, then President Kevin Reilly issued a set of recommendations to address the Committee's major findings. President Reilly's response included the recommendation to restructure the process of academic program planning and review, an area highlighted by the Advisory Committee as warranting revision.

The comprehensive review conducted by the UW System Program Planning and Review Working Group resulted in substantive changes to the program planning and review process. The changes to the process required revisions to SYS 102, "Policy on University of Wisconsin System Array Management: Program Planning, Delivery, Review, and Reporting" (formerly ACIS 1.0), and to RPD 4-12, the principal Board policy addressing academic programs.

The revisions to RPD 4-12 undertaken in 2012 provided clear direction for the set of responsibilities and oversight roles to be played by the Board of Regents, UW institutions, and UW System in the process for planning, review, and approval of new academic programs developed by institutions. The revised RPD established a clear distinction between RPD 4-12 and SYS 102. RPD 4-12 articulates broad principles for how academic program planning, review, and approval are conducted throughout the UW System, whereas SYS 102 details the required process to be followed by UW institutions and UW System Administration.

In the revisions to RPD 4-12 approved in 2012, the policy referenced that a bachelor's degree required 120 minimum credit hours for conferral of a degree. The proposed revisions add the commonly accepted minimum credit hour requirements for associate degrees and master's degrees, as indicated in HLC policy. Doctoral degree program credit hour requirements are set by the institution of higher education and then explained and justified to HLC through the accreditation process.

Recently, across the U.S., institutions of higher education, accrediting agencies, and related stakeholders have discussed the development and implementation of reduced credit bachelor's degrees. Such programs to date have been in applied or technical fields where students are often pulled into the workforce prior to completing their academic degree

program. At this time, federal policy, implemented via HLC, provides a framework for how the Universities of Wisconsin can move forward.

In response to growing interest among higher education stakeholders, HLC has developed guidelines¹ and a new substantive change application² for institutions interested in offering a bachelor's degree program at less than 120 credits. The guidelines emphasize the HLC requirements and quality assurance criteria that are most relevant for consideration of reduced credit bachelor's degree programs. Furthermore, universities that are developing reduced credit bachelor's degree programs must follow the HLC's substantive change process, which generally takes three to eight months to complete.

To allow UW institutions to begin the process of developing reduced credit bachelor's degree programs, and work through the HLC substantive change process, the Board of Regents must first allow the development of academic degree programs that vary in credit hour requirements from the 120-credit hour minimum currently articulated in RPD 4-12. The proposed revisions align with the language in HLC's Assumed Practice B.1.a³ where variation from the minimum credit hour requirements is allowable with explanation and justification.

In parallel to the proposed revisions to RPD 4-12, a systemwide working group composed of provosts and associate vice provosts was convened in spring 2025 and tasked with providing policy recommendations on the development of new reduced credit bachelor's degree programs. These recommendations have been incorporated into the revised SYS 102 policy, which has been distributed to UW universities for comment through March 23, 2026.

The development of reduced credit bachelor's degree programs by a UW institution is anticipated to occur in one of two ways, either the development of a new academic degree program that would require Board of Regent approval, or the development of a reduced credit bachelor's degree program from an already existing academic degree program. The former process is anticipated to follow the traditional new program authorization process currently articulated in SYS 102, with additional rationale for the development of the academic degree program in the reduced credit format. The latter process is similar to current actions regarding changes to existing programs, where the UW institution will

¹ See Higher Learning Commission Guidelines "Evaluating Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs here: https://download.hlcommission.org/Reduced-CreditBachelorsGuidelines_OPB.pdf

² See the Higher Learning Commission Substantive Change notification process and application for Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree programs here: <https://www.hlcommission.org/accreditation/cycles-and-processes/substantive-change/new-educational-programs/>

³ See the Higher Learning Commission Assumed Practices here: <https://www.hlcommission.org/accreditation/policies/assumed-practices/>

notify the Office of Academic Affairs (OAA) of its anticipated curricular revisions in addition to providing the rationale for the reduced credit format.

Related Policies

- Regent Policy Document 4-5, "Accreditation and Assessment of Student Learning"
- Regent Policy Document 4-22, "Distance Education"
- University of Wisconsin System Administrative Policy 102, "Policy on University of Wisconsin System Array Management: Program Planning, Delivery, Review, and Reporting" (formerly ACIS 1.0)

ATTACHMENTS

- A) RPD 4-12, "Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System" – Proposed with Tracked Changes
- B) RPD 4-12, "Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System" – Proposed (Clean)

Regent Policy Document 4-12

Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System

Scope

~~The Board of Regents policy on Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval~~ This policy applies to all University of Wisconsin institutions and the UW System Administration.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish clear roles for the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System (Board), UW System Administration, and UW institutions in the planning, review, and approval process for new academic programs.

Policy Statement

As one of the largest systems of public higher education in the country, one of the most critical components of the University of Wisconsin System's mission is to offer a robust array of academic programs that will serve the state of Wisconsin by providing a quality education to all students, strengthening communities, and responding to workforce development and societal needs. In offering and managing the academic program array, the UW System must ensure the responsible use of state and other resources, the availability of programs to meet student and employer demand, and the sustainability of high-quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional educational offerings at UW institutions.

UW System Administration administrators and staff, in their roles as consultants and advocates, work with the UW institutions to ensure the development and implementation of high-quality degree offerings and opportunities for lifelong learning that effectively leverage existing academic strengths within the UW System, support the distinct missions of UW System institutions, and respond to current and emerging workforce and societal needs that require broad-based planning and educational innovation.

In the context of ever-evolving needs of UW students and institutions, the state of Wisconsin, and the nation, the roles outlined in this policy are meant to foster increased efficiency and agility in meeting existing and emerging workforce and societal needs, while also ensuring the quality of the UW System's academic program offerings.

Oversight, Roles, and Responsibilities

Chapter 36, Wis. Stats., gives the Board of Regents the authority to "ensure the diversity of quality undergraduate programs." In fulfilling this statutory role, the Board has oversight over UW System Administration and UW institutions to ensure that these entities meet their respective roles and responsibilities as designated below. As a steward of the UW System's human and financial resources, the Board is also responsible for balancing access to education with cost-effectiveness in the development and maintenance of the academic program arrays. The Board of Regents requires UW System Administration and UW institutions to follow the specific principles, guidelines, and practices described in the UW System Administrative policy 102: Policy on University of Wisconsin System Array Management: Program Planning, Delivery, Review, and Reporting. Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval policy. As part of the System policy, prior to implementation all new academic degree programs, at the recommendation of the President must be submitted to the Board of Regents for approval approved by the Board of Regents prior to implementation. ~~In addition, new academic program proposals must be submitted to the Board of Regents for approval at the recommendation of the President.~~

UW System Administration is responsible for managing the UW System's academic program array. Management of the academic program array entails:

- consulting with UW institutions in the planning of new academic programs;
- monitoring and analyzing the current program array, including degree productivity, distance education offerings, and modes of delivery;
- working with UW institutions in identifying gaps in the current array to address changing and emerging workforce and societal needs; and
- supporting the UW System Board of Regents and UW institutions in bringing new programs to the Board for approval.

UW institutions are responsible for:

- developing and maintaining high-quality academic programs through efficient and effective use of available resources in support of their missions, ~~and~~ workforce and societal needs;
- determining the quality of new and existing programs, including through regular assessment and review, and periodic accreditation, as appropriate.

- periodical review of the credit requirements of existing bachelor's degree programs that require more than 130 credits in an effort to reduce the credits and time to degree for students.
- continuing to identify approaches to reduce the number of students who accumulate excess credits.

~~UW institutions present their academic plans to the Board of Regents. Universities should conform to commonly accepted minimum program lengths, as indicated by Higher Learning Commission policy, including 60 credit hours for associate's degrees, 120 credit hours for bachelor's degrees, and 30 credit hours beyond a bachelor's degree for master's degrees. Any variation from these minimums must be explained and justified. The required minimum number of credits for a degree program is 120 credits. Institutions shall periodically review the credit requirements of existing degree programs that require more than 130 credits in an effort to reduce the credits and time to degree for students. Institutions shall also continue to identify approaches to advise students in a timely way in order to reduce the number of students who accumulate excess credits. Improved transfer policies and efforts to ensure that required courses are available are examples of other types of initiatives that have a proven track record for reducing the accumulation of excess credits.~~

Both UW System Administration and UW institutions assist the Board of Regents in meeting its statutory requirement for ensuring the diversity of high-quality academic programs by making available institutional definitions of and standards for quality, program planning and review processes, and general information on how program evaluation and assessment of student learning are conducted, including, where applicable, through evaluation by external accreditation agencies.

UW System Administration and UW institutions should periodically review both the Regent and the UW System academic program planning, review, and approval policies and the array management role to assess their efficacy and determine whether they are meeting the needs of the UW System (the Board of Regents, System Administration, the institutions, faculty and staff, and students), as well as of the state of Wisconsin. The results of that review will be communicated to the Board.

Related Regent Policy Documents and Applicable Policies

Regent Policy Document 4-5: "Accreditation and Assessment of Student Learning" (adopted 02/07/2020).

Regent Policy Document 15-2: Distance Education Standards (adopted 06/08/2000).

Regent Policy Document 4-22, "Distance Education"

UW System Administrative Policy 102, "Policy on University of Wisconsin System Array Management: Program Planning, Delivery, Review, and Reporting" (formerly ACIS 1.0)

~~UW System Administrative Policy 150, The Application of Job Market and Placement Information to Academic Planning (formerly ACPS 2.0)~~

History: Res. 541, adopted 08/03/1973, created RPD 73-11. Res. 3911, adopted 10/09/1987, created RPD 87-13. Res. 3968, adopted 02/05/1988, created RPD 88-1. Res. 5971, adopted 12/06/1991, replaced RPDs 73-11, 87-13, and 88-1 with RPD 91-12.

Portions of RPD 91-12 regarding Academic Information Series (ACIS) 1.0 (effective September 1992) were amended by Res. 7046 (adopted 11/08/1995), Res. 7420 (adopted 04/11/1997), and Res. 7440 (adopted 05/09/1997). RPD 91-12 was subsequently renumbered as RPD 4-12. ACIS 1.0 was subsequently renumbered as UW System Administrative Policy 102.

Res. 10115, adopted 08/24/2012, amended and renamed RPD 4-12. Res. 10835, adopted 03/09/2017, authorized technical corrections to RPD 4-12. Res. 11677, adopted 07/09/2021, amended RPD 4-12 consistent with provisions in Res. 11610 (adopted 04/09/2021) related to the review of degree programs that require more than 130 credit hours to complete.

Regent Policy Document 4-12

Academic Program Planning, Review, and Approval in the University of Wisconsin System

Scope

This policy applies to all University of Wisconsin System (UW System) institutions and the UW System Administration.

Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to establish clear roles for the Board of Regents of the University of Wisconsin System (Board), UW System Administration, and UW System institutions in the planning, review, and approval process for new academic programs.

Policy Statement

As one of the largest systems of public higher education in the country, one of the most critical components of the University of Wisconsin System's mission is to offer a robust array of academic programs that will serve the state of Wisconsin by providing a quality education to all students, strengthening communities, and responding to workforce development and societal needs. In offering and managing the academic program array, the UW System must ensure the responsible use of state and other resources, the availability of programs to meet student and employer demand, and the sustainability of high-quality undergraduate, graduate, and professional educational offerings at UW institutions.

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- determining the quality of new and existing programs, including through regular assessment and review, and periodic accreditation, as appropriate.
- periodical review of the credit requirements of existing bachelor's degree programs that require more than 130 credits in an effort to reduce the credits and time to degree for students; and
- continuing to identify approaches to reduce the number of students who accumulate excess credits.

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