



The Carnegie Unit: What is it?

Definition

The unit was developed in 1906 as a measure of the amount of time a student has studied a subject. For example, a total of 120 hours in one subject -- meeting 4 or 5 times a week for 40 to 60 minutes, for 36 to 40 weeks each year -- earns the student one "unit" of high school credit. Fourteen units were deemed to constitute the minimum amount of preparation that may be interpreted as "four years of academic or high school preparation".

History

Currently the Foundation has no position on the unit system. The name of the Carnegie Foundation became linked with the unit in the early 1900s, after other groups, like the National Education Association, defined and adopted a "standard unit" for high school work. At that time, high schools, a new phenomenon in themselves, lacked any uniformity in the courses they taught, the number of hours students spent in class, and the amount of homework assigned.

The Foundation established its own unit system, based on the "standard unit," for internal use as an eligibility requirement for universities interested in participating in its pension program. Entering freshmen were expected to have completed 14 "units" of academic preparation before entering the college or university.

Since academic pension programs did not exist in the early 1900s, the idea appealed to universities as a way to enliven academic research. The pension program enabled faculty members to retire from teaching and devote themselves full-time to research, while simultaneously liberating funds to lure new faculty members, along with their fresh ideas, into the intellectual community.

Institutions interested in joining the pension program began designing entrance requirements to comply with the pension requirements (which included other requirements and set high standards for that era). Naturally, an increasing number of high schools followed suit, altering their curriculum and graduation requirements to get their students into colleges and universities. Overtime, the "Carnegie Unit" became the basic unit used to define the number of contact hours a high school student should have with a teacher. The "Carnegie unit" does not apply to higher education. The pension program became what is today TIAA-CREF.

Annotated Bibliography

Boyer, Ernest L. *High School: A Report on Secondary Education in America*. New York: Harper & Row, 1983.

Boyer introduced the idea of a new "Carnegie service learning unit" in *High School*, but the book also contains some historical information about the original unit.

Boyer, Ernest L. to Michael Hines. Princeton, NJ. Facsimile transmission. May 21, 1993. This document provides a brief history of the Carnegie unit.

Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching. *First Annual Report*. October 15, 1906.

The First Annual Report set the requirements for participating in the Foundation pension program. Among the requirements defined is a "unit" based system to assess academic preparation for admissions to colleges and universities. The report proceeds to give a detailed explanation of the 14 units required for admission.

Lagemann, Ellen Condliffe. *Private Power for the Public Good: A History of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press 1983.

Lagemann discusses the creation of the Carnegie unit and how its use changed over time. Lagemann's work makes reference to other bodies that were involved with or had interest in the creation of a unit system, like the NEA.

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