HCU Instructional Equivalencies Tool

for Distance Learning Courses

PURPOSE

When you are creating or converting content for a distance learning course, it can be difficult to determine how much time learners will need to spend on each lesson or activity. A close estimate will help you ensure that students must spend an appropriate amount of time (not too much or too little) to earn the credit hours that will be awarded for the course.

To estimate how much time students will spend on an activity, you can:

- Base your estimate on how long students have spent on the activity in the past (if you know).
- Guess how long you would take on the activity (as an expert), then multiply that by 3 or 4 for your students.[1]
- Use the HCU instructional equivalencies tool to calculate an estimate. Where possible, the tool incorporates research on how long students typically spend on each type of activity.

BEFORE YOU GET STARTED

Your goal is to ensure that your course aligns with credit hour requirements—and that you and your students aren't bored or overwhelmed with the course load!

Before you jump into calculating the activity times, there are some important differences to consider between distance learning courses and traditional, classroom-based courses. You may find that the next section clarifies some of your existing questions about distance learning activities and relieves a bit of headache in your planning process!

Credit Hours for Distance vs. Traditional Courses

What are the credit hour requirements for distance learning courses?

We often think about credit hours in terms of more traditional classroom settings. This means that we tend to equate one credit hour with one hour of classroom time and two hours of out-of-class work each week (for a fifteen-week semester).

However, trying to think in terms of “in-class” and “out-of-class” time for distance learners is complicated. Faculty face questions like:

- Does there have to be a full hour of online lecture per credit hour each week?
- What about other ways of providing content, like written lessons or supplemental videos? Do these count as lecture?
- How do we determine which online activities count as “in class” vs. “out of class” for asynchronous learners?

Fortunately, trying to determine what qualifies as “lecture,” “in-class work,” and “out-of-class work” for online learners is not necessary. Federal guidance allows universities to determine for themselves the appropriate amount of work to count as a credit hour for distance education.[2]

Therefore, many universities use the “time on task” approach (rather than “time in class” and “time out of class”) to ensure that students are spending an appropriate amount of time learning per credit hour.[3]

Time on Task

The time on task approach is simple. For each credit hour, students should spend three hours on task each week (for a fifteen-week semester). All class-related activities count as time on task.

All you need to do is calculate how much time you expect students to spend on each type of online activity (lectures/lessons, readings, activities, etc.) and ensure that it adds up to an appropriate amount of time on task each week.

CREDITS HOURS	TOTAL COURSE HOURS	TIME ON TASK EACH WEEK		
		15-week course (standard)	*8-week course (summer)*	*2-week course (intensive)*
1 credit	45 hours	**3 hours**	**6 hours**	**23 hours**
3 credits	135 hours	**9 hours**	**17 hours**	**68 hours**
4 credits	180 hours	**12 hours**	**23 hours**	**90 hours**

What Types of Activities Must Be Included?

If we are not concerned with categorizing activities as “lecture,” “in-class,” or “out-of-class,” are there any guidelines on what *does* need to be included in a distance learning course?

According to federal regulations, distance education “must support regular and substantive interaction between the students and the instructor.”[2] The regulations go on to clarify:

> *Substantive interaction is engaging students in teaching, learning, and assessment, consistent with the content under discussion, and also includes at least two of the following:*
>
> - *Providing direct instruction*
> - *Assessing or providing feedback on student coursework*
> - *Providing information or responding to questions about the content of a course or competency*
> - *Facilitating a group discussion regarding the content of a course or competency*
> - *Other instructional activities approved by the institution’s or program’s accrediting agency*[2]

To follow this guidance, be sure that you not only consider time on task, but also include an appropriate range of content, activities, and feedback for your distance learning students.

INSTRUCTIONAL EQUIVALENCIES

Now the part you've been waiting for! What are the instructional equivalencies for various activities?

Use the tool below to get an initial idea, then feel free to adjust your estimates based on your experience, student feedback, and the unique requirements of your activities.

Discussion

Instructional activities	*Student time per activity*
Blog Writing observations related to the course that are shared with the class via online posts.	30 minutes per post.[4] 30 minutes per reply.[4]
Discussion board[4] Participating in a forum about course topics, based on questions or prompts provided by the instructor.	30 minutes per post.[4] 30 minutes per reply.[4]

Homework

Instructional activity	*Student time per activity*
Homework[3] Solving practice problems or completing assigned homework tasks without instructor assistance.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4.

Lesson Content	
Instructional activities	***Student time per activity***
Asynchronous lecture[4] Accessing a lecture that has been video or audio recorded.	1 hour per 50 minutes of lecture.[5]
Instructional video or audio recording[4] Accessing video or audio content (other than a lecture) that has been provided for students to learn more about the course topic.	Duration of recording.[4]
Lesson text Reading text that the instructor has written in the lesson to introduce, explain, or otherwise present course content.	3-4 minutes per 500 words.[6]
PowerPoint review Reviewing a PowerPoint, including text, graphics, or other content, to learn new information and ensure understanding.	5-10 minutes per slide.
Websites Accessing related websites that support or elaborate on lesson content.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4.

Papers	
Instructional activities	***Student time per activity***
Argumentative paper[7] Writing a paper supporting a particular position or viewpoint.	2-2.5 hours per page, double-spaced.[7]
Book or article review Writing a review of a book or article to critically evaluate its value, relation to other course content, arguments, etc.	2-2.5 hours per page, double-spaced. [7]
Journal entry[4] Writing a brief entry in an ongoing course journal; entry may focus on self-reflection, application, personal observations about course content, etc.	30 minutes per entry.[4]
Reflection paper[7] Writing a paper reflecting on course content, learner experiences, and growth.	1-1.25 hours per page, double-spaced.[7]
Research paper[7] Writing a paper on a scholarly topic which requires the student to read and report on academic research.	4-5 hours per page, double-spaced.[7]

Projects	
Instructional activities	***Student time per activity***
Presentation Preparing and delivering a classroom presentation to be shared via video recording, audio recording, or other means.	2 hours preparation per 10 minutes of presentation time, plus duration of presentation.
Group project Working with a peer group to complete a course assignment; group assignments are typically larger and last longer than other assignments. Group assignments may provide service learning or application opportunities.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4.
Research project[3] Conducting an academic research project to contribute new knowledge in the field. Results may be reported as a paper or presentation.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4. Add time spent on paper or presentation (see Research paper and Presentation guidelines).

Quizzes and Exams	
Instructional activities	***Student time per activity***
Review[3] Reviewing class notes in preparation for class activities or exams.	10-20% of weekly time on task for general class activities/assignments. 10-15 hours for exams.
Online quiz or exam[4] Completing an online quiz or exam, which may include a variety of question types.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4. You may also use the following guidelines: • 30 seconds per true-false question[8] • 1 minute per multiple choice question[8] • 1 minute per matching question • 1-2 minutes per listing question • 2 minutes per short answer question[8] • 10-15 minutes per essay question[8] • 5-10 minutes to review the work[8] Add time spent on preparation (see Review guidelines).
Take-home quiz or exam Completing a take-home quiz or exam, which may involve referring to notes and materials, answering challenging questions, and writing in-depth responses.	Estimate completion time based on previous student time requirements or by multiplying expert completion time by 3-4. You may also use the following guidelines: • 30 seconds per true-false question[8] • 1 minute per multiple choice question[8] • 1 minute per matching question • 1-2 minutes per listing question • 2 minutes per short answer question[8] • 10-15 minutes per essay question[8] • 5-10 minutes to review the work[8] Add time spent on preparation (see Review guidelines).

Reading	
Instructional activities	***Student time per activity***
Academic reading[6] Reading to understand academic articles or a textbook related to the class content.	1 hour per 14 pages, if *some* new concepts are introduced.[6] 1 hour per 10 pages, if *many* new concepts are introduced.[6]
Related reading[6] Reading to understand other books or materials that support class content.	1 hour per 24 pages, if *some* new concepts are introduced.[6] 1 hour per 17 pages, if *many* new concepts introduced.[6]

References

[1] Carnegie Mellon University Eberly Center. (n.d.). *Solve a teaching problem: Assign a reasonable amount of work.* Retrieved August 15, 2022, from https://www.cmu.edu/teaching/solveproblem/strat-lackmotivation/lackmotivation-05.html#strat1

[2] 34 CFR 600.2. (2022, August 8). Retrieved August 16, 2022, from https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-34/subtitle-B/chapter-VI/part-600/subpart-A/section-600.2

[3] Rochester Institute of Technology. (n.d.) *Time on task.* Retrieved April 4, 2022, from https://web.archive.org/web/20220504034519/https://www.rit.edu/academicaffairs/tls/course-design/online-courses/time-task

[4] Albright College. (2015, September 2022). *Instructional equivalencies chart.* Retrieved April 1, 2022, from https://www.albright.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/10/instructional-equivalencies-chart-carnegie-units-updated-9-22-15.pdf

[5] Maryville University. (n.d.) *Credit hour/contact hour guidelines.* Retrieved August 15, 2022, from https://www.maryville.edu/academicaffairs/credit-hourcontact-hour-guidelines/

[6] Barre, E. (2016, July 11). *How much should we assign? Estimating out of class workload.* Rice University Center for Teaching Excellence. Retrieved August 15, 2022, from https://cte.rice.edu/blogarchive/2016/07/11/workload

[7] Torrance, M, Thomas, G. V., & Robinson, E. J. (2000). Individual differences in undergraduate essay-writing strategies: A longitudinal study. *Higher Education 39*(2), 181–200.

[8] Wang, A. (2019, July 15). *How to determine the best length for your assessment.* Edulastic. https://edulastic.com/blog/how-to-determine-the-best-length-for-your-assessment/

Resources

Wake Forest University Center for the Advancement of Teaching. *Workload estimator 2.0.* https://cat.wfu.edu/resources/tools/estimator2/