

Guidelines for Reduced-Credit Master's Degrees

Approved by the ATS Board of Commissioners on April 2, 2020

[Effective July 1, 2020, after membership approval of new
Standards and Policies and Procedures in June 2020]

The Standards of Accreditation (“Standards”) of the ATS Commission on Accrediting (“Commission”) discuss reduced-credit options for master’s degrees as follows:

3.13 Any school with reduced-credit options for master’s degrees (through some form of advanced standing, shared credits, or combined undergraduate/graduate degrees) has clearly stated policies with appropriate criteria for doing so in ways that ensure the integrity and learning outcomes of the degree program. Advanced standing may not exceed one-third of the degree being sought; shared credits between degrees may not exceed two-thirds of the degree receiving those credits; and combined undergraduate/graduate degrees may generally not count undergraduate credits as graduate credits. A school utilizing any combination of these reduced-credit options requires that at least one-third of any degree it grants be from credits earned at that school in that degree (see *Guidelines for Reduced-Credit Master’s Degrees*; this standard does not prohibit schools from offering a one-year academic MA degree for students with extensive undergraduate studies in religion or related areas, per pre-2020 Standards).

To assist schools in interpreting and applying Standard 3.13, the ATS Board of Commissioners (“Board”) offers the following conceptual framework, definitions of reduced-credit options, and descriptions of common types of combined degree programs (many of which utilize some version of reduced-credit).

Conceptual Framework

The Board understands there to be two guiding principles behind Standard 3.13. First, and most important, is that each degree should have its own purpose, outcomes, and integrity (see, for example, Standards 2.6, 3.6, 4, 4.3, and 4.6) and should demonstrate academic rigor (Standard 3.2). Second is that there can be value and wisdom in offering a reduced-credit option for particular master’s degrees and/or for particular students (as defined and described below), depending on the mission and context of each school, the design of the school’s degree programs, and the educational and vocational needs of the students.

The Board reminds schools that they are not required to offer any reduced-credit options or may choose to offer these on a limited basis (e.g., only within certain degree programs, only certain types of reduced-credit options, or lower thresholds on the number of credits that may be reduced or shared). The Board also reminds schools that any reduced-credit option should be developed with attention to institutional integrity and sound pedagogy and should be reviewed as part of the school’s ongoing evaluation processes (Standards 2.5-8). As indicated in Standard 3.13, at least one-third of any degree granted by the school must be from credits earned at the school, and typically these credits would be earned within the degree program being sought (the one exception might be a student who, at the last minute and for extenuating circumstances, changes from one degree to another). In no case should a degree be granted solely on the basis of a combination of transfer credit, advanced standing, and/or credit that is shared with another degree program. Schools are also reminded that the Standards are meant to be read holistically, and so any reduced-credit option should be developed and evaluated in light of the Standards as a whole, not simply the text of Standard 3.13.

Definitions of Reduced-Credit Options

Advanced standing refers to a school's decisions about students' competence when no transcripts of *graduate* credit are presented. It can be offered without credit (e.g., waiving a degree requirement but not altering the number of credits required for a degree program) or with credit (reducing the number of credits required for the degree program). For example, advanced standing might be utilized when a student has completed undergraduate coursework that is equivalent to that required by the graduate program (e.g., language), or when a student has engaged in formal learning that did not result in a graduate transcript, or when a student can demonstrate that they have already achieved the learning outcomes of a particular course. Advanced standing (with or without credit) may only be granted based on an appropriate means of assessment that students have the knowledge, competence, or skills that would normally be provided by the specific courses for which they have been admitted with advanced standing. Advanced standing is typically only applicable to the Master of Divinity (Standards 4.1-5) and Master of Arts (Standard 4.6-9) degrees programs (recognizing the breadth of nomenclature for the Master of Arts as allowed by Standard 4.7), not to the ThM degree.

Shared credit refers to a school's decision to count credits from one master's degree toward those required for a second master's degree (what some call "stackable credentials"). This may be done to facilitate the completion of a dual degree program (see definition below) or to encourage a form of lifelong learning (as when students complete a degree and then seek an additional degree). Shared credit can occur when students complete one program before beginning the second or may occur when they are enrolled in both degrees simultaneously. At the discretion of the school, credits may be shared between two graduate programs as long as each degree program has a clear integrity, meets the appropriate degree program standards, and attends to the limits named in Standard 3.13. Shared credit is typically only applicable to the Master of Divinity (Standards 4.1-5) and Master of Arts (Standard 4.6-9) degrees programs (recognizing the breadth of nomenclature for the Master of Arts as allowed by Standard 4.7), not to the ThM degree. The Board is aware of three common examples of shared credit beyond those described under dual degrees (below), and interprets each scenario as follows.

The *first example* is when a student first earns a master's degree with a smaller number of credits and then seeks another master's degree with a larger number of credits (for example, first completing a Master of Arts and then pursuing a Master of Divinity). At the discretion of the school, the credits from the first (smaller) degree could be used toward the second (larger) degree, as long as (a) at least 1/3 of the credits for the second (larger) degree are earned while the student is enrolled in that second degree, and (b) the student achieves the learning outcomes and other relevant curricular expectations for the second degree. For example, if the student had first completed a 48-credit MA, and then enrolled in a 72-credit MDiv, the school could choose to apply as many as 48 of those credits toward the MDiv, if those credits align with the school's MDiv curriculum and as long as the student meets all other expectations for the MDiv program (with particular attention to Standards 4.3 and 4.4) as well as the other expectations regarding reduced-credit (Standard 3.13).

The *second example* is when a student first earns a master's degree with a larger number of credits and then seeks another master's degree with a smaller number of credits (for example, first completing a Master of Divinity and then pursuing a Master of Arts), or first earns one master's degree and then seeks another master's degree with an equal number of credits (for example, a Master of Arts in Ministry and then a Master of Theological Studies). In this scenario, a student could not "retroactively" request all the credits of the larger (or equal) degree to be applied after the fact to the smaller (or second) degree, as

this would not attend to the integrity of the second degree program (otherwise, one might wonder why the school did not simply grant the MA to every MDiv student, for example). The school would need to determine, in light of its own mission as well as the purpose and content of each degree program, whether to allow shared credits and, if so, how many of the credits from the first degree program might be applied to the second degree program, as long as (a) at least 1/3 of the credits for the second (smaller) degree are earned while the student is enrolled in that second degree, and (b) the student achieves the learning outcomes and other relevant curricular expectations for the second degree.

The *third example* is when a school offers an additional credential (such as a certificate) either prior to or during enrollment in an approved master's degree program. Since the Commission's scope does not include certificate programs, schools are welcome to offer these credentials before or within graduate programs as they wish and may include such credentials as a stackable option, as long as the school attends to the Commission's expectations regarding non-degree programs (Standard 3.15) as well as the expectations of the particular graduate degree program.

Schools occasionally ask whether students might *relinquish* one degree as part of earning a second degree, so that more credits may be applied to the second degree than what the Standards regarding shared credit allow. The Board of Commissioners has no policies regarding the relinquishment of degrees, and thus leaves that to each school, but notes that this is an unusual practice.

Transfer credit is distinct from advanced standing (where no transcripts of *graduate* credit are presented) or shared credit (where credits may be used to earn more than one graduate degree). Transfer credit occurs when a school accepts credits that were initially earned at another graduate school in a degree program that was never completed. As indicated in Standard 3.12, schools should have and follow a public transfer of credit policy that clearly identifies the criteria by which it evaluates transfer credits from other graduate schools and the maximum amount of transfer credits it accepts for its degree programs, which may not exceed two-thirds of the program's total credits.

Educational equivalency, as opposed to reduced-credit options, applies to any degree program when a prospective student has engaged in formal postsecondary education that is comparable to that of the degree required for admissions (i.e., a baccalaureate degree for a master's program, a master's degree for a doctoral program). The most common example would be when a student has completed an educational program outside of North America that utilizes nomenclature other than baccalaureate or master's degree. Other examples might include a student who completed a sufficient number of college credits to receive the baccalaureate degree but did not actually complete that degree or who has no formal record of completing that degree, or a student who "levels up" by taking additional coursework in a way that is equivalent to degree completion, or a student who completed a non-accredited degree program and the theological school assesses that program as being appropriately rigorous and educationally equivalent to that of an accredited program. In all cases, educational equivalency should be based on the completion of formal postsecondary education at the appropriate level. If a school admits students as having the educational equivalent of a bachelor's degree or master's degree, it must be able to describe how it determines educational equivalency (see Standards 3.15, 5.5, and 7.4).

Schools seeking to engage in a type of reduced-credit option that is not described here should consult with their Commission staff liaison and may need to petition for a substantive change to engage in an **educational experiment** (see *Commission Policies and Procedures IV.G*). Exceptions that an accredited member may choose to make for an individual student are not considered a substantive change and do not require Board approval (see *Commission Policies and Procedures IV.I*).

Common Types of Combined Degree Programs

Accelerated degree programs are ones in which two degrees at two different levels are taken consecutively and/or concurrently. Common examples of this include an accelerated BA/MDiv or an accelerated BA/MA (recognizing the breadth of nomenclature for the MA as allowed by Standard 4.7). Such programs may be offered by two units within the same school (e.g., the undergraduate college and the graduate theological school at a single university) or by two or more different schools in partnership with each other. While the Commission has no authority over undergraduate programs themselves, it is concerned with the design and integrity of the graduate theological degree within the accelerated program. To this end, it offers the following guidance:

- **Admissions.** A school may admit undergraduate students to a graduate program as long as the school gives attention to the expectations described in Standard 7.4, particularly that the school documents through rigorous means that those students are prepared to do master's-level work.
- **Student services.** Schools are encouraged to attend to the distinctive needs of students enrolled in accelerated programs, including those related to advising, retention, academic support, and student services. For more on these distinctive needs, see the Educational Models and Practices Project's [peer group report](#) regarding accelerated degree programs.
- **Undergraduate credit.** Undergraduate work may not be counted toward a graduate degree simply by transfer of credit (as this applies only to *graduate* credit). As a result, accelerated programs are often designed so that students enroll in graduate courses that are then counted toward the undergraduate degree (rather than enrolling in undergraduate courses that are then counted toward the graduate degree). Such arrangements would need to be considered in light of the expectations of the institution granting the undergraduate degree, as well as the guidelines of their accrediting or quality assurance bodies.
- **Advanced standing.** Work completed at the undergraduate level may be considered for advanced standing in a master's degree, in accordance with Standard 3.13, when such work aligns with the expectations of the graduate program. For example, a student who has completed an undergraduate language course may be able to demonstrate that they meet the expectations of advanced standing noted above, namely that the student has the knowledge, competence, or skills that would normally be provided by specific graduate-level courses.
- **Degree integrity.** In all cases, the degree granted at the graduate level should attend to all appropriate Commission Standards for that degree program, and the school should be able to demonstrate that students have achieved the learning outcomes for that degree. That includes attention not only to completion of required coursework or number of credits but also to overall student formation (as appropriate to the degree program). As noted by the Educational Models peer group, "speed is not a pedagogical value," and schools that develop accelerated programs will want to give careful attention to pedagogical design and degree integrity.

Dual degree programs are ones in which two graduate degrees are taken concurrently but are authorized and conferred separately. Dual degrees may be offered by two or more partner schools, by two or more departments or divisions within the same school, or simply within the same theological school. Examples of this might include a concurrent MDiv/MBA offered by a theological school and a business school at a different institution, a dual MCM/MSW offered by a theological school and a school of social work within a single university, or a dual MDiv/MA offered by a theological school alone. In any

case, the dual nature of the degree recognizes both pedagogical advantages and efficiencies for the student by combining some coursework or other requirements for the two degree programs, often utilizing some sort of shared credit (see above). Each school is primarily responsible for its own degree(s), and the degree(s) offered by the theological school must meet all expectations of the ATS Commission on Accrediting.

Joint degree programs are ones in which a single degree is authorized and conferred by two or more partner schools. Such partnerships may occur between two or more theological schools or may be between a theological school and another educational entity. A common example of this is a PhD granted jointly by a theological school and a university. In any joint degree program, care should be given to the ways in which faculty, administration, and governing boards of each partner institution agree to share educational resources, responsibility, accountability, and authority for the degree.

Note: The ATS member school is always responsible for the integrity of its own Commission-approved degree programs. Commission approval for combined degree programs, as such, is required only if the individual degree(s) offered by the member school involve a substantive change (e.g., new programs, new delivery methods, or exceptions to Commission Standards as described in the Commission Policies and Procedures). Combined degree programs are not tracked or recorded by the Commission on Accrediting, apart from the listing of the Commission-approved degree itself. Schools are encouraged to consult with their Commission staff liaison if they have any questions regarding combined degree programs.