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The Carnegie Unit: Is It Adequate for Today's Schools?

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A study committee appointed by the North Dakota Department of Public Instruction recommended that schools be permitted to grant credit in units smaller than a full Carnegie Unit (1). The advantages cited by the committee included:

1. Individual schools would have more flexibility in establishing curriculum offerings and assigning students and teachers to classes.
2. Transcripts would become more useful to college advisors and potential employers by providing more specific information.
3. Schools experimenting with shorter courses report:
 - a. Motivation of students is much better.
 - b. A better relationship exists between teacher and student.
 - c. More learning takes place in less time.
4. Shorter courses allow better utilization of community resources.

The same committee recommended that "mini courses" (courses of short duration) be established to:

- Satisfy student interest
- Open up other areas of study for students
- Provide a relaxed atmosphere for students during the midst of the regular academic year
- Develop student interest in areas not normally reached by the regular school curriculum
- Involve the community in the education process
- Introduce students to multi-age activities

If courses of shorter duration provide such benefits, how does it happen that most courses are still based on a full year of academic study yielding one Carnegie Unit of credit?

It has been suggested that a sort of Whorfian* hypothesis is operating which limits our view of reality. Even though we are able to admit that shorter courses have many advantages, we cannot get away from thinking about courses or learning except in terms of a Carnegie Unit. The Carnegie Unit has taken on so much meaning that it has become synonymous with learning. The reality of "learning" is surely not dependent upon translation into Carnegie Units.

The Carnegie Unit may have served a historical purpose, but many educators believe that its usefulness has been outlived. A report by the New Jersey Department of Education indicated that approximately one-third of the colleges have abandoned the use of the Carnegie Unit as a means of allocating credit and that about the same percentage of high schools and colleges no longer use it to evaluate work done in high school (2).

Why Are Some Schools Abandoning the Use of the Carnegie Unit?

First of all, the Carnegie Unit severely limits the program of studies a student is able to pursue. The Oregon State Department of Education has suggested that graduation requirements based solely on the Carnegie Unit have tended to "provide a single, rigid program for all students, regardless of their abilities, interests, needs of learning styles and regardless of the real life requirements of a modern society" (3). It must be remembered that the Carnegie Unit was proposed to provide a standard unit of measurement for students matriculating to college. Hopefully, high schools have become more than institutions

*Benjamin Lee Whorf was one of the leading proponents of a Linguistic relativity theory which holds that the language one uses structures the way one thinks about or perceives reality. Language is, according to Whorf, ". . . not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas . . ." (4).

preparing students for college. If schools are providing terminal education for some students and prevocational education for others, and "real life requirements" for still others, it makes little sense to retain a system that was developed essentially for students intending to enter college.

Second, the Carnegie Unit of credit is based solely on time. Nothing else. It is not a measure of competency, success, growth or attitudes. It simply means that a course is offered for 36 weeks, 5 days a week, 40 minutes per day (5). That's all it was intended to mean and has never meant anything else. One could well imagine the framers of this illustrious measurement idea turning over in their graves if they knew that in over sixty years we have not been able to provide a more adequate system for awarding credit or sanctioning learning. We are, basically, still measuring time and not learning. Would not it be much better to focus on the concept of "learning" as opposed to the concept of "serving time in a classroom?"

Third, it is difficult to argue that some classes require more time to yield one credit than do others. Why is it that a student is awarded one credit in what is often considered a "major" area (English, Social Studies, Math) for attending class 40 minutes per day while another student in what is often considered a "minor" area (shop, typing, vocational education) needs to spend 60 minutes per day in order to be awarded one credit? Is the instruction in the "minor" areas inferior? Is learning in the "major" areas more valuable? The New Jersey Commission of Education would argue that all courses should be treated equally and that "any course offered in a school should be taught well and taken seriously or it has no place in the school curriculum. Schools should evaluate their course offerings in terms of each course's intrinsic value as well as its value to the students, rather than in terms of the courses' relative values as defined by an abstract academic standard" (6). Even more strongly, the same commission states, "No subject or person is exalted when another subject or person is demeaned."

Fourth, the Carnegie Unit is making less than honest men of a number of school administrators. New Jersey reports:

It is quite evident, if present rules and regulations were enforced to the letter, that 63 New Jersey secondary schools would not have modular scheduled programs, 280 New Jersey secondary schools would not have independent study programs, or 115 New Jersey secondary schools would not have mini-courses.

The same may be true for North Dakota. A large number of schools provide the minimum 180 days of instruction and more and more schools are using several days a year for mini-courses. Those schools that schedule a minimum of 180 days of instruction and take out several days for mini-courses simply cannot provide the 36 week, 5-days-a-week instruction necessary to complete a Carnegie Unit.

In summary, the best that can be said for the Carnegie Unit is that it has served a historical usefulness. At worst, it could be said that the Carnegie Unit prevents schools from offering quality education to all students.

What Are Some Alternatives to the Carnegie Unit?

Unfortunately, there are few alternatives to the Carnegie Unit of credit. In an informal poll of several persons from a number of state education agencies, one member of a state educational agency indicated: "Many schools have struggled with this problem but no one has come up with a satisfactory substitute. Some schools were thinking about semester hours of credit but this gets back to the same old routine."

An assistant commissioner of instruction in another state replied by saying, "I am very sorry to report that at present we have not been able to come up with a satisfactory substitute for the use of the Carnegie Unit. We are very interested in any kind of

report which you might prepare . . ."

Fortunately, there is an apparent interest in moving beyond the Carnegie Unit, and several states have developed alternatives which may provide for increased dialogue. The alternatives range from relatively minor revisions of the method of granting credit to almost complete changes in school organization and philosophy.

In September, 1971, the state of Texas broadened its method of granting credit to either of the following processes (7):

1. The student has been enrolled in a course scheduled for the minimum clock hours (160) and has made satisfactory progress.
2. The student has demonstrated achievement by meeting the standard requirements of the course, regardless of the time he has been enrolled in the course.

Arizona, likewise, still uses the Carnegie Unit of credit (120 clock hours) but also allows accredited schools to award credit by examination, through independent study programs, through extension and correspondence courses, or through courses offered during the summer (8).

Kansas also grants credit (1) for successful completion of classroom work, (2) through examinations administered by the local district, and (3) through independent study. Kansas also grants credit to students for participation in approved part-time cooperative training programs (9).

Oregon (3) has recently gone through a rather complete re-evaluation of secondary education. This process was begun in 1969 and involved representatives of various groups including teachers, students, administrators, parents, employers, and other interested citizens. As a result of this effort, the Oregon State Board of Education set new standards for school which are "in fact a blueprint whereby local districts may

design educational programs unique to their local area while retaining a minimum level of accountability to the State Legislature and more importantly to the citizens."

The new standards adopted by Oregon require each school district to:

1. Prepare 21 planned course statements (or their equivalent).
2. Provide 21 credits in required areas of study (130 clock hours per area).
3. Identify survival-level competencies and performance indicators.
4. Conduct a needs assessment on electives.
5. Prepare new or amended transcripts.
6. File a plan by July, 1974.

The new standards also allow school districts the opportunity to make the following optional decisions:

1. Decide whether or not to allow off-campus experiences toward the earning of credits.
2. Allow college credit alternative.
3. Allow independent study.
4. Allow work experience.
5. Allow credit by examination for waiving required course areas.
6. Allow credit by examination for waiving required course areas and granting credit.
7. Decide whether or not to waive some on-campus attendance requirements.
8. Decide whether or not to offer programs longer or shorter than four years.
9. Decide whether or not to have pre-tests for entering 9th graders.
10. Decide whether or not to award certificates of competency.
11. Decide whether or not to exceed
 - a. Minimum course offerings.
 - b. Clock-hour lengths.
 - c. Competency categories.
 - d. Elective offerings.
 - e. Credit requirements.

12. Decide whether to aim for the class of 1976 or 1977 or wait for 1978.

Clearly local school districts in Oregon will be able to significantly change the character of their schools. They are, in fact, being encouraged by the State Department of Education to "break the tradition that makes every student a 12-year learner" and to "develop 11-, 12-, and even 13-year school programs based on the needs of the student." The schools are also encouraged "to provide elective experiences in terms of the personal, social, career, and post high school educational needs of the students in addition to providing varied experiences in the fine arts and humanities."

New Jersey has also changed rather radically its method of assigning credit. It has moved away from the Carnegie Unit and offers schools two alternatives (plan A and plan B) for assigning credit (10). Plan A consists of assigning credit equally to all courses based on one (1) credit equals 1440 minutes. The major change in this plan is that of providing equal credit for equal time spent in a course regardless of the content of that course. The other obvious difference is the assigning of one credit for each 1440 minutes instead of the 7200 (120 hours) found in the Carnegie Unit. This would mean that if a class met 40 minutes a day, one day a week, for 36 weeks, the course would yield one (1) credit. Likewise, a class meeting 5 days a week would be a 5-credit class. These changes, although subtle, could be significant. Classes under this system could be scheduled in a variety of ways. A one-credit class could be scheduled for 40 minutes a day, one day a week for 36 weeks; or for 40 minutes a day, two days a week for 18 weeks; or 4 days a week for 9 weeks. The system also allows schools to report credit in fractions of either 1/4 or 1/2. A 1/4 credit course, for instance, would consist of 360 minutes, 6 hours, or 1 school day.

Plan B, under the New Jersey system, allows schools to:

1. Plan programs for individuals based upon specified measurable instructional objectives for a particular course.
2. Certify completion of a course(s) for the pupil based upon the original specified objective.
3. Decide whether or not to assign credit under Plan B. If credits are not assigned, the school would determine and establish a set number of courses for promotion and graduation purposes.

Another alternative to the Carnegie Unit was proposed but not adopted by the North Dakota Study Committee. This system was not unlike New Jersey's Plan A. It was based on a calendar unit of credit (a calendar unit was defined as consisting of 40-minute periods, 5 days a week, for 36 weeks). Under this system, credit could be granted in terms of months, weeks, or years. The only notation needed on a student's transcript would be a period to separate the years from the months and a colon to separate the weeks from the months. Hence 1.4:2 would translate to 1 year, 4 months, and 2 weeks and would be easily converted to Carnegie Units if colleges really needed it translated. Furthermore, it would provide schools much more flexibility in scheduling courses to meet individual needs and would encourage a uniform system for granting credit which the Carnegie Unit does not provide.

The alternative systems for granting credit reported in this paper may need to undergo some revisions as they are put into practice. Hopefully the state of the art is sufficiently advanced so that we will not have to wait another 62 years to consider revision of whichever system or systems are finally adopted.

Footnotes

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4. B. L. Whorf. Language, Thought and Reality. (J. B. Carroll, Ed.). Cambridge and New York: MIT-Wiley, 1956.
5. "The Carnegie Unit: Its Origin, Status and Trends," The Bulletin of the National Association of Secondary School Principals, Vol. 48, Number 288, January 1964, Pages 5-25.
6. On Credit Restructure (from the Commissioner's Corner). Mimeographed paper received from the New Jersey Department of Education, Pages 1 and 2.
7. Texas Education Agency Bulletin, Number 560, Page 35.
8. Arizona Department of Education, Arizona High School Bulletin, "Granting Credit," Pages 47 and 48.
9. Kansas Department of Education, Article 2, Rules, Regulations, Standards and Procedures for Accrediting High Schools, Page 7.
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