

# CHARTING A COURSE THROUGH REDUCED CREDIT HOUR BACHELOR'S DEGREES IN ARKANSAS

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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## POTENTIAL PARADIGM SHIFT

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The Higher Learning Commission's (HLC) recent indication of readiness to accept proposals for bachelor's degrees with fewer than 120 semester credit hours (Janota, 2024) represents a significant inflection point for Arkansas higher education. This shift, while potentially offering pathways to increased access and efficiency, necessitates a critical examination of implications across academic, financial, and reputational domains. This paper aims to provide an analysis of the challenges and opportunities inherent in this potential paradigm shift, specifically within the context of Arkansas' educational landscape. It describes the potential impacts on institutions, explores the broader conversation on degree value and credentialing, and proposes a set of strategic recommendations to guide the Arkansas Division of Higher Education (ADHE) in navigating this complex terrain.



# CONTEXT

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## THE DISTINCTIVE CHALLENGES OF ARKANSAS AND THE RCHBD PROPOSITION

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Arkansas' educational context is characterized by a set of distinct challenges that must be addressed with care when considering the implementation of reduced credit hour bachelor's degrees (RCHBDs). The state ranks consistently below national averages in assessments of student preparedness, which underscores the critical need for robust foundational support (National Center for Education Statistics, 2024). This is not merely a statistical anomaly; it represents a systemic need for intensive academic intervention and a commitment to addressing the root causes of educational inequity. The compression of a bachelor's degree, without a corresponding investment in foundational skill development, risks exacerbating existing academic gaps and perpetuating cycles of disadvantage. Additionally, the correlation of skills, competencies, and standards do not articulate seamlessly between the secondary and post-secondary systems.

The core question becomes, how do we ensure that students, particularly those who enter college with academic deficits, receive the necessary depth of knowledge, skill development, and critical thinking capabilities within a reduced timeframe?

Arkansas' extensive and specific core curriculum introduces a significant constraint. The need to maintain a broad base of general education within a reduced credit framework will necessitate cuts in major-specific coursework and electives. This raises concerns about the depth of disciplinary expertise graduates will possess, impacting their competitiveness in the job market and their ability to pursue advanced studies. The balance between breadth and depth must be carefully recalibrated.

# CONTEXT

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The nomenclature surrounding RCHBDs should be meticulously considered. The term "bachelor's degree" carries weight and consistency in public and professional spheres, representing a widely recognized standard of academic achievement leading to increased labor market outcomes. Using this label for abbreviated programs risks confusion, devaluing existing credentials, and generating public skepticism about the integrity and value of higher education. It could also lead to employer confusion and a dilution of the perceived value of a traditional four-year degree. The lack of clear employer demand for graduates with RCHBDs adds another layer of complexity. Without demonstrated market value, these programs may struggle to attract students, justify program existence, and secure employer buy-in.

Finally, the impact of RCHBDs on financial aid eligibility is an unknown that requires urgent investigation. Federal and state financial aid programs are structured around the standard four-year degree timeline, assuming full-time enrollment and a consistent progression towards degree completion. Any deviation from this model could create disruptions for students, potentially limiting their access to financial assistance and exacerbating existing financial barriers to higher education.

**THE BALANCE BETWEEN BREADTH  
AND DEPTH MUST BE CAREFULLY  
RECALIBRATED.**

# IMPACTS ON INSTITUTIONS

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## BALANCING OPPORTUNITY WITH SUBSTANTIAL RISKS AND STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

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While RCHBDs may offer alternative pathways for specific student populations, such as working adults seeking accelerated degree completion, the benefits must be weighed against the risks and strategic considerations. Public perception and political consequences are valid concerns. Introducing RCHBDs risks public perception of degree devaluation and may fuel concerns about the value of traditional bachelor's degrees.

The allure of increased enrollment and revenue must be tempered by the reality of reduced tuition income. A 25% reduction in credit hours translates to a corresponding decrease in tuition revenue, posing a substantial financial challenge. Especially when coupled with the increasing prevalence of concurrent and dual credit enrollment, which impacts revenue streams in a similar fashion.

The financial sustainability of these programs hinges on careful cost analysis, innovative funding models, and an understanding of the long-term financial implications.

The possibility of specialized 90-hour degrees catering to specific workforce needs presents an opportunity. However, these programs must be clearly designed and differentiated from traditional bachelor's degrees. Strong experiential learning components, such as internships, apprenticeships, and project-based learning, could compensate for reduced academic coursework and ensure graduates possess practical, job-ready skills. These experiential components must be integrated into the curriculum in a structured and meaningful way, rather than being treated as "add-ons" to a degree.

# IMPACTS ON INSTITUTIONS

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Community colleges could expand their offerings through university center partnerships or by offering RCHBDs in select disciplines like health professions, law enforcement, or education. However, this raises concerns about potential revenue loss for four-year institutions and the precedent of delivering bachelor's degrees without the necessary research-active faculty and supporting facilities. The impact on faculty workload, research productivity, and institutional reputation must be carefully considered. The erosion of the traditional distinction between two-year and four-year institutions could have consequences for the higher education landscape. Another potential negative impact on community colleges is the possible reduction of associate degree completion rates, which could be tempered by establishing a reliable system for reverse transfers. Additionally, student experiences would be altered with fewer opportunities for engagement and cocurricular activities. Overall, RCHBDs may diminish the differentiation of role and scope that currently exists between two-year and four-year institutions.

Maintaining accreditation and ensuring academic quality are paramount. Rigorous research and assessment are essential to demonstrate that learning outcomes are equivalent to those of 120-hour degrees. The need for significant curricular and andragogical changes will require substantial resources and faculty development, including training in innovative teaching methodologies and assessment strategies. Clear and transparent communication with students regarding the limitations and implications of RCHBDs is crucial, particularly concerning major changes, transferability, and potential limitations on graduate school admission. The impact on master's programs, which may require adjustments to prerequisites and pathways, must also be considered.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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## A STRATEGIC AND MEASURED APPROACH TO RCHBD IMPLEMENTATION IN ARKANSAS

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Given the limited national adoption of RCHBDs and the lack of conclusive evidence on learning outcomes, Arkansas should adopt a strategic and measured approach.

### **1. PRIORITIZE RIGOROUS EVALUATION AND RESEARCH**

If pilot programs are pursued, ADHE should establish a working group to develop clear parameters and expectations for design, assessment, timeline, and evaluation. This evaluation should focus on demonstrating equivalent learning outcomes, assessing long-term student success, and rigorously evaluating the impact on student learning. ADHE must establish new definitions and policy guidance for the creation of pilot programs.

### **2. ESTABLISH CLEAR AND DISTINCT NOMENCLATURE**

If RCHBDs are implemented, establish a clear and distinct nomenclature that differentiates them from traditional bachelor's degrees. This will help mitigate confusion, maintain the value of existing credentials, and ensure employer understanding. One possibility is to introduce a new, standalone degree level positioned between the associate and bachelor's degrees which could articulate with a bachelor's.

### **3. CONDUCT COMPREHENSIVE FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC ANALYSIS**

Conduct a thorough analysis of the impact of RCHBDs on financial aid eligibility, institutional revenue, the ADHE funding model, and the broader state economy.

### **4. MITIGATE IMPACTS ON COMMUNITY COLLEGES AND ENSURE SEAMLESS TRANSFER**

Implement strategies to mitigate the potential negative impacts of RCHBDs on community colleges, including flexible certificate programs, streamlined reverse transfer processes, and articulation agreements that ensure seamless transitions for students. A possible long-term solution is to develop a strategic plan to allow community colleges to offer RCHBDs.

# RECOMMENDATIONS

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**5. REVIEW AND REVISE CORE CURRICULUM AND ANDRAGOGICAL APPROACHES**

Conduct a comprehensive review of the state's core curriculum to ensure its relevance and efficiency. Explore strategies to integrate core learning outcomes into major-specific coursework and invest in faculty development to enhance pedagogical approaches.

**6. EXPLORE EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING, COMPETENCY-BASED EDUCATION (CBE), AND ALTERNATIVE DELIVERY MODELS**

Explore the potential of Experiential Learning and CBE to supplement credit hours with directed learning opportunities and credit for prior work and life experience and other alternative delivery models to deliver RCHBDs in a more efficient and effective manner.

**7. REVIEW FUNDING MODELS AND ENSURE INSTITUTIONAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Adjust funding models for both 2-year and 4-year institutions to ensure equitable funding for new program types and to promote institutional sustainability.

**8. ENGAGE EMPLOYERS AND ALIGN PROGRAMS WITH WORKFORCE NEEDS**

Actively engage employers to assess the workforce demand for degree programs greater than 60 and less than 120 credit hours and ensure that these programs align with workforce needs, including the development of industry-recognized credentials.

**9. ESTABLISH A STATEWIDE COMMUNICATION AND OUTREACH STRATEGY**

Develop a comprehensive communication and outreach strategy to inform students, employers, and the public about the nature, scope, and value of RCHBDs.

# CONCLUSION

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## A CALL FOR STRATEGIC INNOVATION AND PRUDENT ACTION IN A CHANGING HIGHER EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

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The potential for a new degree level threshold, whether at the reduced credit hour bachelor's or a standalone 90 credit hour credential presents both opportunities and challenges for Arkansas higher education. By carefully considering the implications, drawing on relevant research, and implementing appropriate safeguards, ADHE and Arkansas institutions will ensure that new programs maintain academic quality, serve student needs, and contribute to the state's workforce development goals. A strategic and measured approach, characterized by rigorous evaluation, thoughtful planning, and proactive engagement with stakeholders, is essential for navigating this complex landscape and preserving the value of higher education in Arkansas.



## REFERENCES

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