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Contact Hours Versus CEUs: What's the Difference?

abstract

The terms *contact hour* and *continuing education unit* (CEU) are often used interchangeably. However, they are significantly different. The importance of correct terminology is highlighted in this article.

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The definitions of the terms *contact hour* and *continuing education unit* (CEUs), and the difference between the two, are often misunderstood. Both contact hours and CEUs measure the amount of time an individual participates in an organized educational experience for continuing education (CE) in several professions; however, they represent two completely different measurements. For an organization to award credit for a CE activity, it must be able to meet evidence-based criteria established by the accrediting organization. As a profession, nursing uses contact hours to count CE credit.

CONTACT HOUR

One contact hour is equal to 60 minutes of an educational activity. The American Nurses Credentialing Center (n.d.) uses the contact hour as the unit of measure for continuing nursing education. A contact hour can be awarded for live activities, such as conferences, classes, workshops, or real-time webinars. Contact hours are also awarded for the completion of enduring materials, such as printed articles, Web-based educational materials accessed on one's own time, or recorded webinars. To award contact hours for continuing nursing education, an organization must develop the educational activity in accordance with accreditation criteria that reflect best evidence in educational design. All boards of nursing that require CE for relicensure, as well as all certification bodies for nursing practice, use the contact hour as the unit of measurement.

CEU

A CEU is an educational measurement using criteria from the In-

ternational Association for Continuing Education and Training (IACET, n.d.). One CEU is equal to 10 contact hours (i.e., 600 minutes) of an educational activity. According to the IACET Web site (n.d.), "IACET is the caretaker of the CEU," responsible for maintaining and refining this unit of measure ("What is an IACET CEU?" para. 1). Although the term *CEU* is often used in a generic context, the IACET Web site (n.d.) clarifies that "only accredited providers, or APs, who have been approved by the IACET Commission are allowed to award IACET CEUs" ("What is an IACET CEU?" para. 2). These CEUs can be earned by participating in either live or enduring materials developed by an organization operating under the IACET accreditation system. Some of the accredited providers listed on the IACET Web site include those who represent disciplines such as engineering, architecture, child care, food protection, and project management.

CLARIFYING THE CONFUSION

Nurses can be easily confused when an educational activity is marketed using the term *CEU*. The Table shows the clarification between the contact hour and the CEU.

In the following examples, use of the term *CEU* is misleading to the potential learner. For example, this marketing statement indicates that the program will provide

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TABLE
CALCULATION OF CREDIT

Measurement	Equivalency
Contact hour	60 minutes = 1 contact hour
Continuing education unit	10 contact hours = 1 continuing education unit

30 hours of credit, yet it is scheduled from 8:00 AM to 11:00 AM

At the conclusion of this educational event, this program will award 3 CEUs.

In this case, the program has been marketed incorrectly. The provider is advertising a learning event that will award 30 hours of credit, when in reality, the program is offering 3 hours of education or three contact hours, a significant difference.

Recently, at an international nursing conference, a brochure was posted by a nationally recognized college of nursing to advertise an upcoming opportunity for continuing nursing education in a clinical specialty. The program offered an opportunity for 2 full days of focused study in the topic of interest. The following statement about the amount of credit that would be provided appeared as follows:

16 hours of CEU credit will be offered.

According to the brochure, learning would occur for 8 hours each

day. However, the statement above actually indicates CEU credit, which would be equivalent to 160 contact hours.

Similarly, the following statement was noted on a nursing Web site that advertised a continuing nursing education program that would be held in conjunction with an overseas cultural exchange.

At the conclusion of the trip, participants will receive forty CEUs.

The trip was 1 week in length, and learning sessions were planned daily. A 1-week program could realistically provide 40 contact hours, which would be equivalent to 40 clock hours; however, 40 CEUs are equivalent to 400 hours of learning, an unrealistic expectation for a week-long program and a misleading statement to potential learners.

During a recent conversation about CE opportunities with colleagues, one nurse shared that she had recently attended a great program that offered 6 CEUs. When asked for more information about the program, the nurse shared that it

was a program that had been provided by a state nursing association and had been an all-day event. In reality, the nurse had earned 6 nursing contact hours. Had she been awarded six CEUs, the program would have been 60 hours long.

CONCLUSION

It is important to be aware of the way CE credit is calculated in the nursing profession. When a program is offered by an accredited or approved provider of CE, or an individual activity provider, through the American Nurses Credentialing Center accreditation system, credit is always calculated based on the contact hour, a 60-minute unit of measure. It is important to be aware of what one is registering for and to ascertain how much credit one will earn before registering for the CE program. When writing or speaking about earning credit for continuing nursing education activities, be a good role model and use the term *contact hours*, not *CEUs*!

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