

Memo to Graduate Council



To: Dr. Heather Lipford, Interim Chair, Graduate Council
From: Dr. Katherine Hall-Hertel, Associate Dean and Lauren Coffey, JD, Assistant Dean
Date: September 28, 2026
RE: Accelerated Graduate Pathways

New Proposal:

The Graduate School is proposing to combine existing policies with new policies that allow programs to develop accelerated pathways for students as needed. The purpose of these changes is to give programs more flexibility to expand offerings and to add consistency to doctoral level credit requirements across all available doctoral programs at UNC Charlotte.

Accelerated graduate pathways will include the following initiatives:

- Credit for Prior Learning
- Nano-Certificates (proposed)
- Early Entry
- Accelerated Masters' Programs
- Create Minimum Credit Requirement for Doctoral Programs (proposed)

Note: Credit for prior learning, early entry, and accelerated masters' policies are already in existence at UNC Charlotte. The Graduate School is not suggesting any changes to these policies.

Rationale

Recent higher education changes have made graduate education feel less affordable and accessible. For instance, updated policies for need-based financial aid and international student duration of status could restrict current enrollment. UNC Charlotte can address these challenges by offering new, affordable pathways. Students increasingly seek a clear, cost-effective value proposition backed by a strong brand that directly connects their education to career goals and skill development ([Hanover Research](#), 2026). Additionally, a cohesive pathway strategy builds a compelling brand presence that aligns institutional goals with student needs.

Connecting these pathways leverages existing resources for quicker implementation, boosting enrollment while longer-term initiatives develop. The accelerated pathway offers recruiting, admissions, and academic service support as needed, while giving individual programs the flexibility to adopt the components that best serve their students.

Nano-Certificates

Graduate nano-certificates would be awarded for successful completion of a short, focused series of classes of generally 6-9 credit hours. Approved nano-certs are composed of **competency-based** courses designed to help students build and demonstrate mastery in a given area or skillset connected to an existing or proposed graduate certificate program. These nano-certificates would be stackable and the credits could be used towards a masters' or doctoral degree. As an example, one 12 credit graduate certificate could contain up to 2 nano-certificates.

Current policy for graduate certificates requires a minimum of 12 credits. However, a “nano-certificate” could be added as a portion of an existing graduate certificate program. Adding nano-certificates to existing graduate programs eliminates the need for additional approvals associated with developing new programs since the curriculum and the program in general has already been approved. Since these programs are attached to existing graduate certificate programs, the admissions process would already be established and students would be eligible for financial aid to receive the digital badge/competency. A catalog update would allow programs to highlight foundational courses in their program that would function as the nano-certificate.

This option would be distinct from the existing [microcredential](#) policy. That policy allows for both credit- and non-credit bearing microcredentials. Microcredentials come with a digital badge that can be included on the resume. However, they do not make the student eligible for financial aid.

Proposal: Update graduate certificate requirements to include nano-certificates. This proposal would provide that existing courses within a certificate could be grouped by competency. This would not require the creation of a new program type. Students may apply the credits earned as nano-certificates toward a single degree that they pursue either in conjunction with the short cert or after the short cert has been awarded. Up to 18 credits of previously earned credit through nano-certificates may be applied to satisfy graduate degree requirements

Revising minimum credit requirement for doctoral programs

Under existing requirements, the only doctoral degree with a minimum credit requirement is the Ph.D at 72 credits. All other doctoral degrees do not specify a minimum as part of the degree requirements. Instead it is controlled by the program. This policy will create uniformity with the minimum requirement across all doctoral programs. This also allows programs to establish doctoral degrees with a shorter post-baccalaureate credit requirement, enabling more focused research without requiring a master's degree, if desired.

A review of peer institutions across the UNC system and nationally revealed significant variation from the 72-credit minimum requirement. This would suggest that the minimum was updated to consider all doctoral degrees and not limit Ph.D programs if a lower minimum credit is desired. Additionally, [SACSCOC guidelines](#) do not mandate a specific doctoral credit minimum beyond requiring at least 30 semester credit hours (or equivalent) past the master's degree, or 60 credits post-baccalaureate. Under this proposal, individual programs retain full discretion over their curriculum: they may keep the 72-credit requirement, adopt the new 60-credit minimum, or choose a middle ground. This flexibility will empower departments to design innovative curricula that shorten time-to-degree for students.

Proposal: This plan would establish a minimum credit requirement for all doctoral programs at 60 credits. As part of this 60 credits, doctoral programs must include the following: GRAD 8302 (Responsible Conduct of Research), GRAD 8990 (Academic Integrity), and 18 credit hours of research. The remaining requirements can be completed at the discretion of the program. (See redline for the Catalog policy.)

Redline Catalog Draft Language

Types of Graduate Programs

This section generally describes types of degrees and programs. See the Academic Programs section of this Catalog for a list of specific available graduate programs.

Doctoral and Master's Degree Programs

UNC Charlotte offers 25 doctoral and 65 master's degree programs. To be admitted to a degree program, an applicant must meet all the requirements for admission, be recommended for admission by the program in which they propose to study, and receive final approval for admission by the Graduate School. Acceptance into one graduate program does not guarantee acceptance into another one.

Graduate Certificate Programs

UNC Charlotte offers 50 graduate certificate programs and 7 post-master's certificate programs. Graduate certificate programs (including post-master's certificate programs) are designed for students who wish to complete a coherent program in a defined area to enhance their professional skills and/or academic knowledge.

Students are admitted to a specific graduate certificate program and advised by faculty in the unit offering the graduate certificate. ~~Some certificate programs may contain stackable short, focused courses of generally 6-9 credit hours. These approved nano-certificates are composed of competency-based courses designed to help students build and demonstrate mastery in a given area or skillset connected to an existing or proposed graduate certificate program. Students can "stack" these nano-certificates to earn the graduate certificate and/or use towards a single (master's or doctoral) degree that they pursue in conjunction with the nano-certificate, or after the certificate has been awarded. [Please note: time to degree limits do apply.]~~

~~Many of UNC Charlotte's graduate certificate programs are comprised of some of the required courses in a related master's degree. Since the graduate certificate is not a degree, students may apply the credits earned in the certificate program toward a single (master's or doctoral) degree that they pursue either concomitant with pursuing a graduate certificate or after the certificate has been awarded. [Please note: time to degree limits do apply.]~~

Post-Baccalaureate (Non-Degree) Status

Applicants seeking to take courses beyond the baccalaureate degree for license renewal, for transfer to another institution, as prerequisites for admission to a graduate degree program, or for personal satisfaction may be admitted as post-baccalaureate/non-degree students. The number of transfer credits that may apply to a degree program can vary. Post-baccalaureate students must apply for admission each semester. See "Registration, Transfer Credit" under the Degree Requirements and Academic Policies section of this Catalog for details.

See Types of Admission under the Admission to the Graduate School section of this Catalog for details.

Dual Undergraduate and Graduate Registration

See Types of Admission under the Admission to the Graduate School section of this Catalog for details.

Graduate Certificate Requirements

The graduate certificate is awarded for successful completion of a coherent program of at least 12 credit hours proposed by a unit of the graduate faculty and approved by the Graduate Council. Students are admitted to a particular graduate certificate program and are advised by faculty in the unit offering the graduate certificate. Admission to a graduate certificate program is separate and distinct from admission to a graduate degree program. Admission to a certificate program is not an indication of subsequent admission to a degree program just as admission to a degree program is not an indication of admission to a certificate program.

Since the graduate certificate is not a degree, students may apply the credits earned in the certificate program toward a single degree that they pursue either in conjunction with the graduate certificate or after the certificate has been awarded. However, students may not apply credits earned in one certificate program toward the satisfaction of requirements in a second certificate program.

Students may enroll in a graduate certificate program only or may complete the certificate in conjunction with a graduate degree program at the University. Hours taken toward a graduate certificate may be counted toward a graduate degree program with the recommendation of the graduate program coordinator and the approval of the Graduate School. **Some certificate programs may contain stackable approved short, focused credentials of generally 6-9 credit hours, known as a nano-certificate. Multiple nano-certificates can be built within one specific graduate certificate program. Students can earn these nano-certificates while completing the graduate certificate and/or use the credits towards a single (master's or doctoral) degree that they pursue in conjunction with the full graduate certificate, or after the certificate has been awarded. [Please note: time to degree limits do apply.]**

Graduate certificate programs generally require at least 12 credit hours of graduate coursework and are held to the Transfer Credit policies outlined in the Registration section of the Graduate Catalog. The graduate certificate is awarded to a student who has completed the specified program of study with a GPA of 3.0 or above within five years from the time of enrollment in the first certificate course and has applied to graduate.

Students are expected to satisfactorily complete all required coursework with a GPA of 3.0 or above in courses on the certificate plan of study. Grades in all courses attempted, whether or not on the plan of study, remain on the transcript and will be included in the calculation of the student's cumulative GPA as it is reported on the transcript. Courses graded as C on the certificate plan of study must be offset by an equal number of graduate-level credits graded as A. Some programs may have stricter requirements regarding the applicability of grades of C towards degree completion. Please reference the program-specific entries of this Catalog. Students and faculty should refer to the Academic Suspension and Dismissal policies in this Catalog regarding the accumulation of marginal grades of C.

Ph.D. Degree Requirements

A doctoral degree is conferred by the University after the student has demonstrated outstanding scholarship in an approved program of study. Candidates must satisfy all University degree requirements in addition to all standards established by the doctoral faculty of their particular program. Specific program degree requirements are listed under the respective doctoral programs in this Catalog. In some cases, requirements in a given program are more stringent than the minimum requirements established by the Graduate School.

Ordinarily, a student must complete at least ~~60~~ ~~72~~ post-baccalaureate credit hours in order to earn ~~the Ph.D.~~ a doctoral degree at UNC Charlotte. In cases where a student has earned a master's degree in a relevant field from UNC Charlotte or another institution, the student may be permitted to pursue advanced standing within their Ph.D. program. Such advanced standing must be approved through the graduate curriculum review process and appear in the program-specific sections of this Catalog.

DBA Degree Requirements

The Doctor of Business Administration (D.B.A.) degree is conferred by the University after the student has successfully completed all requirements in an approved doctoral program of study in the College of Business. Ordinarily, a student must complete at least 60 post-baccalaureate credit hours in order to earn a doctoral degree at UNC Charlotte. Specific program degree requirements are described in the College of Business section of this Catalog.

Ed.D. Degree Requirements

The Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree is conferred by the University after the student has successfully completed all requirements in an approved doctoral program of study in the College of Education. Ordinarily, a student must complete at least 60 post-baccalaureate credit hours in order to earn a doctoral degree at UNC Charlotte. Specific program degree requirements are described in the College of Education section of this Catalog.

DNP Degree Requirements

The Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree is conferred by the University after the student has successfully completed all requirements in an approved doctoral program of study in the

School of Nursing. Ordinarily, a student must complete at least 60 post-baccalaureate credit hours in order to earn a doctoral degree at UNC Charlotte. Specific program degree requirements are described in the College of Health and Human Services section of this Catalog.