



Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degrees in Ohio

Opportunities, Constraints, and Field-Level Feasibility

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RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

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About This Report

Ohio, like many states, is considering whether some bachelor's degree programs can be completed in fewer than the traditional 120 semester credits while still preserving educational quality, workforce value, and student opportunity. Interest in these reduced-credit bachelor's degrees has grown as policymakers and institutions look for ways to lower cost, shorten time to degree, and create more targeted pathways for students. At the same time, these programs raise important questions about accreditation, licensure, graduate and professional school access, and the overall meaning and portability of the bachelor's degree.

This report examines the feasibility of reduced-credit bachelor's degree programs in Ohio. It was prepared in response to the Advance Ohio Higher Education Act, which directs the Ohio Department of Higher Education to study bachelor's degree programs that require three years to complete and to assess where reduced-credit pathways may be feasible across fields of study. The report draws on a national inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's degree programs, a review of institutional and specialized accreditation and Ohio regulatory requirements, interviews with institutional and field-level stakeholders, and a survey of graduate and professional admissions leaders in Ohio. Its purpose is to help Ohio policymakers, public institutions, and other stakeholders understand where reduced-credit bachelor's degrees appear most viable under current conditions, what constraints are likely to shape their development, and what questions remain unresolved.

RAND Education, Employment, and Infrastructure

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Key Findings

- Reduced-credit bachelor's degrees represent a small but growing part of the higher education landscape. Our national inventory identified 119 programs publicly announced as of May 2026, most of them in applied and workforce-facing fields.
- The feasibility of postsecondary institutions implementing RCDs in Ohio varies by field. Business, information technology, cybersecurity, and some related applied fields appear to offer the clearest near-term opportunities, while fields with extensive clinical and licensure requirements or tightly sequenced courses appear less adaptable.
- Institutional accreditors are open to reduced-credit bachelor's degrees, but approval and implementation remain demanding and require clear academic justification.
- Most identified reduced-credit programs preserve core general education requirements and reduce flexibility elsewhere in the curriculum.
- Reduced-credit pathways may be promising for targeted student populations, including adult learners and re-engaged students seeking more structured and efficient routes to a degree.
- There is continued uncertainty about how reduced-credit bachelor's degrees will be treated for transfer, graduate and professional programs, licensing, and hiring. Clear communication to students regarding these uncertainties will therefore be essential.

Across the United States, policymakers, accreditors, and institutions are reexamining the traditional bachelor's degree. For generations, the dominant model of undergraduate education has been a four-year, 120-credit degree. That structure has become so normalized that many assume it is a defining requirement of the bachelor's degree itself. In recent years, however, growing concern about college affordability, student debt, time-to-degree, and the labor market value of postsecondary credentials has prompted renewed interest in whether some bachelor's degrees can require fewer credits without sacrificing quality (Carlson, 2026; Povich, 2024).

Rather than simply accelerating programs to compress the same 120 credits into a shorter calendar, a growing number of institutions, accreditors, and state systems are considering or approving reduced-credit bachelor's degrees (RCDs), programs that require fewer total credits, often around 90 to 100. These RCDs allow students to complete a bachelor's degree in roughly three academic years. To reduce credit hours, educational institutions typically preserve core major requirements while reducing electives. In some cases, RCDs are explicitly designed for adult learners, transfer students, or students with clearly defined career goals (Alonso, 2025; Carolina Public Press, 2026; Olson, 2026).

This report is intended for Ohio policymakers, public colleges and universities, and other stakeholders who are considering where RCD pathways may be feasible under current conditions. It examines the feasibility of RCDs in Ohio by drawing on a national inventory of programs, a review of accreditation and Ohio regulatory requirements, interviews with institutional and field-level stakeholders, and a survey of graduate and professional admissions leaders. Its purpose is to identify where reduced-credit pathways appear most viable, what constraints are likely to shape their development, and what questions remain unresolved.

Until recently, RCDs occupied only a small place in American higher education. Yet they are quickly gaining much greater policy and institutional attention. Several institutional accreditors now have formal pathways for reviewing such programs, including the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), the New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE), the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU), and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges¹ (SACSCOC) (Lederman, 2024; NWCCU, 2026). States including Indiana, Utah, Maine, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Oklahoma, North Carolina, and California, have taken legislative or regulatory action to encourage, permit, or study shorter bachelor's degrees (Alonso, 2025; Louisiana Board of Regents, 2026; Massachusetts Department of Higher Education, 2026; Murphy, 2026; Sartwell, 2026; Utah System of Higher Education, 2024; Zinshteyn, 2026). Institutions across the country—most often in applied and workforce-facing fields such as business, cybersecurity, criminal justice, health administration, public health, and design—have launched or proposed RCD pathways (Alonso, 2025; Carlson, 2026).

¹ Effective September 1, 2026, Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges will be known as “The Commission on Colleges and Universities” or as “The Commission.”

At the same time, some have raised concerns about RCDs. Critics worry that these efforts to reduce credit hours may narrow course requirements and learning objectives too much, reduce students' opportunity for exploration and intellectual development, create confusion for employers and graduate schools, or produce a two-tier system in which lower-cost students are steered into shorter and potentially less portable credentials (Carlson, 2026; Povich, 2024). Even supporters generally acknowledge that RCDs are unlikely to be appropriate for every field or every student population. Concerns are greater in areas governed by professional licensure, specialized accreditation, extensive clinical requirements, or strong expectations for graduate and professional study (Alonso, 2026; Olson, 2026).

Ohio is now examining the feasibility of RCDs and confronting these concerns directly. The Advance Ohio Higher Education Act directs the Ohio Department of Higher Education (ODHE) to conduct a feasibility study on bachelor's degree programs that require three years to complete. The law instructs ODHE to examine multiple fields of study and assess the feasibility of reducing course requirements, electives, and total credit hours. This is distinct from the state's existing mechanisms for accelerating progress through traditional bachelor's degrees such as College Credit Plus (Ohio's dual enrollment program). The legislation also explicitly calls for analysis of accreditation-related issues (Ohio General Assembly, 2025). In effect, Ohio legislators are asking where, under what conditions, and with what safeguards RCDs might be responsibly implemented.

The report proceeds in four parts. First, we describe the study approach and methods. Second, we present evidence on the national landscape of reduced-credit bachelor's degrees and the accreditation, licensure, and Ohio policy context that shapes their feasibility. Third, we present a field-level feasibility assessment and accompanying matrix that rates selected fields based on the extent to which current conditions appear to support or constrain RCD design. Fourth, we synthesize findings from the national inventory, document review, interviews, and survey to identify the main opportunities and constraints for reduced-credit bachelor's degrees in Ohio.

Study Approach and Methods

This study used four sources of evidence to assess the feasibility of RCDs in Ohio. We developed a national inventory of RCDs, reviewed institutional and specialized accreditation and Ohio regulatory requirements, conducted interviews with relevant stakeholders, and surveyed graduate and professional admissions professionals in Ohio. Together, these sources helped us examine where RCDs are already operating, how accreditors and regulators are treating them, and what constraints are likely to matter most for Ohio. We describe these data sources below and provide additional detail on the interview protocols and survey instrument in the appendix. These evidence sources informed both the descriptive sections of the report and the field-level feasibility matrix, which is presented later as a companion tool for comparing feasibility across

selected fields in Ohio. We also provide the national inventory of identified RCD programs as a companion file so readers can review the programs, institutions, fields, credit requirements, and source links that informed the national landscape analysis.

For this project, we defined an RCD as a standalone bachelor's degree requiring approximately 90 to 115 semester credits to complete. We excluded programs that only reduced calendar time while retaining the standard 120-credit curriculum. We also excluded programs that require substantial outside credit, such as associate degrees, transfer-heavy models, combined bachelor's-master's pathways, or models built primarily around prior learning or precollege credit.

In addition to the descriptive and thematic analyses presented in the report, we used these evidence sources to develop a field-level feasibility assessment for selected Ohio-relevant fields. This assessment applies a common framework to identify where current statutory, accreditation, professional, and experiential requirements appear to leave room for credit reduction, where reduced-credit design may be possible with meaningful change, and where current conditions make such programs unlikely.

National Inventory of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs

We developed the national inventory to describe the current landscape of RCDs across U.S. postsecondary institutions. We used Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) as the starting institutional frame, drawing on institution names, identifiers, states, and institutional web addresses from the most recent directory file available at the time of the scan. We excluded bachelor's degree programs that only reduced calendar time while retaining a standard 120-credit curriculum. We also excluded programs that required substantial outside credit, such as associate degrees, transfer-heavy models, combined bachelor's and master's pathways, or models that relied primarily on prior learning credit. Where institutions expressed credits in quarter units, we converted them to semester-credit equivalents using a ratio of 1.5 quarter credits to 1 semester credit.

We used Python to make the scan reproducible, scalable, and auditable. The scripts applied the same institutional frame, search terms, URL rules, page filters, and output fields across institutions. A generative AI coding assistant helped us draft and debug portions of the code, but RAND researchers reviewed the scripts, tested them against known examples and false positives, and controlled the final search rules.

The inventory process combined two scripted passes in Python with targeted follow-up and human review. In the first pass, we used Python to scan institutional websites, academic pages, likely program paths, catalogs, and downloadable PDF materials. The scripts searched for terms such as "three-year degree," "three-year bachelor," "90-credit bachelor," "reduced-credit degree," and "accelerated bachelor." This pass identified candidate evidence and captured URLs, matched text snippets, page types, and apparent credit-hour evidence. We designed this pass to find possible RCDs broadly, not to make final inclusion decisions.

In the second pass, we searched more deeply when the first pass produced ambiguous or incomplete evidence. This pass added search-engine queries, catalog-platform review, HTML catalog crawling, and PDF catalog parsing. We also reviewed state, system, accreditor, and media sources when those sources pointed to specific RCDs.

After discovery, we merged and deduplicated candidate pages. We then used an AI-assisted human-in-the-loop review process to investigate the programs that the web scraping flagged. We used a structured prompt to classify candidate pages, extract program names, identify credit-hour information, summarize relevant evidence, and flag cases that required human review. The model helped organize evidence; it did not determine final inclusion.

RAND researchers reviewed the model-assisted outputs, checked source links, compared evidence across pages, separated multi-program listings, and made the final inclusion decisions. For each confirmed program, we coded institution, state, degree title, broad field, credit requirement, delivery model, target population, launch timing, and related contextual information. When public sources included this information, we also recorded whether the RCD was the only offering, whether the institution offered a traditional 120-credit counterpart, and whether the institution described the program as a pilot or permanent offering. The resulting inventory supported both descriptive analysis of national activity and later comparison to Ohio's institutional and field-level context.

Review of Accreditation, Statute, and Licensure Requirements

We reviewed accreditation, licensure, and state policy documents to identify the formal constraints that may shape RCD feasibility. This review focused on both broad institutional requirements and field-specific requirements.

At the institutional level, we reviewed policies and guidance from the major U.S. institutional accreditors. We examined whether each accreditor maintained a minimum credit expectation for bachelor's degrees, how it defined and treated RCD programs, what documentation or justification institutions had to provide, and the timeline for the application and review process.

At the field level, we reviewed specialized accreditation standards and licensure requirements in selected professions and disciplines that are important to Ohio's public universities and workforce priorities. These included highly regulated fields, such as education, nursing, engineering, and architecture, as well as fields forecasted to be among Ohio's fastest growing. We focused on whether external bodies specified minimum credit requirements, required coursework in particular content areas, mandated clinical or practicum experiences, or otherwise constrained the design of a 90-credit bachelor's degree.

We also reviewed Ohio-specific requirements that could affect the approval or design of RCDs in Ohio, including general education expectations, licensure rules, and transfer or articulation requirements. These included the Ohio Revised Code, Ohio Administrative Code, licensing board materials, and Ohio Department of Higher Education academic program review guidance.

Stakeholder Interviews

Policy documents alone cannot show how institutions, accreditors, boards, and workforce stakeholders interpret requirements or weigh tradeoffs. We conducted semi-structured interviews to gather information about practical feasibility, implementation concerns, and areas where expectations are still evolving. In total, we conducted 29 interviews with stakeholders in Ohio and in other states. Interviewees included academic leaders at Ohio public universities, representatives from institutional and specialized accreditors, licensure board and professional association representatives, and selected national policy and state higher education leaders. We also interviewed leaders at institutions outside Ohio that had launched, proposed, or reviewed RCDs. Importantly, we designed these interviews to capture a range of relevant perspectives rather than to produce a representative sample of all stakeholders. We use them in the report as qualitative evidence about how RCD feasibility is currently being interpreted and negotiated in practice.

We tailored interview protocols by respondent type but they addressed common themes. These included the perceived purpose of RCDs, likely areas of feasibility and constraint, issues related to accreditation and licensure, implications for graduate and professional education, communication and degree labeling, and workforce or employer considerations. We conducted interviews virtually. With participant consent, we recorded and transcribed interviews or documented them through detailed notes. We then coded the material thematically to identify recurring patterns, areas of agreement, and areas of uncertainty.

Survey of Graduate and Professional Admissions Leaders

We fielded an online survey to better understand how RCDs may affect graduate and professional admissions in Ohio. An RCD may be approvable and licensure-compatible, but students may still face uncertainty when applying to graduate or professional programs. The survey yielded 28 responses with 10 of the 16 institutions responding. Because respondents forwarded the survey beyond the initial set of recipients, we cannot calculate a response rate, and the results should be interpreted as a small, descriptive set of perspectives rather than a representative picture of all graduate and professional programs in Ohio.

The survey targeted graduate and professional school leaders and others involved in admissions review or admissions policy at Ohio institutions. Respondents included graduate school administrators, deans, associate deans, admissions staff, and program-level faculty or administrators involved in admissions decisions. The survey asked about published admissions requirements, the role of total undergraduate credits in admissions eligibility and competitiveness, the importance of specific prerequisites and other indicators of readiness, and how respondents would view applicants with approximately 90-credit bachelor's degrees. It also asked what institutions would need to communicate to students and to graduate or professional programs if RCDs expand in Ohio.

Study Limitations

This study assessed feasibility, not outcomes. RCDs remain relatively new in the United States, so evidence on student outcomes, employer reception, graduate and professional school portability, and long-term labor market effects remains limited. Many programs in the national inventory had been recently approved, newly launched, or still pending implementation.

Public information was uneven across institutions and accreditors. Some institutions had detailed curriculum materials and formal program descriptions, while others had only announcements or partial catalog information available at the time of review. Likewise, where evidence was incomplete or ambiguous, we interpreted findings cautiously and relied on multiple sources when possible.

Moreover, this study reflects the current policy environment. Accreditor guidance, state policy, and institutional practice in this area continue to evolve. As a result, the report should be read as an assessment of current feasibility under present conditions rather than as a fixed prediction of future policy or institutional action. In addition, some of our analyses focused on Ohio regulations and the perspectives of Ohio stakeholders, so our findings may not be fully generalizable to other states.

Finally, some of our evidence sources are also more comprehensive than others. We designed the national inventory and document review to be broad and systematic and the accreditation and feasibility review to be Ohio focused, while the interviews and survey were selective and descriptive. As a result, interview and survey findings are best understood as informing how relevant stakeholders are currently interpreting feasibility, rather than as representative estimates of views across all institutions or fields.

National Landscape of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs

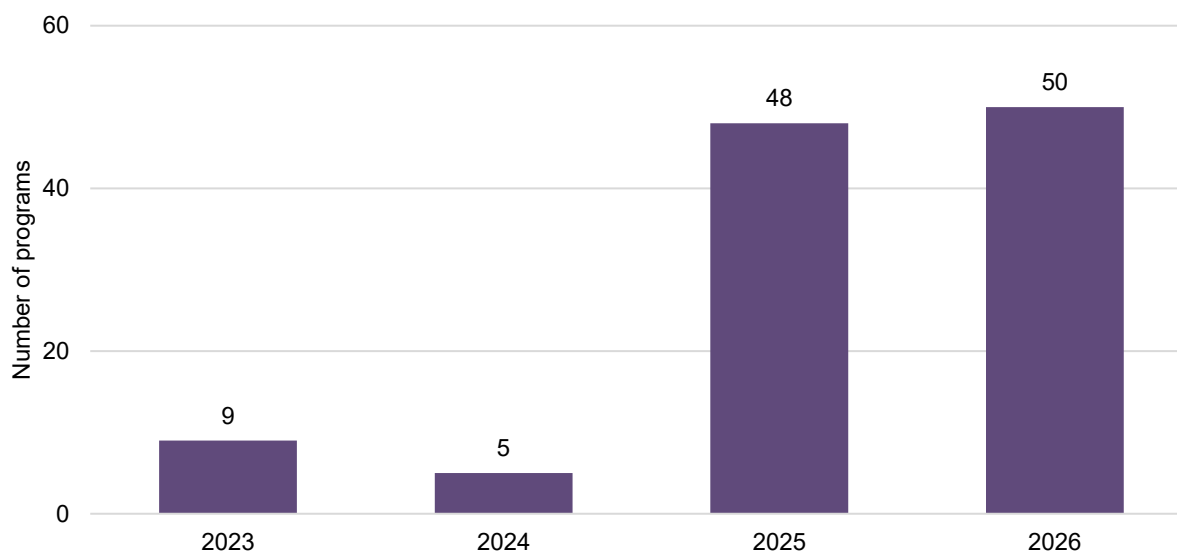
We begin by describing the national landscape of RCD activity because it provides context for understanding how institutions elsewhere are designing these programs and where such activity has been concentrated to date. The evidence in this section comes primarily from the national inventory.

Reduced-Credit Programs Have Grown Rapidly but Remain Concentrated in A Few States and Institutions

RCDs remain limited in number nationally, but they have expanded rapidly in the past two years. Our national inventory includes 119 programs that institutions had publicly announced as of May 2026. These programs are concentrated in a relatively small number of states and institutions, are more common at private nonprofit institutions than at public institutions, and are most often located in applied and workforce-facing fields.

The number of RCDs announced by institutions increased sharply from five programs in 2024 to 48 programs in 2025 (Figure 1).² The sharp increase likely reflects growing institutional interest and the emergence of clearer approval pathways from states and accreditors. The number of RCDs in 2026 reflects the timing of data collection for the inventory, which concluded in May 2026 and did not capture announcements later in the year.

Figure 1. The Number of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Programs Announced by Institutions Increased Five-Fold from 2023-2026



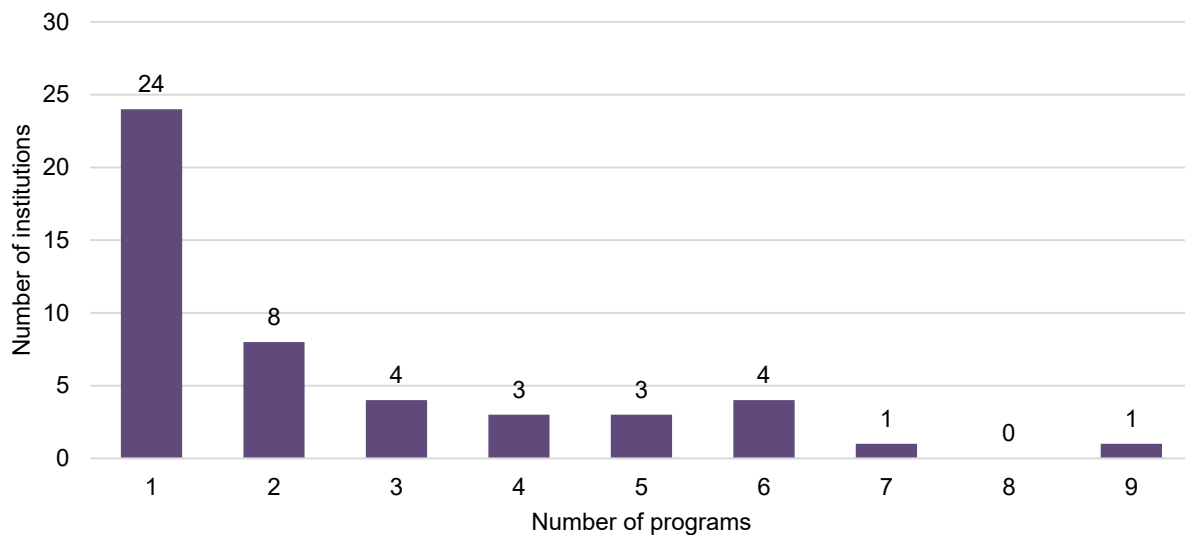
SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026. Excludes 7 programs where announcement year was not found.

Most institutions had announced only a small number of RCDs (Figure 2). Of the 48 institutions in the inventory, 32 had announced one or two programs. Only nine institutions announced five or more programs. This pattern suggests that RCDs remain concentrated among a relatively small number of programs within each institution, and that institutions continued to offer many traditional-length bachelor's degrees.

² “Announced” means a new RCD was announced online through an institution’s website or a media article. It reflects RCDs that institutions planned to open for enrollment in the announcement year or a subsequent year. We report number of RCDs announced, rather than number of RCDs open for enrollment, to capture overall interest in RCDs in recent years.

Figure 2. Most Institutions Announced One or Two Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Programs, while a Few Announced Five or More



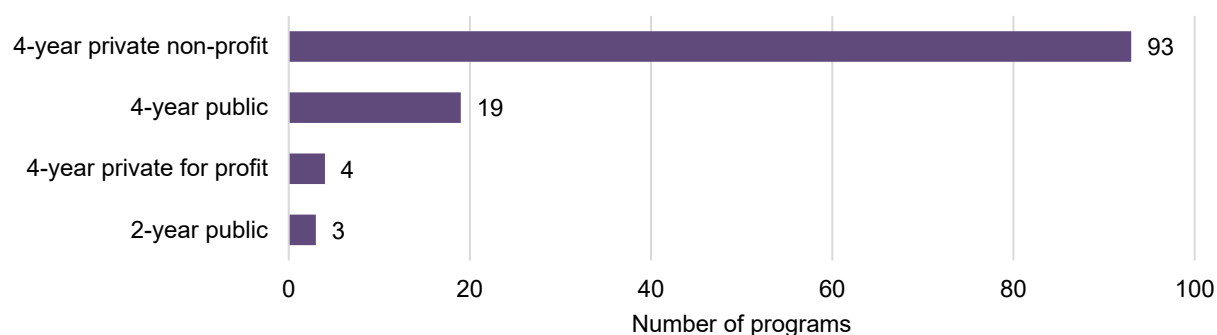
SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

Most Identified Programs Are at Private Nonprofit Institutions and Delivered Online

Private nonprofit institutions account for most identified programs (Figure 3). Of the 119 programs in the inventory, 93 were announced by four-year private nonprofit institutions. Four-year public institutions accounted for 19 programs, while only seven programs were announced by four-year private for-profit institutions or two-year public institutions. This distribution suggests that early development of RCDs has been more common among private nonprofit institutions than among public university systems.

Figure 3. Three-quarters of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs were Announced by Four-Year Private Nonprofit Institutions



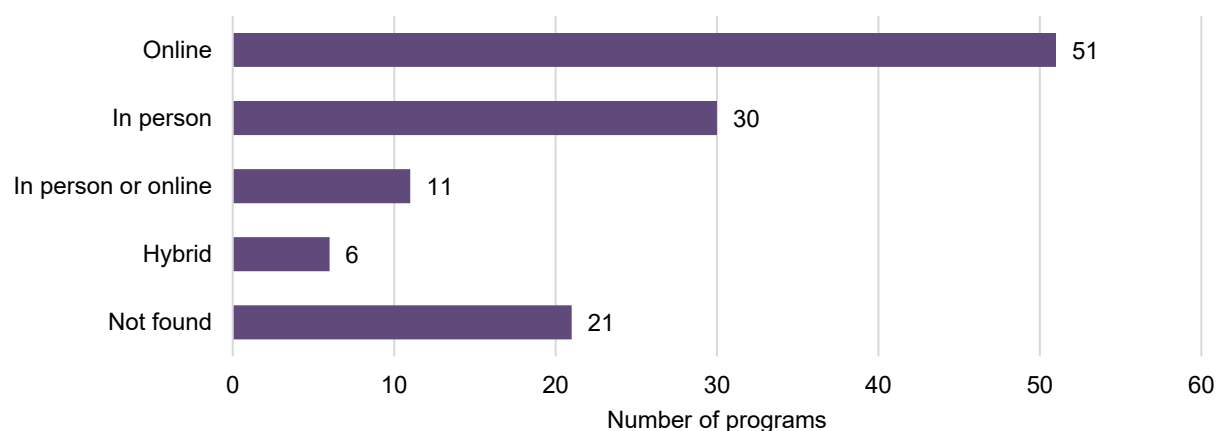
SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.
NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

The percentage of RCDs announced by four-year private nonprofit institutions and two-year public institutions was disproportionate to their share of all degree-granting institutions in the U.S. Although four-year private nonprofit institutions announced 78 percent of all RCDs, they comprise only 36 percent of all degree-granting postsecondary institutions. Conversely, two-year public institutions comprise 23 percent of all degree-granting institutions, but they announced only three percent of RCDs.³ The percentage of RCDs announced by four-year public and four-year private for-profit institutions (16 percent, 3 percent) was similar to their share of all degree-granting institutions (20 percent, 8 percent). These differences may relate to the different resource or governance constraints faced by four-year private nonprofit institutions and two-year public institutions, which may affect their capacity to design and launch new programs.

The most common way of delivering RCDs was online (Figure 4). Of the 119 programs in the inventory, 51 were online only and 30 were in person only. Only 11 had online and in-person options, and only six were offered using hybrid delivery (i.e., online and in-person components).

³ Table 312.80. Number and percentage distribution of degree-granting postsecondary institutions with first-year undergraduates, by control and level of institution and percentage of students with disabilities: Selected academic years, 2010-11 through 2021-22. National Center for Education Statistics, Digest of Education Statistics, https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d22/tables/dt22_312.80.asp

Figure 4. The Most Common Way of Delivering Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs was Online

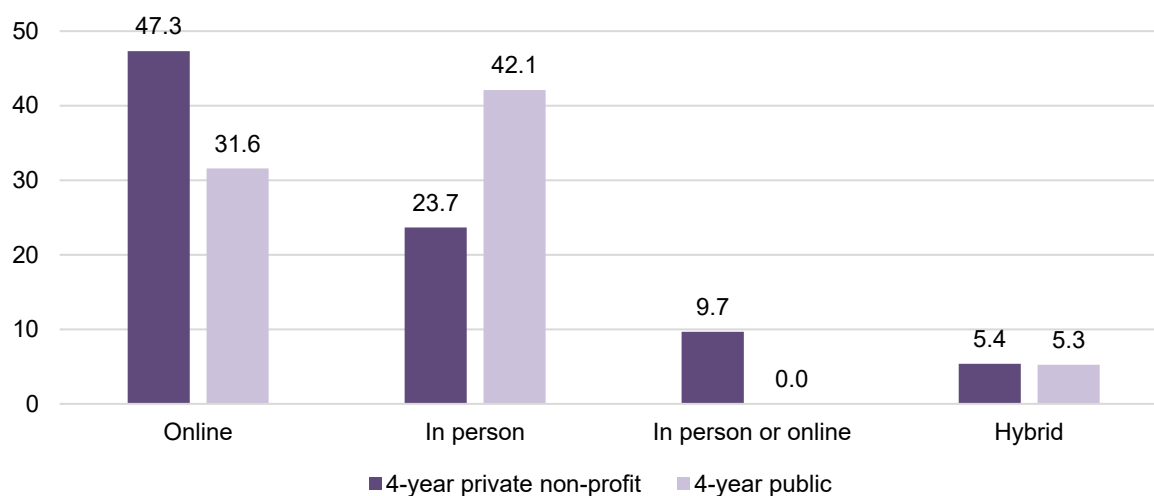


SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

RCDs offered by four-year private non-profit institutions were more likely to be delivered online and less likely to be delivered in person than RCDs offered by four-year public institutions (Figure 5). Nearly half (47 percent) of RCDs offered by four-year private non-profit institutions were online only, while only one-third (32 percent) of RCDs offered by four-year public institutions were online only. In contrast, 42 percent of RCDs offered by four-year public institutions were in-person only, while only one-quarter (24 percent) of RCDs offered by four-year private non-profit institutions were in-person only.

Figure 5. Reduced-Credit Degrees Offered by Four-Year Private Non-Profit Institutions were More Likely to Deliver Online Only



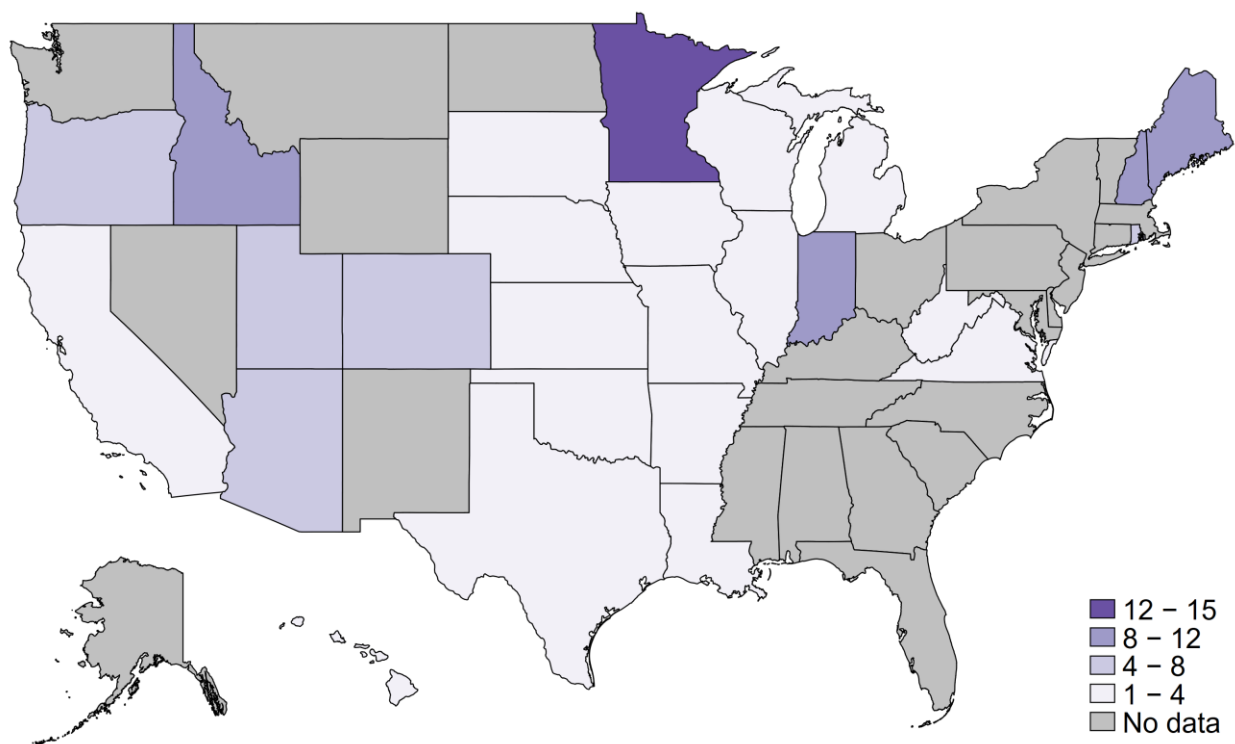
SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by four-year private non-profit institutions (N=88) and four-year public institutions (N=15) as of May 2026. Excludes programs where delivery method was not found.

Reduced-Credit Activity is Concentrated in a Small Number of States

Institutions that launched RCDs were located in 25 states (Figure 6). Yet 48 percent of all RCDs had been announced by institutions in five states. The five states where institutions launched 10 or more programs were Idaho, Indiana, Maine, Minnesota, and New Hampshire. In contrast, 14 states had institutions that announced three or fewer RCDs accounting for less than one-fifth (18 percent) of all programs. Given that many RCDs were offered online, they may have been open to enrollees outside the institution's home state.

Figure 6. Institutions in Five States Announced Half of all Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Programs



SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

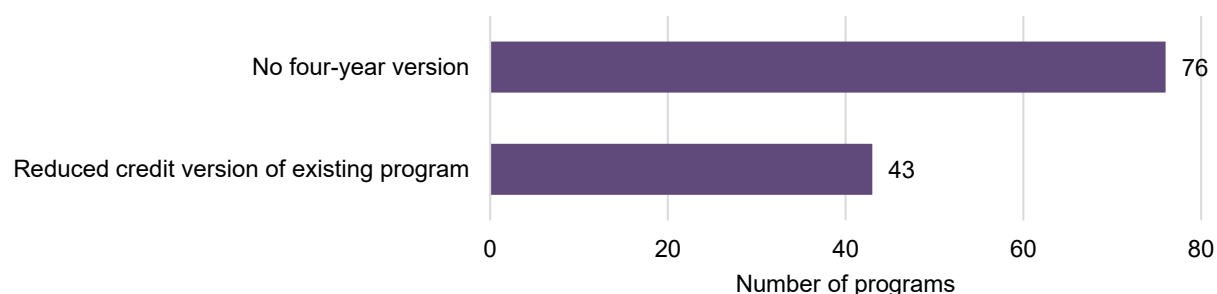
Institutions Describe RCDs as Lower-Cost, Faster, and Often Workforce-Oriented

On program websites and in news media, institutions described a variety of goals for their RCDs. Almost all institutions mentioned helping students earn a bachelor's degree in less time and at lower cost. Six institutions stated that they launched programs to help meet state or regional workforce needs. These institutions launched programs focused on technology-related fields (e.g., bioinformatics, cybersecurity, robotics) and business or public-service-related fields

(e.g., agribusiness, small business administration, police studies, public administration). Some institutions mentioned helping individuals with barriers to completion of a traditional-length degree, such as working adults and individuals with family responsibilities. For example, the University of Maine System, which announced programs at four universities in 2025, plans to serve students with prior college credit who have been away from postsecondary education for at least two years. On the other hand, two institutions described plans to serve “highly motivated” or “high performing” students who want to enter the workforce quickly, students who may have been less likely to face barriers. Finally, one institution mentioned the need to compete with other institutions in the region that have received approval to offer RCDs.

For most RCDs, there was not a similar four-year version of the program at the same institution (Figure 7). Of all programs, 76 programs (64 percent) did not have a similar four-year version. The remaining 43 programs (36 percent) were reduced-credit versions of a four-year program at the same institution.

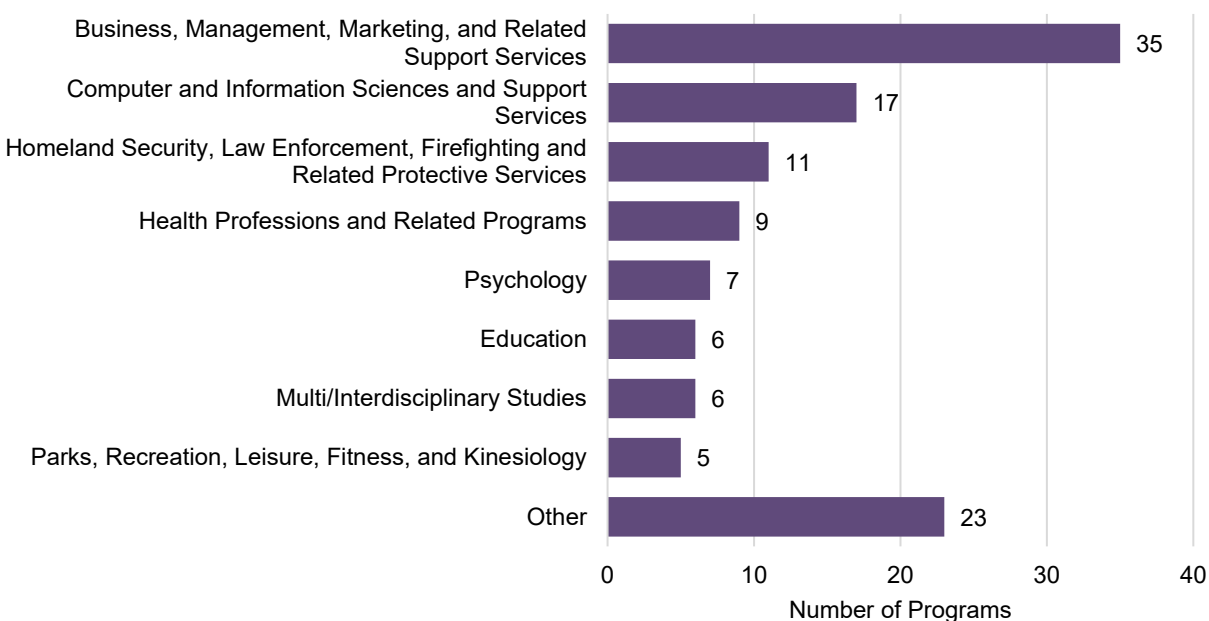
Figure 7. For Most Reduced-Credit Bachelor’s Programs, there was no Four-Year Version at the Same Institution



SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.
 NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

RCDs are concentrated in applied and workforce-facing fields (Figure 8). Business-related fields accounted for the largest share of programs, followed by computing and information sciences, protective services, health professions, and psychology. This suggests RCDs are most often being developed in a narrow set of applied workforce-focused programs.

Figure 8. Applied Fields of Study Had the Largest Numbers of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degree Programs

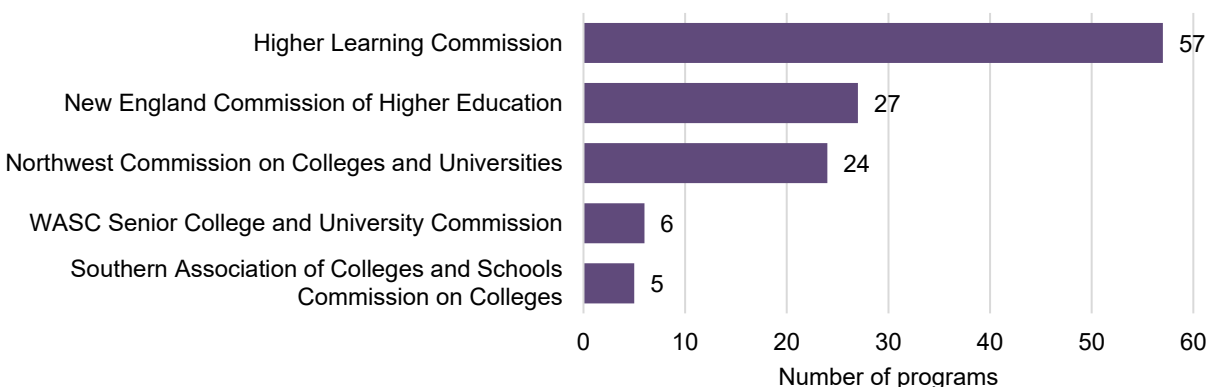


SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026. Fields of study are two-digit-level 2020 Classification of Instructional Program codes. Fields with fewer than five programs are aggregated into "Other".

Each RCD was accredited by an independent accrediting organization, and the number of programs accredited by each organization varied widely (Figure 9). HLC accredited 57 programs (48 percent of all programs), while NECHE and NWCCU accredited 27 and 24 programs (43 percent of all programs), respectively. Together, the WASC Senior College and University Commission (WSCUC) and Southern Association of Colleges and SACSCOC accredited only 11 programs. Although HLC accredits roughly one-third of accredited institutions and programs nationally (Council for Higher Educational Accreditation, 2024), nearly one-half of the reduced-credit bachelor's programs identified in this study were offered by HLC-accredited institutions, indicating modest overrepresentation relative to its overall institutional footprint.

Figure 9. The Number of Programs Accredited by Each Independent Accrediting Organization Varied Widely



SOURCE: RAND inventory of reduced-credit bachelor's programs.

NOTE: Number of programs announced by institutions as of May 2026.

Taken together, the national inventory suggests that RCDs remain a relatively limited but fast-growing part of the higher education landscape, concentrated in a small number of institutions, disproportionately located in private nonprofit institutions, and most common in applied, workforce-facing, and often flexible program formats.

Institutional Accreditation Policy and Guidance for RCDs

This section draws primarily on the review of institutional accretor policies and guidance, supplemented where relevant by interview evidence. Its purpose is to identify how institutional accreditors are currently treating RCD proposals and what that means for institutions considering such programs.

Institutional accreditors Have Created Review Pathways for RCDs

Institutional accreditors have developed policies and requirements for assessing and approving RCDs, but they continue to treat the traditional 120-credit bachelor's degree as the standard point of reference. Across accreditors, RCD proposals are no longer unusual or categorically disallowed. Several accreditors now have formal pathways or explicit guidance for reviewing bachelor's degrees below the traditional credit threshold (see Table 1). At the same time, greater openness of accreditors does not eliminate the need for institutions to carefully design programs, offer strong justifications for RCDs, and clearly communicate to students about the advantages and disadvantages of these pathways.

The Higher Learning Commission, which accredits most Ohio public universities, is especially important for understanding the options available in Ohio. HLC does not set a fixed minimum number of credits for reduced-credit bachelor's degrees. Instead, it treats 120 semester credits as the typical bachelor's degree length under its Assumed Practices, requires institutions

to explain and justify departures from that norm, and requires a site visit for an institution's first RCD program. Institutions seeking to offer an RCD must apply through HLC's substantive change process using a dedicated RCD application. In that application, institutions are expected to address mission alignment, student demand, the needs of the student population to be served, and postgraduation implications for employment or further education. HLC also places strong emphasis on transparency, particularly with respect to how institutions will communicate differences between reduced-credit and traditional programs to students.

Other institutional accreditors have adopted similar but not identical approaches. The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities and the WASC Senior College and University Commission also permit RCD proposals and do not require a fixed minimum number of credits. The Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC), NECHE and SACSCOC are somewhat more prescriptive. All three define RCDs as programs below the standard 120-credit bachelor's degree and establish a 90-credit minimum. ACCJC treats RCDs under its Substantive Change policy, while NECHE requires institutions to submit proposals under its innovation policy and expects those programs to include a pathway to a traditional four-year degree. SACSCOC has developed distinct degree-labeling conventions for RCDs and ties approval more explicitly to workforce need. Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE) differs from the others in that it has not established a separate RCD category and does not impose a fixed credit threshold, although it has acknowledged reduced-credit and accelerated undergraduate pathways in its broader materials.

Table 1. Accreditation Policies for Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degrees

Institutional accreditor	Minimum Credit Expectations	Treatment of RCDs	Required Justifications	Estimated Approval Timeline	Expectations Related to Program Naming or Degree Labeling	Communication and Marketing Policies
Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (ACCJC)	90 credits	Substantive Change policy	Institution's mission, general rational and need	Unclear	None	Must provide students with clear and accurate information in all publications
Higher Learning Commission (HLC)	None	Substantive Change policy	Institution's mission, needs of student populations, student demand, and postgraduation opportunities	3-8 months	None	Transparency of differences between RCDs and traditional program and implications and risks for further education and future work

Institutional accreditor	Minimum Credit Expectations	Treatment of RCDs	Required Justifications	Estimated Approval Timeline	Expectations Related to Program Naming or Degree Labeling	Communication and Marketing Policies
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)	None	None	None	2 months	None	None
New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE)	90 credits	The Policy on Innovation	Institution's mission and fulfills demonstrated need	Up to 2 years	Degree must be distinguished by means of a prefix	Transparency of differences between RCDs and traditional program and implications and risks for further education and future work
Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)	None	Minor Substantive Change policy	None	1-2 months	Identifier must be used (e.g., Accelerated Bachelor's)	Unclear
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC)	90 to 119 credits	Substantive Change policy	Evidence of workforce needs that supports shortened academic pathway	Unclear	Must use distinct degree labeling and limited to two options: Reduced-Hour Bachelor of (Discipline); Abridged Bachelor of (Discipline) to ensure transparency	Transparency of differences between RCDs and traditional program and implications and risks for further education and future work
WASC Senior College & University Commission (WSCUC)	No minimum	Substantive Change policy	Institution's mission, needs of student populations, and student demand and adds value different from traditional version of program in terms of learning outcomes, content, and costs	6-9 months	Unclear	Transparency of differences between RCDs and traditional program and implications and risks for further education and future work

SOURCE: Data pulled from institutional accreditors' websites as of May 2026.

Approval Still Requires Strong Justification and Clear Communication

Although institutional accreditor policies vary, their core expectations are similar. Accreditors generally require institutions to show that RCDs remain coherent, appropriately rigorous, and aligned with institutional mission and student need. They also expect institutions to explain how learning outcomes will be assessed and how the reduced-credit structure affects student pathways after graduation. Across institutional accreditors, transparency is a recurring theme. Some require or encourage clear naming distinctions between reduced-credit and traditional bachelor's degrees. Others allow more flexibility in naming but still require institutions to disclose how the program differs from a traditional degree and what implications that difference may have for transfer, graduate study, licensure, or employment.

For Ohio, the main implication is that institutional accreditors, such as HLC, are open to reviewing and approving RCD proposals. However, accreditation approval is still likely to be demanding. For instance, HLC requires a site visit for an institution's first RCD program. Institutions will also need to provide evidence that an RCD is intentionally designed, educationally coherent, and communicated clearly to students and other audiences.

Specialized Accreditation, Licensure and Ohio Program Approval Context

This section draws on the review of specialized accreditation standards, licensure requirements, Ohio policy documents, and selected interview evidence. Its purpose is to identify where field-specific requirements are more likely than institutional accreditation alone to set practical limits on reduced-credit design.

Field-Specific Requirements Often Set the Most Stringent Limits on RCD Design

Institutional accreditation is only one part of the feasibility picture. In many fields, programs must also align with specialized accreditation, professional licensure, or state academic program approval requirements. These program-specific requirements are more likely to set practical limits on RCD design.

Specialized accreditors review individual programs rather than institutions. Their standards often focus on the knowledge, experiences, and competencies students must acquire to enter a profession or continue to graduate study. In some fields, those standards leave substantial room for institutional discretion. In others, they impose detailed requirements related to required content, curriculum sequence, supervised practice, or total credit expectations.

In Ohio, many professions are regulated by state licensing boards that establish educational, experiential, and examination requirements for entry into practice. In some cases, those requirements are specified directly in state code. In others, the state defers to a national specialized accreditor or professional body. These arrangements matter because an RCD has limited value if it leaves graduates ineligible for licensure or at a disadvantage in the profession.

State higher education agencies also play a role in approving new programs. ODHE's program review guidance continues to treat the 120-credit bachelor's degree as the standard model, while allowing programs below that threshold if they are justified and approved. The framework also expects baccalaureate programs to include general education, typically at least 36 semester credits unless a deviation is approved. In addition, institutions must show alignment with mission, workforce relevance, student demand, and, where applicable, professional accreditation and licensure standards. ODHE also requires programs to align with statewide transfer and articulation agreements. We reviewed specialized accreditation standards, Ohio code, and licensure requirements in in-demand fields for the state, and several cross-field patterns emerged. Fields are more adaptable to RCD design when Ohio law does not prescribe a traditional four-year pathway, specialized accreditors do not require extensive course coverage or supervised practice, and employers or professional gatekeepers emphasize demonstrated competence rather than seat time. By contrast, fields are less adaptable when they combine rigid course sequences, substantial clinical or practicum requirements, and external expectations that align closely with the traditional 120-credit or longer bachelor's degree model. The examples below are illustrative rather than exhaustive; fuller discussion of additional reviewed fields appears in the appendix.

Architecture and Engineering Illustrate the Strongest External Constraints, Education Illustrates Clinical Requirement Constraints

Architecture and engineering fields illustrate the more constrained end of the spectrum. Architecture relies on a professional accreditor that explicitly requires a much larger credit load for the bachelor's-level professional degree. Engineering does not specify a total credit minimum in the same way, but the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology (ABET) requires substantial mathematics, science, and engineering content, and Ohio law ties professional engineering licensure to graduation from an accredited four-year engineering curriculum. Teacher preparation education provides a different kind of example. Neither Ohio code nor the major educator preparation accreditors set a bachelor's-level credit minimum in the same way that architecture does, but prelicensure teacher preparation education includes substantial clinical requirements and external competency expectations that make compression much more difficult in practice.

These examples underscore the importance of field-level analysis. The question is not simply whether a program can be brought below 120 credits. It is whether that can happen while preserving required content, experiential preparation, approval eligibility, and student pathways after graduation.

Taken together, the national inventory, policy review, interviews, and survey provide a fuller picture of where reduced-credit bachelor's degrees appear most feasible in Ohio, what constraints are most likely to arise, and what conditions would matter most for responsible

implementation. The next section applies that evidence in a structured field-level framework designed to help readers compare feasibility across selected fields.

Field-Level Feasibility Assessment for Ohio Fields

The evidence presented thus far suggests that the feasibility of RCDs in Ohio depends heavily on field-specific conditions. To translate that evidence into a more decision-relevant form, we developed a field-level feasibility assessment for selected fields relevant to Ohio's institutions and workforce priorities. The assessment applies a common framework to rate where reduced-credit design appears more or less plausible under current statutory, accreditation, licensure, workforce, and institutional conditions. We provide the resulting feasibility matrix alongside this report as a companion tool that allows readers to compare fields and review the evidence supporting each rating. In the appendix, we describe the assessment criteria, evidence sources, and process we used to assign the summative ratings. The following section synthesizes the broader implications of the full study for Ohio.

We used these factors to assign overall field ratings through structured judgment rather than a mechanical scoring formula. In other words, the overall rating for a field reflects the combination of statutory, accreditation, professional, and experiential constraints present, together with whether comparable reduced-credit programs already exist elsewhere.

- 1) *Ohio statute and, where relevant, licensing board requirements:* These specify whether state law requires degree length, credit, or content requirements.
- 2) *Specialized accreditor standards:* Accreditors often set specific curricular components, credit expectations, or supervised practice.
- 3) *Industry and professional standards:* In some fields and industries employers or professional associations shape expectations for entry into the field.
- 4) *Clinical, practicum, internship, observation, or other experiential components:* Because these experiences may be difficult to compress, fields with substantial experiential components may be harder to adapt to a reduced-credit design.
- 5) *Whether current reduced-credit bachelor's programs exist:* We used the national inventory to identify whether comparable reduced-credit programs already exist in other states or under accreditors relevant to Ohio.

As shown in Table 2, we then grouped fields into three broad categories. Highly feasible fields are those in which current statutory, accreditation, and professional conditions leave substantial room for credit reduction. The resulting field-level feasibility matrix is provided alongside this report as a companion tool for readers who want to examine the ratings and supporting notes for individual fields in greater detail. Fields that are feasible with achievable change are those in which RCD design may be possible, but only with meaningful redesign, coordination, or accommodation. Likely infeasible fields are those in which multiple statutory, accreditation, or professional barriers make a 90-credit bachelor's degree unlikely under current

conditions. Table 2 should be interpreted as a guide to the types of conditions associated with each overall category, not as a row-by-row decision rule under which any single criterion automatically determines the final rating.

Table 2. Feasibility Scale for the Assessment of Field-Level Candidacy for Reduced-Credit Baccalaureate Degrees

	Green: Highly Feasible	Yellow: Feasible with achievable change	Red: Likely infeasible; multiple or improbable changes needed
Ohio Statute	Ohio code does not mention total credit hours required	Ohio code requires minimum number of credit hours in specific content areas (but not overall)	Ohio code defines 120 credit hours or more for baccalaureate degree
Specialized accreditor requirements/standards	Specialized accreditor requirements/standards do not mention total credit hours required	Specialized accreditor requirements/standards require minimum number of credit hours in specific content areas (but not overall)	Specialized accreditor defines 120 credit hours or more for baccalaureate degree
Industry/professional standards	Industry/professional standards do not mention total credit hours required	Industry/professional standards require minimum number of credit hours in specific content areas (but not overall)	Industry/professional standards define 120 credit hours or more for baccalaureate degree
Clinical/observation hours required	Clinical/observation hours not required to graduate from baccalaureate program	Clinical/observation hours required before graduation but achievable within three years of beginning degree program	Clinical/observation hours required before graduation but <u>not</u> achievable within three years of beginning degree program
90 credit-hour adoption in other contexts	Multiple examples across accreditors or states, including at least one highly comparable example	At least one HLC-approved or otherwise highly comparable example	No known reduced-credit examples in same or closely related field or few known examples, but outside HLC or weakly comparable

NOTE. Categories reflect current Ohio statutory requirements, specialized accreditation standards, industry or professional expectations, required clinical or observational experiences, and the presence or absence of comparable reduced-credit programs in other contexts.

This scale is intended to help readers interpret field-level conditions rather than to serve as a mechanical scoring system. After reviewing evidence for each field across the five criteria, we synthesized that evidence to determine whether current conditions in Ohio appeared broadly supportive, mixed, or constraining for reduced-credit bachelor's degree design. Thus, the overall rating should be interpreted as a summary judgment based on the pattern of evidence across criteria, not as a numeric average or weighted score. A green rating indicates that a field appears to offer relatively strong flexibility under current conditions. A yellow rating indicates that a

reduced-credit pathway may be possible, but only with substantial coordination or redesign. A red rating indicates that important barriers would likely make implementation difficult without major changes in accreditation, licensure, or professional standards.

Highly Feasible Fields Examples

Some fields appear relatively well positioned for RCD development. Business administration is one example. Ohio code does not specify a total credit-hour requirement for general business bachelor's degrees, and business accreditors focus more on learning outcomes, faculty qualifications, and curricular quality than on a fixed bachelor's credit minimum. In addition, the national inventory includes many RCDs in business and related management fields, including several at HLC-accredited institutions. These patterns suggest that business programs may offer meaningful room to reduce total credits while preserving core preparation.

Computer science and related information technology fields also appear comparatively promising. These fields generally do not face rigid state licensure requirements, and specialized accreditation is often optional rather than universally required. The national inventory includes multiple programs in computing, cybersecurity, software development, and related fields. In these areas, institutions may be able to preserve major requirements while reducing elective space or other flexible credits. Employer expectations may also be more focused on technical competencies and applied skill than on formal credit totals alone.

Other business and professional fields may also fall into this category when they lack rigid statutory barriers, do not depend on extensive supervised practice, and have already attracted RCD experimentation elsewhere. At the same time, even highly feasible fields still require careful program design, especially if institutions want to preserve graduate-school options or avoid confusion about degree meaning.

Fields Feasible with Achievable Change

Other fields may be feasible, but only with substantial design work and coordination. Teacher preparation is a good example. Ohio code does not specify a fixed total number of credits for teacher education programs, but it does require specific content in areas such as reading instruction. More importantly, Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) standards and state expectations require structured clinical experiences and supervised practice. These requirements do not necessarily make RCDs unlikely, but they make them considerably more complex. An RCD teacher preparation pathway would likely require sustained coordination among institutions, school partners, and accreditors, along with careful sequencing of coursework and field experiences.

Some applied health and laboratory-related fields may also fall into this middle category. These programs may not face an explicit statewide credit minimum, but they often rely on substantial practicum or clinical expectations and tightly sequenced coursework in the sciences. In such fields, RCD adoption may be feasible only if institutions can redesign academic

calendars, integrate coursework and practice more intensively, or secure flexibility from relevant external bodies without undermining program quality or recognition.

This middle category is important because it captures the fact that some fields are constrained but not necessarily closed off. In these cases, feasibility depends less on a simple legal yes-or-no question and more on whether institutions, accreditors, and professional stakeholders can support a redesigned model that still meets the expectations of the field.

Likely Infeasible Fields Examples

Some fields appear unlikely to support 90-credit bachelor's degree pathways under current conditions. Architecture is one of the clearest examples. The professional bachelor's in architecture is governed by a specialized accreditor that explicitly requires a much larger credit structure than a 90-credit program would allow. In addition, Ohio licensure depends on graduation from an accredited architecture program. Together, these constraints make a reduced-credit professional bachelor's degree in architecture unlikely without major changes at both the accreditation and professional levels.

Engineering pathways tied to professional licensure also appear highly constrained. Although ABET does not prescribe a single total credit minimum in the same way architecture does, it does require substantial mathematics, science, and engineering content. Those requirements, together with Ohio's reliance on accredited four-year engineering curricula for professional engineering licensure, leave limited room for a 90-credit bachelor's degree that would preserve expected preparation for licensure-track engineering work.

Some other fields may also prove difficult for similar reasons. Where programs are governed by cumulative technical sequences, extensive supervised practice, or strong professional norms tied to traditional degree structure, RCDs may face barriers that are not easily addressed through minor redesign alone.

Implications for Ohio

The field-level assessment suggests that Ohio's most plausible early candidates for RCD development are likely to be applied and workforce-facing fields with relatively flexible regulatory environments. Business, information technology, cybersecurity, and some related applied fields are more likely to fall into this category than fields such as architecture, engineering, and some clinically intensive or licensure-dependent professions.

The analysis also suggests that reduced-credit implementation in Ohio will depend not only on whether the state permits these programs, but on whether institutions can design them in ways that preserve core learning outcomes, maintain clear student pathways, and remain legible to employers, accreditors, and graduate or professional programs. In fields with substantial experiential or licensure requirements, even modest reductions may require extensive restructuring or external accommodation. In those cases, the question is not only whether a 90-

credit program can be approved, but whether it can be implemented in a way that preserves the value and recognizability of the degree.

These field-level ratings should be interpreted as assessments under current conditions rather than fixed predictions. Accreditors, licensing boards, state policy, and institutional practice in this area continue to evolve. Full field-by-field detail appears in the accompanying feasibility matrix.

Limitations of the Field-Level Assessment

Several limitations should be kept in mind when interpreting the field-level assessment. The analysis reflects current regulatory, accreditation, and professional conditions rather than fixed or permanent constraints, and those conditions may change over time. It also focuses on structural feasibility rather than educational outcomes, which means that a rating of relatively high feasibility does not by itself imply that a reduced-credit program would preserve quality or produce equivalent outcomes. Finally, broad field categories may mask important variation across specific subfields and institutional implementations.

What the Evidence Suggests About Feasibility in Ohio

This concluding section synthesizes evidence from all four study components: the national inventory, the review of accreditation and regulatory requirements, stakeholder interviews, and the survey of graduate and professional admissions leaders, together with the field-level feasibility assessment presented in the prior section. Taken together, these sources point to six main findings about the feasibility of RCDs in Ohio. Rather than presenting a new analysis, this section distills the main implications of the evidence already introduced in the preceding sections.

Finding 1: Feasibility Varies by Academic Program or Field, With Applied Fields Perceived as the Most Adaptable

Feasibility varies substantially by field, with differences in curriculum structure, licensure requirements, specialized accreditation standards, and expectations for experiential learning and graduate study. The national inventory shows that RCDs are concentrated in applied and workforce-facing fields, such as business, computing and information technology, criminal justice and protective services, and public health. By contrast, the study identified far fewer programs in fields that are tightly sequenced, clinically intensive, or governed by extensive external requirements. This pattern is consistent with our interviews and the review of licensure and specialized accreditation requirements in Ohio, which show that some fields offer more room for redesign than others. Across stakeholder groups, respondents consistently described applied and occupationally oriented fields as more adaptable to reduced-credit design than fields such as engineering, teacher preparation, social work, and some health professions. According to

an academic leader from a four-year university, these fields seem compatible because they are “highly focused in terms of competencies.” At the same time, respondents in more sequential or regulated fields emphasized that feasibility depends not simply on credit totals but on whether a program can preserve the structure needed to develop competence over time. As one specialized accreditor participant put it, engineering coursework builds in layers, and “the stuff as an engineer that you take in your freshman year... is required for the engineering science classes” that follow, while third-year coursework is “prerequisite to the kind of culminating experiences that show up in the fourth year.” For Ohio, this means that feasibility judgments must be made field-by-field rather than assumed to apply broadly across undergraduate education.

Finding 2: Institutional accreditors Are Open to RCDs, but Approval and Design Remain Demanding

Accreditors have created formal pathways for RCD proposals and have already begun approving such programs. Most accreditors now have formal review pathways for bachelor’s programs below the traditional 120-credit norm, and some have already approved such programs. However, RCDs are not easy to approve or design. Across most accreditors, review expectations emphasize mission alignment, student demand, postgraduation implications, clarity of learning outcomes, and adequacy.

Institutional accreditors do not require exact outcome equivalence with 120-credit programs, but they are requiring clear, evidence-backed explanations for any differences. While accreditors are flexible with program types, they do not waver when it comes to assessing learning outcomes. One interview participant from an institutional accreditor shared, “We’re actually insisting on...a program map where you are telling us specifically here’s the outcomes that we have, here’s the program learning outcomes...here’s how we believe that these are at the bachelor’s degree level”. Accreditors apply similar scrutiny to general education requirements.

Institutional accreditors require that colleges address general education retention. The general education preservation requirement for most institutional accreditors reflects the belief that comprehensive knowledge and study are essential to the bachelor’s degree, regardless of credit hours. One interview participant from an institutional accreditor said campuses, “Need to talk about how general education, how that larger student learning experience is still retained.. how disciplinary depth and breadth is ensured”. Other institutional accreditors were more explicit in their stance on general education. One interview participant from an institutional accreditor shared, “You can’t say, ‘We’re not going to do math anymore. We’re not going to do English and writing anymore.’ We’re saying you need to keep a balance with your [general education], but you have latitude in how you’re managing electives.” For accreditors, the curriculum review examines whether the proposed degree structure produces graduates who have been both broadly educated and prepared for work in their field.

Finding 3: Most Reduced-Credit Programs Preserve Core Requirements and Reduce Flexibility, while Experiential Requirements are More Difficult to Compress

Across this study, the most common curricular strategy was not to reduce the major core substantially, but to reduce flexibility. Many programs appear to preserve core major requirements and, in many cases, general education requirements, while reducing electives, minors, certificates, or other optional credits. This pattern helps explain why RCDs often appear in applied fields, where institutions may be more willing to streamline degree structure in exchange for faster workforce entry.

Programs with substantial free-elective space or flexible curricular structure present the clearest structural opening for credit reduction. Most participants suggested that trimming or cutting out free-electives would be the easiest path to an RCD. According to an academic leader from a four-year university:

A bachelor's degree in economics, you have so many free electives. You can complete general education and degree requirements. And I haven't looked at it lately, but if you look at the double counting between some of the major requirements count as Gen. Eds, I don't think you hit 70 credit hours. So you could just lop off a bunch of free electives.

Programs taking this approach are eliminating courses that are not necessarily tied to any specific outcomes, thereby leaving the courses that are intact. As one academic leader from another four-year university reported, “What we're doing is we're removing the frills, like minors, concentrations and things like that. So here's the core degree, these are the courses you need, and that's it”. Some state agencies have codified this approach in their policies. One state's policy explicitly limits reduction to “the elimination only of unstructured non-essential electives outside the major,” prohibiting any changes to the major or general education requirements that support students in achieving a program's primary learning outcomes. Institutional accreditors have also reinforced this strategy, emphasizing that free elective removal is an effective approach for programs where learning outcomes are already mapped to course requirements rather than to unstructured elective credits.

Trimming free electives, however, may not work for every field, especially if a program's free electives do not sufficiently cover the desired reduction. Some fields may require a significant number of upper-division courses that are core to students' learning and success for further education and/or career readiness, such as some fields in engineering. If there are not sufficient free electives to effectively reduce total credits, programs will have to make cuts to general education and major courses, both of which accreditors and state agencies view unfavorably. Interview participants also raised concerns that programs with extensive experiential learning (e.g., clinicals, practicums, internships, co-ops, and capstone experiences) may be difficult to compress into an RCD program.

Interview participants consistently shared that hands-on learning was inextricably linked to career readiness and professional identity. One interview participant from a national policy organization shared, “if there are fewer opportunities for students to participate in clinicals or whatever experiential learning opportunity, you might lose some really high quality, high impact experiences”. For some highly regulated fields, experiential learning is heavily guarded and nonnegotiable. Social work and respiratory therapy programs operate under specialized accreditation standards that set minimum clinical hours, thereby removing experiential learning as an option for credit reduction. In teacher education, the pressure of reaching 90 credits, has led some colleges to reduce clinical and practicum hours which have generated some concerns about career readiness. An academic leader from a two-year college described its local employers’ opinions of program graduates, “The complaint that we almost immediately started getting from companies is they can’t communicate, they can’t write, they can’t talk to people”. Other colleges have approached modifying experiential learning creatively such as rethinking prerequisite chains, combining courses, creating accelerated pathways to graduate credentials, and examining, with caution, general education requirements. Interview participants from all stakeholder groups agree that no matter the difference in total credits, there should not be “a reduction in skills or capabilities of students”.

Finding 4: Reduced-Credit Pathways Appear Most Promising for Targeted Student Populations, Especially Adult and Re-Engaged Learners

Our evidence suggests that RCDs may be most attractive for targeted student populations rather than all undergraduates. The national inventory shows that many programs are delivered fully online or in flexible formats and that many institutions explicitly describe working adults, degree completers, students with prior college experience, or other nontraditional learners as intended audiences. Several programs also target students in specific workforce pathways rather than broadly defined traditional-age cohorts.

The most widely cited motivation for developing a RCD program was support for adult and non-traditional learners, including working adults, students with some college but no credential, first-generation college students, and students with prior-learning or military credit. An academic leader from a two-year college, for example, described how their student body informed their target population:

We're not required, but given... the student body that we serve, which is primarily adult, our average age is 28... that have some college but no degree for the most part and are working... I see lots of opportunity for these students to not only apply their life experience to credit for prior learning, but reach a bachelor's level, a credential that would help them... in terms of advancement at their institution or a change of career if they need it.

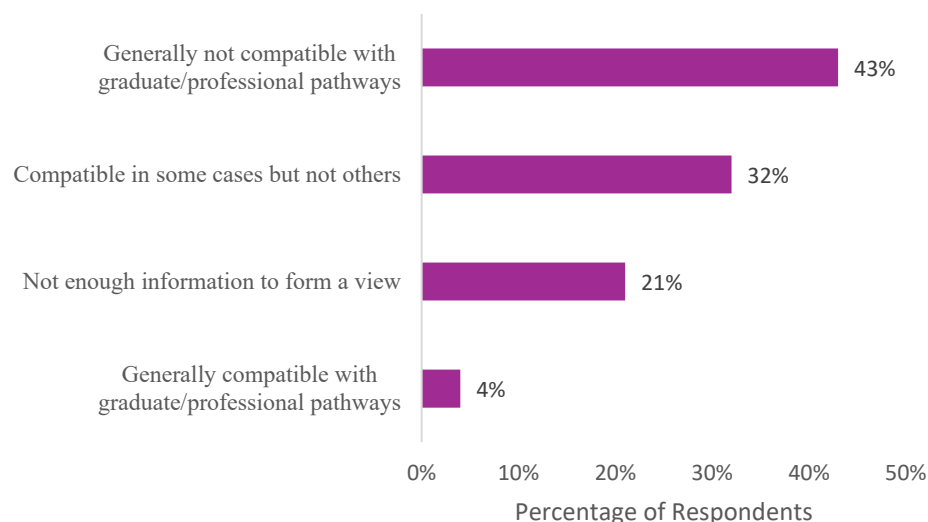
More commonly, however, participants framed adult and non-traditional learners as a population that RCDs would be well-suited to serve. Respondents described RCDs as one possible way to

create more efficient degree pathways for adults with prior work experience, some college credit, or clearly defined advancement goals. Tailoring degree structures—such as RCDs—to the specific needs of adult learners is critical not only for individual career advancement but for reclaiming a demographic that is essential to the mission of many colleges in this study.

Finding 5: The Implications of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degrees for Graduate and Professional Education, Licensure, and Employer Recognition are Uncertain

An important, unresolved issue concerns how RCDs will be interpreted in graduate and professional pathways, licensure contexts, and the labor market. Survey findings reinforce the broader conclusion that portability into graduate and professional pathways remains uncertain. As shown in Figure 10, only one respondent viewed RCDs as generally compatible with graduate or professional pathways. Most respondents either said that these degrees are generally not compatible or that compatibility depends on the case, while others indicated that they did not yet have enough information to form a view. These results suggest uncertainty rather than consensus about how RCDs would fit into graduate and professional admissions. That uncertainty may reflect the fact that RCDs appear most applicable in some fields and for some student pathways more than others, rather than an expectation that all such programs should serve as direct preparation for graduate study. For Ohio, the survey points to continued uncertainty rather than a single consensus and suggests that any implications for graduate and professional pathways are likely to vary by field, institution, and program.

Figure 10: Most Survey Respondents were Uncertain or Did Not View Reduced-Credit Degrees as Compatible with Graduate or Professional Pathways



NOTE: N=28. Figure shows responses to the survey item asking which statement came closest to the respondent's current view of RCDs and graduate/professional pathways. Categories are mutually exclusive.

SOURCE: RAND survey of graduate and professional admissions staff in Ohio.

According to our interview participants, graduate programs across the country have not yet systematically updated their admissions policies to address RCD holders, although graduate programs are implementing different strategies to accommodate them. One interview participant from an institutional accreditor noted that:

The National Association for Graduate Studies that basically said that at this point their organization was not endorsing a reduced-credit hour baccalaureate for admissions. So there's some concern that graduate schools may not accept it as an equal baccalaureate degree or that even the worry that Graduate School says, oh, you only had 90 hours, we're going to make you take the other 30 before you [enter the program].

However, some colleges are making changes to their entry requirements to reflect this change in the higher education landscape. According to an academic leader from a four-year university describing changes to their graduate admission policies, “If you have the appropriate coursework and the minimum GPA, we will admit you without condition, and even if you don't have the appropriate undergrad coursework, then they'll just assign prerequisites”. For some programs, the main priority is ensuring that students learn what they need to succeed in graduate school, and in cases where students are short in some areas, graduate programs may offer an on ramp to address any gaps in the student’s RCD. Despite these efforts by individual colleges, the graduate school landscape remains fragmented when it comes to RCDs; there are no standard practices or policies for graduates of these programs, which may limit students’ options (e.g., location, college, field, degree type) and accessibility for further education.

Perceived employer reception to RCDs appears to be highly industry-dependent, with industries hiring technical and vocational education graduates expressing more enthusiasm for RCDs. For instance, in the field of design, a faculty member from a two-year college framed RCD’s time-to-degree as a major asset and described how in a conversation with a local employer, they “talked about how the three-year model mirrors the pace of the design world, [and] that trends evolve, technology changes and clients expect agility. A three-year model mirrors this pace and gets emerging designers into the field sooner”. While RCDs may shorten a student’s pathway to the workforce, some have raised concerns that students may not graduate with fully developed soft skills (e.g., professional communication, critical thinking, and interpersonal maturity) and technical skills, depending on the field, necessary to succeed in the workplace.

Academic and national policy organization interview participants were mixed in how employers would receive RCDs because of differences in requirements for career readiness and licensure. According to an academic leader at four-year university, “I'm not sure employers are screaming for [RCDs]. One of the things we've heard from employers is we have programs that actually take a little longer to complete because of, let's say, you know, field experience or clinical placement requirements. And what employers sometimes say is they prefer our students because they're a little older when they come out”. Since a four-year bachelor’s degree often indicates readiness and eligibility for graduate admissions or post-college work, participants in

the study expressed concern that education and workforce systems may not be prepared for students earning RCDs. The reduction in course credits or relevant training experiences through experiential learning activities may spark concern for employers in certain industries, like healthcare. According to one interview participant from a state agency, “If it's [an RCD in] engineering, this is a bad idea. You don't want [engineers] to be undereducated. And nursing is probably the same.” Interview participants suggest that programs considering RCDs should meaningfully engage employer advisory boards early to ensure alignment with program design and content that eases students' pathways to the workforce. To protect students and ensure they are fully informed of the risks and implications of pursuing an RCD, most accreditors require colleges to explain how they will communicate possible implications for graduate or professional school, transfer, employment, or licensure.

Finding 6: Clear Communication to Students about the Benefits and Limitations of Reduced-Credit Bachelor's Degrees is Essential

Across stakeholder groups, and consistently in institutional accretor policies, transparency in student-facing communication emerged as a central condition for responsible implementation. Most interview participants cited transparency about RCDs as an ethical obligation to protect students and ensure they are informed of the implications of RCDs for further education, career readiness and employment. According to an academic leader at a four year university, “I think it's incumbent on us on the institutional side to try and spell it out as best we can where, where the pathways are and where the barriers are for folks when they're trying to make those decisions” about RCDs. While colleges may have many priorities that drive their development of RCDs, including enrollment and revenue, participants urge that these efforts include significant documented disclosures, including marketing collateral, that students can rely on when making critical decisions about their future. Some state agencies and most accreditors are requiring colleges to develop communication and marketing plans that reflect this commitment to total transparency of the goals and risks of RCDs. Communication, including marketing and outreach, to prospective students must be proactive, specific, and calibrated to diverse audiences who may not have the context to fully understand how an RCD will affect their long-term employment, licensure, and graduate school options.

Some institutional accreditors and state agencies are also requiring programs to comply with degree naming policies. One institutional accretor shared that their internal committees and board agreed that a modifier for an RCD was necessary and settled on two options that their member colleges would be required to use. This prescriptive approach stems from a deep commitment, expressed by the interview participant, to being student-centered. Interview participants from state agencies also agreed with their peers in accreditation and are enforcing similar policies, with one state agency explicitly naming RCDs as a “B.A.S. (Bachelor of Applied Studies).” Some interview participants, however, have expressed concerns that placing a naming requirement on RCD programs weakens their value in the economy and marginalizes

students. According to an academic leader at a two-year college, "I guess my hope will be that it doesn't say reduced bachelor's." (P04). Essentially, the concern is that the "reduced" will treat the RCD as an inferior pathway in the eyes of employers and other colleges. An interview participant from a state agency had similar feedback and did not believe a new naming convention was necessary when both a 90- and 120-credit program should be equivalent in what matters, achieving the same learning outcomes, "If we truly believe that they're comparable with a bachelor's degree, then why aren't we just calling it a bachelor's degree? And what does it matter what the credit is?". Stakeholders committed to placing naming requirements on RCD programs are focused on protecting students and ensuring that students understand the implications for earning an RCD, but doing so may also lead to further degree stratification, which may dilute students' long-term access to opportunities.

Conclusion

RCDs may become an important part of Ohio's higher education landscape. This study suggests that they offer meaningful opportunities to expand options for students, lower credit requirements in selected fields, and create more efficient pathways to degree completion. At the same time, their successful development will depend on aligning program design with the academic, regulatory, and labor market conditions that shape each field.

Overall, the evidence in this report points to a consistent conclusion. RCDs are viable in Ohio, but only under some conditions and not as a single uniform reform. Their feasibility depends heavily on field, target population, program structure, and downstream portability. Where reduced-credit programs appear most plausible, they still require careful design, strong documentation, and clear communication to students about what the degree is intended to do and where its limits may lie.

For Ohio, the most promising path forward is likely to be deliberate and field specific. Rather than treating RCDs as a uniform model, institutions and policymakers can focus on the fields where feasibility appears strongest and where program purposes can be clearly defined. That approach would allow Ohio to expand RCD options while preserving attention to quality, transparency, and student outcomes.

The strongest near-term opportunities appear to be in applied and workforce-facing fields with relatively flexible external requirements. In these areas, institutions may be able to preserve core learning outcomes while reducing electives and other flexible credits, especially for students who would benefit from more structured and accelerated pathways. This may be particularly true for adult learners, re-engaged students, and others for whom time, cost, and clarity of program design are especially important.

The study also points to several conditions that will matter for implementation. Institutional accreditors have created space for institutions to propose RCDs, but institutions still need to demonstrate that these programs are academically coherent and appropriately designed. In many

fields, the most important constraints are likely to come not from institutional accreditors alone, but from specialized accreditation, licensure expectations, required experiential learning, and uncertainty about how RCDs will be interpreted in graduate or professional education and other downstream settings.

Over time, continued implementation will likely require careful monitoring of how these programs function in practice, including whether graduates encounter barriers in employment, licensure, transfer, or further education. The evidence in this study suggests that RCDs can be a viable option in Ohio when they are designed with clear purpose, matched to field conditions, and communicated carefully to students.

Abbreviations

ABET	Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology
ACCJC	Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges
CAEP	Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation
CIP	Classification of Instructional Programs
HLC	Higher Learning Commission
IPEDS	Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System
MSCHE	Middle States Commission on Higher Education
NECHE	New England Commission of Higher Education
NWCCU	Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities
ODHE	Ohio Department of Higher Education
RCD	Reduced-credit bachelor's degree
SACSCOC	Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
WSCUC	WASC Senior College and University Commission

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