



Defining Graduate Courses, Certificates, and Degree Programs

Overview

Western Washington University's graduate-level curriculum includes several types of degrees, certificates, and specializations. This planning resource serves to guide the development of new programs, summarizes the types of programs offered, and describes required processes for curricular and program review. Related planning resources include Planning New Graduate Programs ([PDF](#)), the Academic Coordinating Commission (ACC) [Handbook](#), and ACC [Curriculum Calendar](#).

Overview of the Approval Process

All credit-bearing curricular proposals (degrees, certificates, courses, and new programs) at the graduate level follow the same University curricular process. After review and approval at the program and college levels, new proposals are considered by the Graduate Faculty Governance Council (GFGC) and ACC, and approved by the Faculty Senate. New doctoral programs must also be individually authorized by the State Legislature. Other Washington State Public Universities are notified of plans for new programs via collegial communication from Western's Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education.

The curricular approval period for the following academic year's catalog runs from late fall through mid-winter. Proposals for all graduate curricula, including new graduate programs, should be ready for review by GFGC no later than early February in order to begin admitting students for the following academic year. Final program approvals are completed in the spring. Additional lead-time may be needed if the new program involves faculty hiring, significant new coursework development, outreach or marketing.

If the proposed program requires new financial, space or staffing resources, a parallel resource review process is also required. Please refer to the Planning New Graduate Programs document ([PDF](#)) for details. Proposed new programs should coordinate the timing of these reviews, noting that those involving significant new resources may require 1-2 years or longer. As a first step, developers should contact the Graduate School as early in the process as possible for advice and guidance.



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Recruitment and Admissions

Admission to all graduate degree and graduate certificate programs is completed through the Graduate School. All application materials, the receipt and validation of required formal documentation (transcripts, standardized test scores, letters of recommendation, etc.), and the awarding of the degree or certificate, are managed by the Graduate School. Once a new program receives approval, program directors meet with Graduate School staff to configure the program application, establish deadlines and admissions processes.

New programs will receive assistance from The Graduate School with development of basic marketing materials, including a landing page on the Graduate School website, as well as integration of the program into Graduate School and University marketing initiatives. The Graduate School also may be able to assist with targeted, program-specific recruitment efforts.

Self-Supported and State-Supported Programs

Self-supported programs offered through Western's Office of Outreach and Continuing Education conform to the same academic, admissions, programmatic and curricular approval requirements as state-supported programs; the main difference is in the way these two types of programs are funded. New programs may adopt either model and proposers should discuss both options with Graduate School and OCE staff early in the planning process. Note that students enrolled in self-supported programs may have different financial aid eligibility, access to campus services, and eligibility for TA positions than students enrolled in state-supported programs.

Program Types and Definitions

Doctoral Degree Programs

New doctoral programs require individual legislative authority, a process that may extend the time needed for program development and approval. Minimum credit requirements for doctoral programs depend on whether a master's degree is required prior to admission to the doctorate, or whether students may be admitted following the bachelor's degree. Students



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ordinarily are admitted directly into a program. Minimum credits: 90 after the bachelor's degree.

Two-Year Master's Degree Programs

Historically the core of Western's graduate offerings, these programs typically lead to a master's degree after 6-8 quarters of full-time study. Minimum credits: 45 with thesis or 48 without thesis. Many master's programs require a higher number of credits, often to meet professional accreditation requirements. Students are ordinarily admitted directly into a program.

Accelerated "4+1" Master's Degree Programs

Accelerated programs allow students to complete undergraduate and graduate coursework concurrently, leading to a master's degree in just one additional year beyond the bachelor's degree. Students are typically identified by the academic department in their third year as honors or fast-track students and take a significant number of graduate credits in their fourth year, while still undergraduates. Up to of 12 of these 500-level credits may count toward both the undergraduate and the graduate degree. Students apply to the graduate program during their senior year but retain undergraduate status until they have been awarded the bachelor's degree. Minimum credits: 36 after the completion of the bachelor's degree.

Concentrations or Specializations within Degrees

Graduate degree programs may include formal or informal subcurricula centered on a specific body of knowledge, method of inquiry, or application. The terms 'concentration' and 'specialization' as well as 'track' are used interchangeably. They typically consist of a coordinated set of courses (usually three or more) and may include examinations and other requirements. Concentrations are joined with the curriculum of one or more graduate programs such that program and concentration requirements may be met concurrently.

- *Formal concentrations* are required components of some degree programs. In such cases, graduate students must choose a specific concentration and fulfill related requirements in order to complete their program, as listed in the approved curriculum for the graduate degree. Formal concentrations are not listed on the transcript or diploma, and must be approved by GFGC as part of the program approval process.



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- *Informal concentrations* are completed through the choice of courses and research but are not specifically delineated in the curriculum. Informal concentrations do not require GFGC approval.

Graduate Certificate Programs

A graduate certificate is a short course of study designed to meet the supplemental educational needs of professionals through graduate-level coursework. Certificates offer specialized training with the goal of enhancing the education of an individual in a specific industry or field without requiring investment in a full master's or doctoral program. Applicants must have earned at least a bachelor's degree prior to acceptance into any graduate certificate program. Certificates may be completed in conjunction with a graduate degree program, or they may be pursued independently. Note that certificates pursued independently of a degree may not qualify for financial aid. Students have matriculated status and must satisfy Graduate School admissions requirements. Once matriculated, certificate students may be able to take other WWU courses and access student services, depending on the campus they attend, the number of credits they take per quarter, and the financial model of the certificate (state-supported or self-supported tuition). Courses taken for a graduate certificate may be applied to a related graduate degree, under faculty advisement. Graduate certificates appear on academic transcripts, and students receive a formal certificate of completion from the University. The exception to this is state-awarded credentials such as the Initial Administrator (Principal's Residency) certificate, which is conferred by the State of Washington. Minimum credits: 16.

Post-Baccalaureate Certificate Programs

Non-graduate-level certificate programs are intended for students who have earned a bachelor's degree and who wish to obtain further credentialing such as a teacher certification or to meet other academic goals without graduate student status. Post-baccalaureate certificate programs have an independent admissions process. These programs do not require GFGC approval and typically do not involve the Graduate School.

Combined Degree and Certificate Programs

Certain degree programs may be structured to include a graduate certificate as part of the requirements for the degree. Alternatively, programs may allow courses from a related



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certificate to fulfill elective requirements for the degree, such that a student may earn both the degree and the certificate without taking additional credits above the number required for the degree.

Dual Master's Degree Programs

Dual master's degree programs enable students to complete two degrees simultaneously in a significantly shorter amount of time than would be required to complete both degrees separately. Students must be admitted separately to each degree program, and the degrees may be awarded at different times, as each is completed. In dual degree programs, a portion of the total credits taken is applied to both degrees. This may occur in several ways, such as:

1. An agreement between departments in which courses required for one degree may be used to fulfill elective requirements for the other degree;
2. A new program developed jointly between departments that results in two degrees, with up to 50% overlap between the programs.

Interdisciplinary Programs

Departments, institutes, and centers may develop interdisciplinary degree and certificate programs that incorporate faculty, coursework, and other instructional resources from two or more academic areas. Requirements for minimum number of credits and other details are the same as for other degree and certificate programs.

Student/Faculty-Designed Master's Degree Programs

Prospective graduate students may design their own master's degree program by combining existing curriculum across academic units in order to meet their academic or professional goals when no regular graduate program is able to accommodate those goals. Students are expected to develop their curriculum and research plan and present it to potential faculty advisors. Faculty advisors must agree to the plan and provide written support for the student to the Graduate School before the student may submit an application for admission. Early coordination with the Graduate School is highly recommended. Minimum credits and other details are the same as for other two-year master's degree programs.