



The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement

Adopted by the College Delegate Assembly
December 2017

SACS  **COC**[™]
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges



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Mission

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) is the regional body for the accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions in the Southern states. The Commission's mission is the enhancement of education quality throughout the region and the improvement of the effectiveness of institutions by ensuring that they meet standards established by the higher education community that address the needs of society and students. It serves as the common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions in Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, Latin America, and other international sites approved by SACSCOC that award associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral degrees. SACSCOC also accepts applications from other international institutions of higher education.

Accreditation by SACSCOC signifies that the institution (1) has a mission appropriate to higher education, (2) has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that mission, and (3) maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers, and that indicate whether it is successful in achieving its stated objectives.

Philosophy of Accreditation

Self-regulation through accreditation embodies a philosophy that a free people can and ought to govern themselves through a representative, flexible, and responsive system. Decentralization of authority honors the rich diversity of educational institutions in our pluralistic society and serves to protect both institutional autonomy and the broader culture of academic freedom in our global society. The empowerment flowing from self-regulation promotes both innovation and accountability in achieving the goals of educating and training citizens in a representative democracy. Consistent with these overarching values, accreditation is best accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions. Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity; thoughtful and principled professional judgment; rigorous application of requirements; and a context of trust. The process provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its self-defined mission; its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association; and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services. Based on rigorous analysis and reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to the institutions' stakeholders and to the public.

The culmination of the accreditation process is a public statement of an institution's continuing capacity to provide effective programs and services based on agreed-upon requirements. The statement of an institution's accreditation status with SACSCOC also represents an affirmation of an institution's continuing commitment to the Commission's principles and philosophy of accreditation.

The membership expects its peers to dedicate themselves to enhancing the quality of their programs and services within the context of their respective resources and capacities and to create an environment in which teaching and learning, research, and public service occur, as appropriate to the institution's self-defined mission.

At the heart of SACSCOC's philosophy of accreditation, the concept of quality enhancement assumes that each member institution is engaged in ongoing improvement of its programs and services and can demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission. Although evaluation of an institution's educational quality and effectiveness in achieving its mission is a difficult task requiring careful analysis and professional judgment, an institution is expected to document the quality and effectiveness of all its programs and services.

SACSCOC supports the right of an institution to pursue its own educational mission as inherent in fundamental values of institutional autonomy; the right of faculty members to teach, investigate, and publish freely; and the right of students to access opportunities for learning and for the open expression and exchange of ideas. However, exercising these rights should not substantially interfere with the overriding obligation of an institution to offer a sound educational experience that optimizes student achievement outcomes.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) adheres to the following fundamental characteristics of accreditation:

- Participation in the accreditation process is voluntary and is an earned and renewable status.
- Member institutions develop, amend, and approve accreditation requirements.
- The process of accreditation is representative, responsive, and appropriate to the types of institutions accredited.
- Accreditation is a form of self-regulation.
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment and engagement.
- Accreditation is based upon a peer review process.
- Accreditation requires an institutional commitment to student learning and achievement.
- Accreditation acknowledges an institution's prerogative to articulate its mission, including a religious mission, within the recognized context of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is accomplishing its mission.
- Accreditation requires institutional commitment to the concept of quality enhancement through continuous assessment and improvement.
- Accreditation expects an institution to develop a balanced governing structure designed to promote institutional integrity, autonomy and flexibility of operation.
- Accreditation expects an institution to ensure that its programs are complemented by support structures and resources that allow for the total growth and development of its students.

Organization Of The Southern Association Of Colleges And Schools Commission On Colleges

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) is a private, nonprofit, voluntary organization founded in 1895 in Atlanta, Georgia. The Association currently comprises the Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and the Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACSCASI), the K-12 arm of the Association. The two commissions carry out their missions with considerable autonomy; they develop their own standards and procedures, and govern themselves by a delegate assembly.

The College Delegate Assembly (CDA) of SACSCOC includes one voting representative (the chief executive officer or the officer's designee) from each member institution. Its responsibilities include electing the 77-member SACSCOC Board of Trustees to guide the organization's work; to approve all revisions in accrediting standards as recommended by the Board; to approve the dues of candidate and member institutions as recommended by the Board; and to elect an Appeals Committee to hear appeals of adverse accreditation decisions, and electing representatives to the Association's Board of Trustees.

The SACSCOC Board of Trustees is responsible for recommending to the College Delegate Assembly standards for candidacy and membership, authorizing special visits, taking final action on the accreditation status of institutions, nominating to the College Delegate Assembly individuals for election to succeed outgoing members of the Board, electing an Executive Council that will act for the Board while it is not in session, appointing *ad hoc* study committees as needed, and approving SACSCOC policies and procedures.

The thirteen-member Executive Council is the executive arm of the SACSCOC Board and functions on behalf of the Commission's Board and the College Delegate Assembly between sessions. However, the actions of the Council are subject to the review and approval by the Board. The Council interprets Commission policies and procedures, develops procedures for and supervises the work of *ad hoc* and standing committees of the Commission, approves goals and objectives of the Commission, reviews and approves the Commission's budget, oversees and annually evaluates the work of its president and initiates new programs, projects, and policy proposals.

The Council receives and acts on reports from all *ad hoc* and standing committees and submits them to the Commission's Board of Trustees. In the case of institutions applying for candidacy, membership, or reaffirmation of accreditation, the Executive Council receives recommendations from the Committees on Compliance and Reports

(C&R), which are the standing evaluation committees of the Commission, and, in turn, submits its recommendations to the full SACSCOC Board of Trustees.

The Process Of Accreditation

The process for initial and continued accreditation involves a collective analysis and judgment by the institution's internal constituencies, an informed review by peers external to the institution, and a reasoned decision by the elected members of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. Accredited institutions periodically conduct internal reviews involving their administrative officers, staffs, faculties, students, trustees, and others appropriate to the process. The internal review allows an institution to consider its effectiveness in achieving its stated mission, its compliance with *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*, its efforts in enhancing the quality of student learning and the quality of programs and services offered to its constituencies, and its successes in accomplishing its mission. At the culmination of the internal review, peer evaluators representing the Board apply their professional judgment through a preliminary assessment of the institution; elected SACSCOC Board members make the final determination of an institution's compliance with the accreditation requirements.

Application of the Requirements

SACSCOC accredits degree-granting higher education institutions and entities based on requirements in *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. These requirements apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. This includes programs offered through distance and correspondence education, off-campus sites, and branch campuses. Consequently, when preparing documents for the Commission demonstrating compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation*, an institution must include these programs in its "Institutional Summary Form Prepared for Commission Reviews" and address these programs in its analysis and documentation of compliance (See *Commission policy [Distance and Correspondence Education](#)*). SACSCOC applies the requirements of its *Principles* to all applicant, candidate, and member institutions, regardless of the type of institution: private, for-profit, private not-for-profit, or public.

The SACSCOC Board of Trustees evaluates an institution and makes accreditation decisions based on the current edition of the *Principles of Accreditation*. The Commission's philosophy of accreditation precludes denial of membership to a degree-granting institution of higher education on any ground other than an

institution's failure to meet the above requirements in the professional judgment of peer reviewers, or failure to comply with the policies and procedures of SACSCOC.

Components Of The Review Process

The SACSCOC Board of Trustees conducts several types of institutional reviews: (1) Candidate Committee reviews of institutions seeking candidacy, (2) Accreditation Committee reviews of candidate institutions seeking initial membership, (3) Reaffirmation Committee reviews of member institutions seeking continued accreditation following a comprehensive review, (4) Special Committee reviews of member institutions seeking continued accreditation following evaluation of institutional circumstances that are accreditation related, and (5) Substantive Change Committee reviews of member institutions seeking approval and continued accreditation following the review of a change of a significant modification or expansion to the institution's nature and scope. Each of the above types of reviews has its own evaluation documents and peer review procedures and can be found on the SACSCOC web site at www.sacscoc.org.

The process described below is specific to a member institution seeking reaffirmation of accreditation.

Preparation by the Institution

As part of the reaffirmation process, the institution will provide two (2) separate documents:

1. Compliance Certification

The Compliance Certification, submitted fifteen (15) months in advance of an institution's scheduled reaffirmation, is a document completed by the institution that demonstrates its judgment of the extent of its compliance with each of the Core Requirements and Standards. The signatures of the institution's chief executive officer and accreditation liaison are required. By signing the document, these individuals certify that the process of institutional self-assessment has been thorough, honest, and forthright, and that the information contained in the document is truthful, accurate, and complete.

2. Quality Enhancement Plan

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP), submitted six weeks in advance of the On-Site Reaffirmation Review Committee, is (1) a topic identified through ongoing, comprehensive and evaluation processes, (2) has a broad-based support of institutional constituencies, (3) focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student successes, (4) commits resources to initiate, implement

and complete the QEP, and (5) includes a plan to assess achievement. The plan should be focused and succinct (no more than 75 pages of narrative text and no more than 25 pages of support documentation or charts, graphs, and tables).

Review by the Commission on Colleges

1. The Off-Site Reaffirmation Review

The Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee, composed of a chair and normally eight to ten peer evaluators, serves as an evaluative committee in the reaffirmation process. The committee meets in Atlanta, Georgia, and reviews Compliance Certifications of a group of institutions to determine whether each institution is in compliance with all Core Requirements and Standards (except 7.2). The group of institutions, called “a cluster,” normally will consist of no more than three institutions similar in governance and degrees offered. At the conclusion of the review, the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee will prepare a separate report for each institution, recording and explaining its preliminary findings about compliance. The report is forwarded to the respective institution’s On-Site Reaffirmation Committee.

2. The On-Site Reaffirmation Review

The On-Site Reaffirmation Committee consists of peers and serves as an evaluative committee in the reaffirmation process. Following review by the Off-Site Reaffirmation Committee, an On-Site Reaffirmation Committee will conduct a focused evaluation at the campus to finalize issues of compliance with the Core Requirements and Standards, evaluate the QEP, and provide consultation regarding the issues addressed in the QEP. At the conclusion of its visit, the On-Site Committee will finalize the Report of the Reaffirmation Committee, a written report of its findings noting areas of noncompliance. The Report of the Reaffirmation Committee, along with the institution’s response to areas of noncompliance, is forwarded to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees for review and action on reaffirmation of accreditation.

3. Review by the SACSCOC Board of Trustees

The Committees on Compliance and Reports (C&R), standing committees of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, review reports prepared by evaluation committees and the institutional responses to those reports. A C&R Committee’s recommendation regarding an institution’s reaffirmation of accreditation is forwarded to the Executive Council for review. The Executive Council recommends action to the full Board of Trustees, which makes the final decision on reaffirmation and any monitoring activities that it may require of an institution. The full Board of Trustees convenes twice a year.

Institutional Responsibility For Reporting Substantive Change

SACSCOC accredits the entire institution and all programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. Accreditation is specific to an institution, is based on conditions at the time of the most recent evaluation, and is not transferable. When an accredited institution significantly modifies or expands its scope, or changes its affiliation, governance, or ownership, a substantive change review is required. The Commission is responsible for evaluating all substantive changes occurring between an institution's decennial reviews to ensure the quality of the total institution and to ensure the public that all aspects of the institution meet defined standards.

A member institution is responsible for following the [*Substantive Change for SACSCOC Accredited Institutions*](#) policy and procedures by notifying or securing approval from SACSCOC, as required, prior to implementation. If an institution is noncompliant with the policy, its accreditation may be in jeopardy. Refer to "Procedure One," "Procedure Two," and "Procedure Three" in the substantive change policy outlining the types of substantive change, their respective notification and approval requirements, and their reporting timelines. If an institution is unclear as to whether a change is substantive, it should contact SACSCOC staff for consultation.

An applicant or candidate institution may not undergo substantive change prior to membership.

SECTION 1: The Principle of Integrity

Institutional integrity is essential to the purpose of higher education. Integrity functions as the basic covenant defining the relationship between the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) and its member and candidate institutions. The principle serves as the foundation of a relationship in which all parties agree to deal honestly and openly with their constituencies and with one another.

1. The institution operates with integrity in all matters.

(Integrity) [CR]

(Note: While this principle is not addressed by the institution in its Compliance Certification or its application for accreditation, failure to adhere to this principle will lead to the imposition of a sanction, adverse action, or denial of authorization of a candidate committee.)

SECTION 2: Mission

A clearly defined and comprehensive mission guides the public's perception of the institution. It conveys a sense of the institution's uniqueness and identifies the qualities, characteristics, and values that define its role and distinctiveness within the diverse higher education community. Fundamental to the structure of an institution's effectiveness, the mission reflects a clear understanding of the institution by its governing board, administration, faculty, students, staff, and all constituents.

1. The institution has a clearly defined, comprehensive, and published mission specific to the institution and appropriate for higher education. The mission addresses teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service.

(Institutional mission) [CR]

SECTION 3: Basic Eligibility Standard

SACSCOC accredits degree-granting institutions in the southern region of the United States and those operating in select international locations. To gain or maintain accreditation with SACSCOC, an institution is a continuously functioning organization legally authorized to grant degrees and other academic credentials, and able to demonstrate compliance with SACSCOC standards and policies.

- 1. An institution seeking to gain or maintain accredited status**
 - a. has degree-granting authority from the appropriate government agency or agencies.** (*Degree-granting authority*) [CR]
 - b. offers all coursework required for at least one degree program at each level at which it awards degrees.** (For exceptions, see SACSCOC policy [Documenting an Alternative Approach.](#)) (*Coursework for degrees*) [CR]
 - c. is in operation and has students enrolled in degree programs.** (*Continuous operation*) [CR]

SECTION 4: Governing Board

The institution's governing board holds in trust the fundamental autonomy and ultimate well-being of the institution. As the corporate body, the board ensures both the presence of viable leadership and strong financial resources to fulfill the institutional mission. Integral to strong governance is the absence of undue influence from external sources.

- 1. The institution has a governing board of at least five members that:**
 - (a) is the legal body with specific authority over the institution.**
 - (b) exercises fiduciary oversight of the institution.**
 - (c) ensures that both the presiding officer of the board and a majority of other voting members of the board are free of any contractual, employment, personal, or familial financial interest in the institution.**
 - (d) is not controlled by a minority of board members or by organizations or institutions separate from it.**
 - (e) is not presided over by the chief executive officer of the institution.**

(Governing board characteristics) [CR]

2. The governing board
 - a. ensures the regular review of the institution's mission.
(Mission review)
 - b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policy-making function of the board and the responsibility of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy.
(Board/administrative distinction)
 - c. selects and regularly evaluates the institution's chief executive officer. *(CEO evaluation/selection)*

- d. defines and addresses potential conflict of interest for its members. (*Conflict of interest*)
 - e. has appropriate and fair processes for the dismissal of a board member. (*Board dismissal*)
 - f. protects the institution from undue influence by external persons or bodies. (*External influence*)
 - g. defines and regularly evaluates its responsibilities and expectations. (*Board self-evaluation*)
3. If an institution's governing board does not retain sole legal authority and operating control in a multiple-level governance system, then the institution clearly defines that authority and control for the following areas within its governance structure:
(a) institution's mission, (b) fiscal stability of the institution, and
(c) institutional policy. (*Multi-level governance*)

SECTION 5: Administration and Organization

The institution's chief executive officer has ultimate responsibility for priorities and initiatives that advance its board-approved mission, goals, and priorities. The chief executive officer oversees an organizational structure that includes key academic and administrative officers and decision makers with credentials appropriate to their respective responsibilities.

1. **The institution has a chief executive officer whose primary responsibility is to the institution.** (*Chief executive officer*) [CR]
2. The chief executive officer has ultimate responsibility for, and exercises appropriate control over, the following:
 - a. The institution's educational, administrative, and fiscal programs and services. (*CEO control*)
 - b. The institution's intercollegiate athletics program.
(*Control of intercollegiate athletics*)
 - c. The institution's fund-raising activities.
(*Control of fund-raising activities*)
3. For any entity organized separately from the institution and formed primarily for the purpose of supporting the institution or its programs:
 - (a) The legal authority and operating control of the institution is clearly defined with respect to that entity.
 - (b) The relationship of that entity to the institution and the extent of any liability arising from that relationship are clearly described in a formal, written manner.
 - (c) The institution demonstrates that (1) the chief executive officer controls any fund-raising activities of that entity or (2) the fund-raising activities of that entity are defined in a formal, written manner that assures those activities further the mission of the institution.

(*Institution-related entities*)

4. The institution employs and regularly evaluates administrative and academic officers with appropriate experience and qualifications to lead the institution. (*Qualified administrative/academic officers*)
5. The institution publishes and implements policies regarding the appointment, employment, and regular evaluation of non-faculty personnel. (*Personnel appointment and evaluation*)

SECTION 6: Faculty

Qualified, effective faculty members are essential to carrying out the mission of the institution and ensuring the quality and integrity of its academic programs. The tradition of shared governance within American higher education recognizes the importance of both faculty and administrative involvement in the approval of educational programs. Because student learning is central to the institution's mission and educational degrees, the faculty is responsible for directing the learning enterprise, including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency.

Achievement of the institution's mission with respect to teaching, research, and service requires a critical mass of qualified full-time faculty to provide direction and oversight of the academic programs. Due to this significant role, it is imperative that an effective system of evaluation be in place for all faculty members that addresses the institution's obligations to foster intellectual freedom of faculty to teach, serve, research, and publish.

- 1. The institution employs an adequate number of full-time faculty members to support the mission and goals of the institution.**
(Full-time faculty) [CR]

2. For each of its educational programs, the institution
 - a. Justifies and documents the qualifications of its faculty members.
(Faculty qualifications)
 - b. Employs a sufficient number of full-time faculty members to ensure curriculum and program quality, integrity, and review.
(Program faculty)
 - c. Assigns appropriate responsibility for program coordination.
(Program coordination)

3. The institution publishes and implements policies regarding the appointment, employment, and regular evaluation of faculty members, regardless of contract or tenure status.
(Faculty appointment and evaluation)

4. The institution publishes and implements appropriate policies and procedures for preserving and protecting academic freedom.
(Academic freedom)

5. The institution provides ongoing professional development opportunities for faculty members as teachers, scholars, and practitioners, consistent with the institutional mission.
(Faculty development)

SECTION 7: Institutional Planning and Effectiveness

Effective institutions demonstrate a commitment to principles of continuous improvement, based on a systematic and documented process of assessing institutional performance with respect to mission in all aspects of the institution. An institutional planning and effectiveness process involves all programs, services, and constituencies; is linked to the decision-making process at all levels; and provides a sound basis for budgetary decisions and resource allocations.

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is an integral component of the reaffirmation of accreditation process and is derived from an institution's ongoing comprehensive planning and evaluation processes. It reflects and affirms a commitment to enhance overall institutional quality and effectiveness by focusing on an issue the institution considers important to improving student learning outcomes and/or student success.

- 1. The institution engages in ongoing, comprehensive, and integrated research-based planning and evaluation processes that (a) focus on institutional quality and effectiveness and (b) incorporate a systematic review of institutional goals and outcomes consistent with its mission.** (*Institutional Planning*) [CR]
2. The institution has a QEP that (a) has a topic identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes; (b) has broad-based support of institutional constituencies; (c) focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success; (d) commits resources to initiate, implement, and complete the QEP; and (e) includes a plan to assess achievement. (*Quality Enhancement Plan*)
3. The institution identifies expected outcomes of its administrative support services and demonstrates the extent to which the outcomes are achieved. (*Administrative effectiveness*)

SECTION 8: Student Achievement

Student learning and student success are at the core of the mission of all institutions of higher learning. Effective institutions focus on the design and improvement of educational experiences to enhance student learning and support student learning outcomes for its educational programs. To meet the goals of educational programs, an institution provides appropriate academic and student services to support student success.

1. **The institution identifies, evaluates, and publishes goals and outcomes for student achievement appropriate to the institution's mission, the nature of the students it serves, and the kinds of programs offered. The institution uses multiple measures to document student success.** (*Student achievement*) [CR]

2. The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in the areas below:
 - a. Student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs.
(*Student outcomes: educational programs*)
 - b. Student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs.
(*Student outcomes: general education*)
 - c. Academic and student services that support student success.
(*Student outcomes: academic and student services*)

SECTION 9: Educational Program Structure and Content

Collegiate-level educational programs emphasize both breadth and depth of student learning. The structure and content of a program challenges students to integrate knowledge and develop skills of analysis and inquiry.

General education is an integral component of an undergraduate degree program through which students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge. Undergraduate and graduate degrees develop advanced expertise in an integrated understanding of one or more academic disciplines or concentrations.

The institution is responsible for delivering an appropriate portion of the academic experiences applicable to the degrees or credentials awarded.

- 1. Educational programs (a) embody a coherent course of study, (b) are compatible with the stated mission and goals of the institution, and (c) are based on fields of study appropriate to higher education. (*Program content*) [CR]**

- 2. The institution offers one or more degree programs based on at least 60 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the associate level; at least 120 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the baccalaureate level; or at least 30 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the post-baccalaureate, graduate, or professional level. The institution provides an explanation of equivalencies when using units other than semester credit hours. The institution provides an appropriate justification for all degree programs and combined degree programs that include fewer than the required number of semester credit hours or its equivalent unit. (*Program length*) [CR]**

- 3. The institution requires the successful completion of a general education component at the undergraduate level that:**
 - (a) is based on a coherent rationale.**

- (b) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree program. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent.**
- (c) ensures breadth of knowledge. These credit hours include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/ fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/ mathematics. These courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession.**

(General education requirements) [CR]

4. At least 25 percent of the credit hours required for an undergraduate degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree. *(Institutional credits for an undergraduate degree)*
5. At least one-third of the credit hours required for a graduate or a post-baccalaureate professional degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree. *(Institutional credits for a graduate/professional degree)*
6. Post-baccalaureate professional degree programs and graduate degree programs are progressively more advanced in academic content than undergraduate programs, and are structured (a) to include knowledge of the literature of the discipline and (b) to ensure engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training. *(Post-baccalaureate rigor and curriculum)*
7. The institution publishes requirements for its undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate professional programs, as applicable. The requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices for degree programs. *(Program requirements)*

SECTION 10: Educational Policies, Procedures, and Practices

Effective academic policies related to an institution's educational programs are developed in concert with appropriate input and participation of the constituencies affected by the policies, conform to commonly accepted practices and policies in higher education, accurately portray the institution's programs and services, and are disseminated to those benefiting from such practices. These academic policies lead to a teaching and learning environment that enhances the achievement of student outcomes and success.

To advance learning, all coursework taken for academic credit has rigor, substance, and standards connected to established learning outcomes. To protect the integrity of degrees offered, the institution is responsible for the quality of all coursework transcribed as if it were credit earned from the institution.

1. The institution publishes, implements, and disseminates academic policies that adhere to principles of good educational practice and that accurately represent the programs and services of the institution. (*Academic policies*)
2. The institution makes available to students and the public current academic calendars, grading policies, cost of attendance, and refund policies. (*Public information*)
3. The institution ensures the availability of archived official catalogs (digital or print) with relevant information for course and degree requirements sufficient to serve former and returning students. (*Archived information*)
4. The institution (a) publishes and implements policies on the authority of faculty in academic and governance matters, (b) demonstrates that educational programs for which academic credit is awarded are approved consistent with institutional policy, and (c) places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty. (*Academic governance*)

5. The institution publishes admissions policies consistent with its mission. Recruitment materials and presentations accurately represent the practices, policies, and accreditation status of the institution. The institution also ensures that independent contractors or agents used for recruiting purposes and for admission activities are governed by the same principles and policies as institutional employees. (*Admissions policies and practices*)
6. An institution that offers distance or correspondence education:
 - (a) ensures that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit.
 - (b) has a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs.
 - (c) ensures that students are notified, in writing at the time of registration or enrollment, of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity.(*Distance and correspondence education*)
7. The institution publishes and implements policies for determining the amount and level of credit awarded for its courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery. These policies require oversight by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments. In educational programs not based on credit hours (e.g., direct assessment programs), the institution has a sound means for determining credit equivalencies. (*Policies for awarding credit*)
8. The institution publishes policies for evaluating, awarding, and accepting credit not originating from the institution. The institution ensures (a) the academic quality of any credit or coursework recorded on its transcript, (b) an approval process with oversight by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments,

and (c) the credit awarded is comparable to a designated credit experience and is consistent with the institution's mission.

(Evaluating and awarding academic credit)

9. The institution ensures the quality and integrity of the work recorded when an institution transcribes courses or credits as its own when offered through a cooperative academic arrangement. The institution maintains formal agreements between the parties involved, and the institution regularly evaluates such agreements.

(Cooperative academic arrangements)

SECTION 11: Library and Learning/Information Resources

To provide adequate support for the institution's curriculum and mission, an institution's students, faculty, and staff have access to appropriate collections, services, and other library-related resources that support all educational, research, and public service programs wherever they are offered and at the appropriate degree level. The levels and types of educational programs offered determine the nature and extent of library and learning resources needed to support the full range of the institution's academic programs. Qualified, effective staff are essential to carrying out the goals of a library/learning resource center and the mission of the institution, and to contributing to the quality and integrity of academic programs.

- 1. The institution provides adequate and appropriate library and learning/information resources, services, and support for its mission.** (*Library and learning/information resources*) [CR]
2. The institution ensures an adequate number of professional and other staff with appropriate education or experiences in library and/or other learning/information resources to accomplish the mission of the institution. (*Library and learning/information staff*)
3. The institution provides (a) student and faculty access and user privileges to its library services and (b) access to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources. (*Library and learning/information access*)

SECTION 12: Academic and Student Support Services

Student success is significantly affected by the learning environment. An effective institution provides appropriate academic and student support programs and services, consistent with the institution's mission, that enhance the educational and personal development experience(s) of students at all levels; contribute to the achievement of teaching and learning outcomes; ensure student success in meeting the goals of the educational programs; and provide an appropriate range of support services and programs to students at all locations. Qualified and effective faculty and staff are essential to implementing the institution's goals and mission and to ensuring the quality and integrity of its academic and student support programs and services. An effective institution has policies and procedures that support a stimulating and safe learning environment.

- 1. The institution provides appropriate academic and student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission.** *(Student support services)* [CR]
2. The institution ensures an adequate number of academic and student support services staff with appropriate education or experience in student support service areas to accomplish the mission of the institution. *(Student support services staff)*
3. The institution publishes clear and appropriate statement(s) of student rights and responsibilities and disseminates the statement(s) to the campus community. *(Student rights)*
4. The institution (a) publishes appropriate and clear procedures for addressing written student complaints, (b) demonstrates that it follows the procedures when resolving them, and (c) maintains a record of student complaints that can be accessed upon request by SACSCOC. *(Student complaints)*

5. The institution protects the security, confidentiality, and integrity of its student records and maintains security measures to protect and back up data. (*Student records*)
6. The institution provides information and guidance to help student borrowers understand how to manage their debt and repay their loans. (*Student debt*)

Section 13: Financial and Physical Resources

Although missions vary among institutions, both a sound financial base and a pattern of financial stability provide the foundation for accomplishing an institution's mission. Adequate financial resources allow for deliberate consideration of the effective use of institutional resources to fulfill that mission. Adequate physical resources are essential to the educational environment and include facilities that are safe and appropriate for the scope of the institution's programs and services. It is reasonable that the general public, governmental entities, and current and prospective students expect sufficient financial and physical resources necessary to sustain and fulfill the institution's mission.

- 1. The institution has sound financial resources and a demonstrated, stable financial base to support the mission of the institution and the scope of its programs and services. (*Financial resources*) [CR]**
- 2. The member institution provides the following financial statements:**
 - (a) an institutional audit (or Standard Review Report issued in accordance with *Statements on Standards for Accounting and Review Services* issued by the AICPA for those institutions audited as part of a system-wide or statewide audit) for the most recent fiscal year prepared by an independent certified public accountant and/or an appropriate governmental auditing agency employing the appropriate audit (or Standard Review Report) guide.**
 - (b) a statement of financial position of unrestricted net assets, exclusive of plant assets and plant-related debt, which represents the change in unrestricted net assets attributable to operations for the most recent year.**

- (c) **an annual budget that is preceded by sound planning, is subject to sound fiscal procedures, and is approved by the governing board.**

For applicant and candidate institutions, including an applicant seeking separate accreditation from a current SACSCOC accredited institution, the institution provides the financial information, including audit requirements, specified in the SACSCOC policy entitled [Accreditation Procedures for Applicant Institutions](#).

(Financial documents) [CR]

3. The institution manages its financial resources in a responsible manner. *(Financial responsibility)*
4. The institution exercises appropriate control over all its financial resources. *(Control of finances)*
5. The institution maintains financial control over externally funded or sponsored research and programs.
(Control of sponsored research/external funds)
6. The institution (a) is in compliance with its program responsibilities under Title IV of the most recent Higher Education Act as amended and (b) audits financial aid programs as required by federal and state regulations. In reviewing the institution's compliance with these program responsibilities under Title IV, SACSCOC relies on documentation forwarded to it by the U.S. Department of Education. *(Federal and state responsibilities)*
7. The institution ensures adequate physical facilities and resources, both on and off campus, that appropriately serve the needs of the institution's educational programs, support services, and other mission-related activities. *(Physical resources)*

8. The institution takes reasonable steps to provide a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all members of the campus community.
(Institutional environment)

SECTION 14: Transparency and Institutional Representation

An institution is responsible for representing accurately to the public its status and relationship with SACSCOC; reporting accurately to the public its status with state or the federal government, if receiving funding from either or both; maintaining openness in all accreditation-related activities; ensuring the availability of institutional policies to students and the public; and publishing appropriate information with respect to student achievement. SACSCOC's philosophy of accreditation precludes removal from or denial of membership or candidacy to a degree-granting institution of higher education on any ground other than an institution's failure to meet the standards of the membership as determined by the professional judgment of peer reviewers, or failure to comply with SACSCOC policies and procedures.

1. The institution (a) accurately represents its accreditation status and publishes the name, address, and telephone number of SACSCOC in accordance with SACSCOC's requirements and federal policy; and (b) ensures all its branch campuses include the name of that institution and make it clear that their accreditation depends on the continued accreditation of the parent campus.
(Publication of accreditation status)
2. The institution has a policy and procedure to ensure that all substantive changes are reported in accordance with SACSCOC policy. *(Substantive change)*
3. The institution applies all appropriate standards and policies to its distance learning programs, branch campuses, and off-campus instructional sites. *(Comprehensive institutional reviews)*
4. The institution (a) represents itself accurately to all U.S. Department of Education recognized accrediting agencies with which it holds accreditation and (b) informs those agencies of any change of accreditation status, including the imposition of public sanctions.

(See SACSCOC policy [Accrediting Decisions of Other Agencies.](#))
(*Representation to other agencies*)

5. The institution complies with SACSCOC’s policy statements that pertain to new or additional institutional obligations that may arise that are not part of the standards in the current *Principles of Accreditation*. (*Policy compliance*)

(Note: For applicable policies, institutions should refer to the SACSCOC website: www.sacscoc.org)

Commission Policies

Definition: A policy is a required course of action to be followed by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) or its member or candidate institutions. SACSCOC policies may also include procedures, which are likewise a required course of action to be followed by SACSCOC or its member or candidate institutions. The *Principles of Accreditation* require that an institution comply with the policies and procedures of SACSCOC. Policies are approved by vote of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. At its discretion, the Board may choose to forward a policy to the College Delegate Assembly for approval.

Examples of policy topics include substantive changes, standing rules, procedures for applicant institutions, special committee procedures, sanctions and adverse actions, or appeals procedures. All policies are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the policies listed.

Commission Guidelines

Definition: A guideline is an advisory statement designed to assist institutions in fulfilling accreditation requirements. As such, guidelines describe recommended educational practices for documenting requirements of the *Principles of Accreditation* and are approved by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. The guidelines are examples of commonly accepted practices that constitute compliance with the standard. Depending on the nature and mission of the institution, however, other approaches may be more appropriate and also provide evidence of compliance.

Examples of guideline topics include advertising, student recruitment, contractual relationships, travel and committee visits, or faculty credentials. All guidelines are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the guidelines listed.

Commission Good Practices

Definition: Good practices are commonly-accepted practices within the higher education community which enhance institutional quality. Good practices may be formulated by outside agencies and organizations and endorsed by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees or the Board itself. Good practice documents are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC

maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the good practices listed.

Commission Position Statements

Definition: A position statement examines an issue facing the SACSCOC membership, describes appropriate approaches, and states the SACSCOC stance on the issue. It is endorsed by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees or the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. Position statements are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the position statements listed.



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