

# Principles of Accreditation:

## Foundations for Quality Enhancement

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**Commission on Colleges  
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools**

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■ SECTION 1:

# Principles and Philosophy of Accreditation

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## GENERAL OVERVIEW

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The Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is the regional body for the accreditation of higher education institutions in the Southern states (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, and Virginia) and Latin America that award associate, baccalaureate, master's, or doctoral degrees.

Accreditation by the Commission on Colleges signifies that an institution has a purpose appropriate to higher education and has resources, programs, and services sufficient to accomplish and sustain that purpose. Accreditation indicates that an institution maintains clearly specified educational objectives that are consistent with its mission and appropriate to the degrees it offers, and that it is successful in achieving its stated objectives.

Self-regulation through accreditation embodies a traditional U.S. philosophy that a free people can and ought to govern themselves through a representative, flexible, and responsive system. Accordingly, accreditation is best accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions. Accreditation enhances educational quality throughout the region by improving the effectiveness of institutions and ensuring that institutions meet standards established by the higher education community, and serves as a common denominator of shared values and practices among the diverse institutions.

Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity, thoughtful and principled judgment, rigorous application of requirements, and a context of trust. It provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its 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 upon reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to constituents and the public.

The product of accreditation 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 the Commission on Colleges is also an affirmation of that institution's continuing commitment to the Commission's principles and philosophy of accreditation.

The Commission on Colleges supports the right of an institution to pursue its established educational mission; 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 exchange of ideas. However, the exercise of these rights should not interfere with the overriding obligation of an institution to offer its students a sound education.

The Commission on Colleges 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 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 within the recognized context of higher education and its responsibility to show that it is accomplishing its mission.
- Accreditation expects an institution to develop a balanced governing structure designed to promote institutional 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.

The first task of the Commission when considering accreditation status is to determine the institution's integrity and its commitment to quality enhancement. These two principles serve as the foundation of the relationship between the Commission and its member and candidate institutions.



## ***Integrity***

Integrity, essential to the purpose of higher education, functions as the basic contract defining the relationship between the Commission and each of its member institutions. It is a relationship in which all parties agree to deal honestly and openly with their constituencies and with one another. Without this commitment, no relationship can exist or be sustained between the Commission and its member institutions. The Commission's requirements, policies, processes, procedures, and decisions are predicated on integrity.

The Commission on Colleges expects integrity to govern the operation of institutions. Therefore, evidence of intentionally withholding information, deliberately providing inaccurate information to the public, or failing to provide timely and accurate information to the Commission will be seen as the lack of a full commitment to integrity and may result in the loss of membership in the Commission on Colleges. (*See Commission policy "Integrity and Accuracy in Institutional Representation."*)

## ***Quality Enhancement***

The Commission on Colleges expects institutions to dedicate themselves to enhancing the quality of their programs and services within the context of their missions, resources, and capacities, and to create an environment in which teaching, public service, research, and learning occur.

The concept of quality enhancement is at the heart of the Commission's philosophy of accreditation; this presumes each member institution to be engaged in an ongoing program of improvement and able to demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission. Although evaluation of an institution's educational quality and its effectiveness in achieving its mission is a difficult task requiring careful analysis and professional judgment, an institution is expected to document quality and effectiveness in all its major aspects.

## **AN ORGANIZATIONAL OVERVIEW**

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The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools is a private, nonprofit, voluntary organization founded in 1895 in Atlanta, Georgia. The Association comprises the Commission on Colleges, the Commission on Secondary and Middle Schools, and the Commission on Elementary and Middle Schools. The three Commissions carry out their missions with considerable autonomy: they develop their own standards and procedures, and govern themselves by a delegate assembly. All three operate under the Association's Board of Trustees.

The College Delegate Assembly includes one voting representative (the chief executive officer or the officer's designee) from each member institution. Its responsibilities include electing the seventy seven- member Commission on Colleges to guide the organization's work; to approve all revisions of accrediting standards as recommended by the Commission; to approve the dues of candidate and member institutions as recommended by the Commission; and to elect an Appeals Committee to hear appeals of certain accreditation decisions.

The Commission on Colleges is responsible for preparing a statement on the standards for candidacy and membership; authorizing special visits; taking final action on the accreditation status of institutions based only on its published standards, policies, and procedures; nominating to the College Delegate Assembly persons to succeed outgoing members of the Commission; electing an Executive Council of the Commission that will act for the Commission while it is not in session; appointing *ad hoc* study committees as needed; and approving the policies and procedures consistent with the Association's charter and bylaws.

The thirteen-member Executive Council is the executive arm of the Commission and functions on behalf of the Commission and the College Delegate Assembly between sessions. However, the actions of the Council are subject to the review and approval of the Commission. 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 executive director; 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. 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, the standing evaluation committees of the Commission, and in turn submits its recommendations on these institutions to the Commission for final action.

## **THE PROCESS OF ACCREDITATION**

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The process for initial and continued accreditation involves a collective analysis and judgment by an institution's internal constituencies, an informed review by peers external to the institution, and a reasoned decision by the elected members of the Commission on Colleges. 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 and its compliance with the accreditation requirements established by the member institutions. Furthermore, it helps an institution evaluate its efforts in enhancing the quality of student learning and the quality of programs and services offered to its constituencies as well as challenge itself to examine its successes in accomplishing its mission. At the culmination of the internal review, peer evaluators representing the Commission apply their professional judgment through a preliminary assessment of the institution; elected Commissioners make the final determination of an institution's compliance with the accreditation requirements.

### **Application of the Requirements**

The Commission on Colleges accredits degree-granting higher education institutions and entities based on requirements in its *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. The requirements apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located and however delivered. The *Principles of Accreditation* is designed to guide institutions in all stages of membership, from application through initial accreditation and reaffirmation of accreditation. Compliance with the requirements is intended to help an institution achieve overall effectiveness. The Commission on Colleges 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 Commission evaluates an institution and makes accreditation decisions based on the following:

- Compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation*, defined as integrity and commitment to quality enhancement (outlined in Section 1).
- Compliance with the Core Requirements (outlined in Section 2).
- Compliance with the Comprehensive Standards (outlined in Section 3).
- Compliance with additional Federal Requirements (outlined in Section 4).

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 the Commission.

### **Compliance with the Core Requirements**

Compliance with the Core Requirements is essential for gaining and maintaining accreditation with the Commission on Colleges. The requirements establish a level of development required of an institution seeking initial or continued accreditation. Compliance with the Core Requirements is necessary but not sufficient to warrant accreditation or reaffirmation of accreditation. To maintain accreditation, an institution must meet all Core Requirements, including Requirement 2.12. An institution responds to each Core Requirement by either confirming compliance or explaining those situations for which there is non-compliance.

Core Requirement 2.12 requires an institution to develop an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) and show that the plan is part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process. Engaging the wider academic community, the QEP is based upon a comprehensive and thorough analysis of the effectiveness of the learning environment for supporting student learning and accomplishing the mission of the institution. It is used to outline a course of action for institutional improvement by addressing one or more issues that contribute to institutional quality, with special attention to student learning.

An applicant institution seeking membership with the Commission on Colleges is required to document compliance with Core Requirements 2.1 - 2.11 in order to be awarded candidacy, candidacy renewal, or membership.

### **Compliance with the Comprehensive Standards**

The Comprehensive Standards set forth requirements in the following three areas: institutional mission, governance, and effectiveness; programs; and resources. The Comprehensive Standards represent good practices in higher education and establish a level of accomplishment expected of all member institutions. Institutions respond to each Comprehensive Standard either by confirming compliance or by explaining those situations that constitute non-compliance.

Guidelines for faculty credentials contained in Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1 reflect the commonly accepted standards of good practice within the larger community of the Commission's membership and describe one method for documenting faculty competence. Guidelines are not Comprehensive Standards.

## **Compliance with additional Federal Requirements**

The U.S. Secretary of Education recognizes accreditation by the Commission on Colleges in establishing the eligibility of higher education institutions to participate in programs authorized under Title IV of the 1998 *Higher Education Amendments* and other federal programs. Through its compliance with these federal regulations, the Commission assures the public that it is a reliable authority on the quality of education provided by its member institutions.

The federal statute includes mandates that the Commission review an institution in accordance with criteria outlined in the regulations of the *Amendments* developed by the U.S. Department of Education. As part of the review process, institutions are required to document compliance with those criteria and the Commission is obligated to consider such compliance when the institution is reviewed for initial membership or continued accreditation (see Section 4).

## **COMPONENTS OF THE PEER REVIEW PROCESS**

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### **Review by the Institution**

The institution will provide two separate documents as part of its reaffirmation review:

#### **1. *Compliance Certification***

The Compliance Certification, submitted fifteen 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 Comprehensive Standards. Signatures by the institution's chief executive officer and accreditation liaison will be required to certify compliance. By signing the document, the 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 review by the Commission, describes a carefully designed and focused course of action that addresses a well-defined issue or issues directly related to improving student learning. The development of the QEP involves significant participation by the institution's aca-

demic community. The plan should be focused and succinct (no more than seventy-five pages of narrative text and no more than twenty-five pages of support documentation or charts, graphs, and tables).

## **Review by the Commission**

### **1. *The Off-Site Peer Review***

The Off-Site Review Committee, composed of a chair and normally eight evaluators, meets at an off-site location and reviews Compliance Certifications of a group of institutions to determine whether each institution is in compliance with all Core Requirements (except Requirement 2.12) and Comprehensive Standards, and with federal regulations. The group of institutions, called a cluster, normally will consist of five institutions similar in governance and degrees offered. At the conclusion of the review, the Off-Site Review Committee will prepare a separate report for each institution, recording and explaining its decisions regarding compliance. A report is forwarded to the respective institution's On-Site Review Committee which makes the final determination on compliance.

### **2. *The On-Site Peer Review***

Following review by the Off-Site Committee, an On-Site Review Committee of peers will conduct a focused evaluation at the campus to finalize issues of compliance with the Core Requirements and Comprehensive Standards, evaluate the acceptability of the QEP, and provide consultation regarding the issues addressed in the QEP. At the conclusion of its visit, the On-Site Review Committee will prepare a written report of its findings noting areas of non-compliance and will make a recommendation to the Commission on Colleges regarding the institution's accreditation status. The committee's report, along with the institution's response to areas of non-compliance, will be forwarded to the Commission for review and action.

## **INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY FOR REPORTING SUBSTANTIVE CHANGE**

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The Commission on Colleges accredits the entire institution and its programs and services, wherever they are located and however they are delivered. Accreditation, specific to an institution, is based on conditions existing at the time of the most recent evaluation and is not transferable. When an accredit-

ed institution significantly modifies or expands its scope, or changes the nature of its affiliation or its ownership, a substantive change review is required. The Commission is responsible for evaluating all substantive changes that occur between an institution's scheduled reviews (normally ten years) to determine whether the change has affected the quality of the total institution and to assure the public that the institution continues to meet defined standards.

A member institution is responsible for following the substantive change policy by informing the Commission of changes in accord with the Commission's procedures and, when required, seeking approval prior to the initiation of the change. If an institution fails to follow the procedures, its total accreditation may be placed in jeopardy. (See Commission policy, "Substantive Change for Accredited Institutions," outlining the types of substantive changes, approval and notification requirements, and reporting timelines.) If an institution is unclear as to whether a change is substantive in nature, it should contact Commission staff for consultation.

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

## REPRESENTATION OF STATUS

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An institution must be accurate in reporting to the public its status with the Commission. In all official institutional publications, a *member institution* describes its status with the Commission only according with the following statement:

(Name of institution) is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award (name specific degree levels).

A *candidate institution* describes its status with the Commission only according to the following statement:

(Name of institution) is a candidate for accreditation with the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools to award (name specific degree levels).

No statement may be made about the possible future accreditation status with the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools nor may an institution use the logo or seal of the Southern Association in any of its publications or documents.

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■ SECTION 2:

# Core Requirements

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Core Requirements are basic qualifications that an institution must meet to be accredited with the Commission on Colleges.



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- 2.1 The institution has degree-granting authority from the appropriate government agency or agencies. **(Degree-granting Authority)**
- 2.2 The institution has a governing board of at least five members that is the legal body with specific authority over the institution. The board is an active policy-making body for the institution and is ultimately responsible for ensuring that the financial resources of the institution are adequate to provide a sound educational program. The board is not controlled by a minority of board members or by organizations or interests separate from it. Neither the presiding officer of the board nor the majority of other voting members of the board have contractual, employment, or personal or familial financial interest in the institution.
- A military institution authorized and operated by the federal government to award degrees has a public board in which neither the presiding officer nor a majority of the other members are civilian employees of the military or active/retired military. The board has broad and significant influence upon the institution's programs and operations, plays an active role in policy-making, and ensures that the financial resources of the institution are used to provide a sound educational program. The board is not controlled by a minority of board members or by organizations or interests separate from the board except as specified by the authorizing legislation. Neither the presiding officer of the board nor the majority of other voting board members have contractual, employment, or personal or familial financial interest in the institution. **(Governing Board)**
- 2.3 The institution has a chief executive officer whose primary responsibility is to the institution and who is not the presiding officer of the board. **(Chief Executive Officer)**
- 2.4 The institution has a clearly defined and published mission statement specific to the institution and appropriate to an institution of higher education, addressing teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service. **(Institutional Mission)**
- 2.5 The institution engages in ongoing, integrated, and institution-wide research-based planning and evaluation processes that incorporate a systematic review of programs and services that (a) results in continuing improvement, and (b) demonstrates that the institution is effectively accomplishing its mission. **(Institutional Effectiveness)**
- 2.6 The institution is in operation and has students enrolled in degree programs. **(Continuous Operation)**

## 2.7 The institution

- 2.7.1** 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 a written justification and rationale for program equivalency. **(Program Length)**
- 2.7.2** offers degree programs that embody a coherent course of study that is compatible with its stated purpose and is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education. **(Program Content)**
- 2.7.3** requires in each undergraduate degree program the successful completion of a general education component at the collegiate level that (1) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree, (2) ensures breadth of knowledge, and (3) is based on a coherent rationale. 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. These credit hours are to be drawn from and include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts; social/behavioral sciences; and natural science/mathematics. The courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession. The institution provides a written justification and rationale for course equivalency. **(General Education)**
- 2.7.4** provides instruction for all course work required for at least one degree program at each level at which it awards degrees. If the institution makes arrangements for some instruction to be provided by other accredited institutions or entities through contracts or consortia, or uses some other alternative approach to meeting this requirement, the alternative approach must be approved by the Commission on Colleges. In all cases, the institution demonstrates that it controls all aspects of its educational program. **(Contractual Agreements for Instruction)** *(See Commission policy “Core Requirement 2.7.4: Documenting an Alternate Approach.”)*

- 2.8** The number of full-time faculty members is adequate to support the mission of the institution. The institution has adequate faculty resources to ensure the quality and integrity of its academic programs. In addition, upon application for candidacy, an applicant institution demonstrates that it meets Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1 for faculty qualifications. **(Faculty)**

**2.9** The institution, through ownership or formal arrangements or agreements, provides and supports student and faculty access and user privileges to adequate library collections as well as to other learning/information resources consistent with the degrees offered. These collections and resources are sufficient to support all its educational, research, and public service programs. **(Learning Resources and Services)**

**2.10** The institution provides student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission that promote student learning and enhance the development of its students. **(Student Support Services)**

**2.11** The institution has a sound financial base, demonstrated financial stability, and adequate physical resources to support the mission of the institution and the scope of its programs and services.

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 systemwide or statewide audit) and written institutional management letter 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; and (c) an annual budget that is preceded by sound planning, is subject to sound fiscal procedures, and is approved by the governing board.

Audit requirements for applicant institutions may be found in the Commission policy entitled “Accreditation Procedures for Applicant Institutions.” **(Resources)\***

**2.12** The institution has developed an acceptable Quality Enhancement Plan and demonstrates that the plan is part of an ongoing planning and evaluation process. **(Quality Enhancement Plan)**

\* revision approved by the Commission on Colleges, December, 2003.

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■ SECTION 3:

# Comprehensive Standards

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It is implicit in every Comprehensive Standard mandating a policy or procedure that the policy or procedure is in writing, approved through appropriate institutional processes, published in appropriate institutional documents accessible to those affected by the policy or procedure, and implemented and enforced by the institution.



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## **INSTITUTIONAL MISSION, GOVERNANCE, AND EFFECTIVENESS**

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### **3.1 Institutional Mission**

- 3.1.1** The institution has a clear and comprehensive mission statement that guides it; is approved by the governing board; is periodically reviewed by the board; and is communicated to the institution's constituencies.

### **3.2 Governance and Administration**

- 3.2.1** The governing board of the institution is responsible for the selection and the evaluation of the chief executive officer.
- 3.2.2** The legal authority and operating control of the institution are clearly defined for the following areas within the institution's governance structure:
  - 3.2.2.1** institution's mission;
  - 3.2.2.2** fiscal stability of the institution;
  - 3.2.2.3** institutional policy, including policies concerning related and affiliated corporate entities and all auxiliary services; and
  - 3.2.2.4** related foundations (athletic, research, etc.) and other corporate entities whose primary purpose is to support the institution and/or its programs.
- 3.2.3** The board has a policy addressing conflict of interest for its members.
- 3.2.4** The governing board is free from undue influence from political, religious, or other external bodies, and protects the institution from such influence.
- 3.2.5** Members of the governing board can be dismissed only for cause and by due process.
- 3.2.6** There is a clear and appropriate distinction, in writing and practice, between the policy-making functions of the governing board and the responsibility of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy.
- 3.2.7** The institution has a clearly defined and published organizational structure that delineates responsibility for the administration of policies.
- 3.2.8** The institution has qualified administrative and academic officers with the experience, competence, and capacity to lead the institution.

- 3.2.9** The institution defines and publishes policies regarding appointment and employment of faculty and staff.
- 3.2.10** The institution evaluates the effectiveness of its administrators, including the chief executive officer, on a periodic basis.
- 3.2.11** The institution's chief executive officer has ultimate responsibility for, and exercises appropriate administrative and fiscal control over, the institution's intercollegiate athletics program.
- 3.2.12** The institution's chief executive officer has ultimate control of the institution's fund-raising activities.
- 3.2.13** Any institution-related foundation not controlled by the institution has a contractual or other formal agreement that (a) accurately describes the relationship between the institution and the foundation, and (b) describes any liability associated with that relationship. In all cases, the institution ensures that the relationship is consistent with its mission.
- 3.2.14** The institution's policies are clear concerning ownership of materials, compensation, copyright issues, and the use of revenue derived from the creation and production of all intellectual property. This applies to students, faculty, and staff.

### **3.3 Institutional Effectiveness**

- 3.3.1** The institution identifies expected outcomes for its educational programs and its administrative and educational support services; assesses whether it achieves these outcomes; and provides evidence of improvement based on analysis of those results.

## **PROGRAMS**

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### **3.4 Educational Programs: *All Educational Programs (includes all on-campus, off-campus, and distance learning programs and course work)*** *(See Commission policy "Distance Education.")*

- 3.4.1** The institution demonstrates that each educational program for which academic credit is awarded (a) is approved by the faculty and the administration, and (b) establishes and evaluates program and learning outcomes.
- 3.4.2** The institution's continuing education, outreach, and service programs are consistent with the institution's mission.

- 3.4.3** The institution publishes admissions policies consistent with its mission.
- 3.4.4** The institution has a defined and published policy for evaluating, awarding, and accepting credit for transfer, experiential learning, advanced placement, and professional certificates that is consistent with its mission and ensures that course work and learning outcomes are at the collegiate level and comparable to the institution's own degree programs. The institution assumes responsibility for the academic quality of any course work or credit recorded on the institution's transcript. (*See Commission policy "The Transfer or Transcribing of Academic Credit."*)
- 3.4.5** The institution publishes academic policies that adhere to principles of good educational practice. These are disseminated to students, faculty, and other interested parties through publications that accurately represent the programs and services of the institution.
- 3.4.6** The institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded for courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery.
- 3.4.7** The institution ensures the quality of educational programs/courses offered through consortia relationships or contractual agreements, ensures ongoing compliance with the comprehensive requirements, and evaluates the consorcial relationship and/or agreement against the purpose of the institution.
- 3.4.8** The institution awards academic credit for course work taken on a noncredit basis only when there is documentation that the noncredit course work is equivalent to a designated credit experience.
- 3.4.9** The institution provides appropriate academic support services.
- 3.4.10** The institution defines and publishes general education requirements for its undergraduate programs and major program requirements for all its programs. These requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices for degree programs.
- 3.4.11** The institution protects the security, confidentiality, and integrity of its student academic records and maintains special security measures to protect and back up data.
- 3.4.12** The institution places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of its curriculum with its faculty.
- 3.4.13** For each major in a degree program, the institution assigns responsibility for program coordination, as well as for curriculum development and review, to persons academically qualified in the field. In those

degree programs for which the institution does not identify a major, this requirement applies to a curricular area or concentration.

- 3.4.14** The institution's use of technology enhances student learning, is appropriate for meeting the objectives of its programs, and ensures that students have access to and training in the use of technology.

### **3.5 Educational Programs: *Undergraduate Programs***

- 3.5.1** The institution identifies college-level competencies within the general education core and provides evidence that graduates have attained those competencies.
- 3.5.2** The institution awards degrees only to those students who have earned at least 25 percent of the credit hours required for the degree through instruction offered by that institution. (*See Commission policy "The Transfer or Transcribing of Academic Credit."*)

### **3.6 Educational Programs: *Graduate and Post-Baccalaureate Professional Programs***

- 3.6.1** The institution's post-baccalaureate professional degree programs, and its master's and doctoral degree programs, are progressively more advanced in academic content than undergraduate programs.
- 3.6.2** The institution ensures that its graduate instruction and resources foster independent learning, enabling the graduate to contribute to a profession or field of study.
- 3.6.3** The majority of credits toward a graduate or a post-baccalaureate professional degree is earned through the institution awarding the degree. In the case of graduate and post-baccalaureate professional degree programs offered through joint, cooperative, or consortia arrangements, the student earns a majority of credits from the participating institutions. (*See Commission policy "The Transfer or Transcribing of Academic Credit."*)

### **3.7 Faculty**

- 3.7.1** The institution employs competent faculty members qualified to accomplish the mission and goals of the institution. When determining acceptable qualifications of its faculty, an institution gives primary consideration to the highest earned degree in the discipline in accordance with the guidelines listed below. The institution also considers competence, effectiveness, and capacity, including, as appropriate, undergraduate and

graduate degrees, related work experiences in the field, professional licensure and certifications, honors and awards, continuous documented excellence in teaching, or other demonstrated competencies and achievements that contribute to effective teaching and student learning outcomes. For all cases, the institution is responsible for justifying and documenting the qualifications of its faculty.

*Credential Guidelines:*

- a. *Faculty teaching general education courses at the undergraduate level: doctor's or master's degree in the teaching discipline or master's degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (a minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline).*
- b. *Faculty teaching associate degree courses designed for transfer to a baccalaureate degree: doctor's or master's degree in the teaching discipline or master's degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (a minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline).*
- c. *Faculty teaching associate degree courses not designed for transfer to the baccalaureate degree: bachelor's degree in the teaching discipline, or associate's degree and demonstrated competencies in the teaching discipline.*
- d. *Faculty teaching baccalaureate courses: doctor's or master's degree in the teaching discipline or master's degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline). At least 25 percent of the discipline course hours in each undergraduate major are taught by faculty members holding the terminal degree—usually the earned doctorate—in the discipline.*
- e. *Faculty teaching graduate and post-baccalaureate course work: earned doctorate/ terminal degree in the teaching discipline or a related discipline.*
- f. *Graduate teaching assistants: master's in the teaching discipline or 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline, direct supervision by a faculty member experienced in the teaching discipline, regular in-service training, and planned and periodic evaluations.*

- 3.7.2** The institution regularly evaluates the effectiveness of each faculty member in accord with published criteria, regardless of contractual or tenured status.
- 3.7.3** The institution provides evidence of ongoing professional development of faculty as teachers, scholars, and practitioners.
- 3.7.4** The institution ensures adequate procedures for safeguarding and protecting academic freedom.
- 3.7.5** The institution publishes policies on the responsibility and authority of faculty in academic and governance matters.

### **3.8 Library and Other Learning Resources**

- 3.8.1** The institution provides facilities, services, and learning/information resources that are appropriate to support its teaching, research, and service mission.
- 3.8.2** The institution ensures that users have access to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources.
- 3.8.3** The institution provides a sufficient number of qualified staff—with appropriate education or experiences in library and/or other learning/information resources—to accomplish the mission of the institution.

### **3.9 Student Affairs and Services**

- 3.9.1** The institution publishes a clear and appropriate statement of student rights and responsibilities and disseminates the statement to the campus community.
- 3.9.2** The institution protects the security, confidentiality, and integrity of its student records.
- 3.9.3** The institution provides services supporting its mission with qualified personnel to ensure the quality and effectiveness of its student affairs programs.

## RESOURCES

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### **3.10 Financial and Physical Resources**

- 3.10.1** The institution's recent financial history demonstrates financial stability.
- 3.10.2** The institution provides financial statements and related documents, including multiple measures for determining financial health as requested by the Commission, which accurately and appropriately represent the total operation of the institution.
- 3.10.3** The institution audits financial aid programs as required by federal and state regulations.
- 3.10.4** The institution exercises appropriate control over all its financial and physical resources.
- 3.10.5** The institution maintains financial control over externally funded or sponsored research and programs.
- 3.10.6** The institution takes reasonable steps to provide a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all members of the campus community.
- 3.10.7** The institution operates and maintains physical facilities, both on and off campus, that are adequate to serve the needs of the institution's educational programs, support services, and other mission-related activities.

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■ SECTION 4:

# Federal Requirements

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- 4.1 When evaluating success with respect to student achievement in relation to the institution's mission, the institution includes, as appropriate, consideration of course completion, state licensing examinations, and job placement rates.
- 4.2 The institution maintains a curriculum that is directly related and appropriate to its purpose and goals and to diplomas, certificates, or degrees awarded.
- 4.3 The institution makes available to students and the public current academic calendars, grading policies, and refund policies.
- 4.4 The institution demonstrates that program length is appropriate for each of the degrees offered.
- 4.5 The institution has adequate procedures for addressing written student complaints and is responsible for demonstrating that it follows those procedures when resolving student complaints. (*See Commission policy "Complaint Procedures for the Commission or its Accredited Institutions."*)
- 4.6 Recruitment materials and presentations accurately represent the institution's practices and policies.
- 4.7 The institution publishes the name of its primary accreditor and its address and phone number. (The publication of this information is presented so that it is clear that inquiries to the Commission should relate only to the accreditation status of the institution, and not to general admission information.)
- 4.8 The institution is in compliance with its program responsibilities under Title IV of the *1998 Higher Education Amendments*. (In reviewing the institution's compliance with these program responsibilities, the Commission relies on documentation forwarded to it by the U.S. Secretary of Education.)

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■ APPENDIX:

# Commission Policy, Guidelines, and Good Practice Statements

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## COMMISSION POLICIES

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

The following are categorized as policies of the Commission and are available on the Commission's Web page ([www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)). The Commission maintains currency on the Web and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the policies listed below.

- 1 Accreditation Procedures for Applicant Institutions
- 2 Accrediting Decisions of Other Agencies
- 3 Administrative Procedures for the Meetings of the Committees on Compliance and Reports
- 4 Appeals Procedures of the College Delegate Assembly of the Commission on Colleges
- 5 Commissioner Duties and Responsibilities
- 6 Complaint Procedures for the Commission or Its Accredited Institutions
- 7 Conflict of Interest: for Commissioners, Evaluation Committee Members, and Commission Staff
- 8 Core Requirement 2.7.4: Documenting an Alternative Approach
- 9 Closing an Institution or Program: Teach-Out Agreements
- 10 Deadlines for Reports and Profiles
- 11 Disclosure of Accrediting Documents and Information
- 12 Distance Education

- 13 Dues and Fees
- 14 Governing, Coordinating, and Other State Agencies:  
Representation on Evaluation Committees
- 15 Integrity and Accuracy in Institutional Representation
- 16 International Institutions: Affiliate or Technical  
Assistance Relationships
- 17 Litigation: Financial Obligations
- 18 Observers on Reaffirmation Committees (pending classi-  
fication)
- 19 Policies, Guidelines, and Good Practices: Definitions for  
Accreditation Purposes
- 20 Reaffirmation of Accreditation and Subsequent Reports
- 21 Records Maintenance by the Commission on Colleges
- 22 Reimbursement for Expenses
- 23 Reports Submitted for Committee or Commission Review
- 24 Sanctions, Denial of Reaffirmation, and Removal from  
Membership
- 25 Separate Accreditation for Units of a Member Institution
- 26 Special Committee Procedures and Team Report
- 27 Standing Rules: the Commission on Colleges, Executive  
Council, and the College Delegate Assembly
- 28 Substantive Change for Accredited Institutions of the  
Commission on Colleges
- 29 The Transfer or Transcribing of Academic Credit



## COMMISSION GUIDELINES

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**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. Some guidelines are embedded within the *Principles of Accreditation*. These guidelines are examples of commonly accepted practices that constitute compliance with the standard. Depending upon the nature and mission of the institution, however, other approaches may be more appropriate and also provide evidence of compliance.

- 1 Advertising, Student Recruitment and Representation of Accredited Status: Guidelines
- 2 Contractual Relationships with Non-Regionally Accredited Entities: Guidelines
- 3 Travel and Committee Visits: Guidelines

## COMMISSION GOOD PRACTICES

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**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 or the Commission. These are posted only on the Commission's Web page and are not available in print documents.

- 1 Electronically Delivered Programs: Good Practices
- 2 International Education Programs for Non-U.S. Nationals: Good Practices

## NOTES

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