



Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
Commission on Colleges  
1866 Southern Lane  
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097

## **REDUCED CREDIT UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE**

### **Guidelines**

For the purposes of the Southern Association of Colleges Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), reduced-credit undergraduate degree programs are those that require fewer credit hours and shorter time-to-completion than traditional or standard baccalaureate degrees. The standard baccalaureate degree consists of a minimum of 120 semester credit hours (or the equivalent quarter credit hours or clock hours) and is designed to be completed in four years (or eight academic semesters, or the equivalent). By contrast, reduced-credit undergraduate degree programs typically require 90-100 semester credit hours or the equivalent.

SACSCOC is supportive of curriculum renewal, innovation, continuous improvement, and exploration. These guidelines provide information to (1) assist institutions when initially seeking to offer, and then subsequently offering, a reduced-credit undergraduate degree program; and (2) assist peer reviewers when evaluating an application from an institution that is seeking to offer a reduced-credit degree.

Regardless of the approach used to design and produce a new option for students that provides a more rapid completion of an undergraduate degree, institutions must ensure that these reduced-credit programs comply with all *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement (Principles)*. This applies to all educational programs and services, wherever the program is located or however it is delivered.

In addition, institutions should demonstrate clear institutional control and faculty involvement in the development of any academic program, and care should be given that programs align with the institutional mission and goals.

In a prospectus for a reduced-credit undergraduate degree, the institution must clearly describe the nature and goals of the proposed reduced-credit degree. These elements of the degree are the basis for the institution addressing how compliance with faculty, curriculum, education, policy, learning outcomes, and other related standards of SACSCOC will be met.

### **Credit Hours Required**

The reduced hour undergraduate degree should require fewer than 120 credit hours, but more than eighty-nine (89) credit hours (or the equivalent quarter credit hours or clock hours). If an institution wishes to offer a program below ninety (90) hours, the option of a certificated should be considered.

### **Degree Name and Discipline Content**

The nature and goals of a reduced-credit undergraduate degree, and the content of the degree may not be suitable for all disciplines. Whether embedded in a baccalaureate degree, a stand-alone degree, or one that builds on the associate degree, these degrees are likely to prepare

graduates in specialized disciplines that address workforce needs. Thus, in the prospectus, it is the responsibility of the institution to make a case for the types of majors/disciplines that lend themselves to this degree format and clearly justify why a reduced-credit degree is more appropriate for the educational goals of the degree than a traditional bachelor's degree. The prospectus should also indicate the relationship of the major or discipline to workforce needs.

To clearly distinguish these degrees from other award levels, institutions are required to refer to the reduced-credit undergraduate degree programs as something other than a baccalaureate or bachelor's degree, such as an "undergraduate specialist" degree, "workforce specialist," or some other degree name that modifies the term "Baccalaureate" and avoids confusion with the traditional baccalaureate. In other words, while the institution has the flexibility to name the reduced-credit undergraduate degree, care should be taken to name the degree in a manner that indicates that it is different from the traditional baccalaureate and reflects that the proposed undergraduate degree requires less than 120 semester credit hours.

### **Degree Structure**

The institution should design an appropriately strong curriculum framework and provide an explanation of how curricular breadth and depth are ensured. While a reduced-credit degree may have a more abbreviated general education component and/or more limited minor or elective requirements, students should still be expected to demonstrate an approximately proportional breadth of general education knowledge that are encompassed in a four-year program and required in the SACSCOC Core Requirement 9.3 (*General education requirements*). The curriculum breadth should be carefully designed to include those skills, abilities, and dispositions typical of a traditional baccalaureate, such as critical thinking, communication, humanities, sciences, social sciences, soft skills, and a broad introduction to a variety of disciplines to teach students how to pose questions and solve problems using different modalities. If an institution intends to require less than the minimum thirty (30) semester hours of general education expected for a baccalaureate degree, a clear rationale and explanation of outcomes equivalency based upon the degree name and number of hours required for completion is needed.

Instead of simply removing elective hours, institutions preparing a reduced-credit undergraduate degree should be intentional and perhaps more prescriptive of the hours required outside the major to make certain the goals of the degree are met. This could be accomplished by carefully utilizing both general education and major coursework to provide an introduction, development, and mastery of liberal arts learning outcomes.

Institutions should be aware of the SACSCOC *Principles*, including Core Requirement 9.1 (*Educational programs*), ensures that the curriculum (a) embodies a coherent course of study, (b) is compatible with the stated mission and goals of the institution, and (c) is based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.

As always, the nature and goals of the program determine the program learning outcomes. The knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions of graduates must be clearly stated and consistent with the content of the degree. Evidence of how the student learning outcomes will be introduced, practiced, applied, and assessed at various levels across the curriculum must be included in the prospectus.

It is the responsibility of the institution to build a case for what kinds of majors/disciplines would lend themselves to a reduced-credit undergraduate degree and clearly justify why a reduced-credit degree is more appropriate to accomplish the learning goals than a traditional bachelor's degree. Some outcomes typically found in the baccalaureate might be embedded in the courses offered. The prospectus should indicate when that is the case.

The reduced-credit undergraduate degree may be considered embedded or leading to the completion of a baccalaureate degree at those institutions offering baccalaureate or bachelor's degrees. These institutions must describe the path to completion of the baccalaureate degree from the reduced-credit degree, e.g. how the general education coursework supports the baccalaureate degree, that the program outcomes for the reduced-credit degree represent a subset of the outcomes for the baccalaureate degree. Similarly, for those institutions offering associate degrees (which may include embedded certificates and/or a diploma program), a path to completion of the reduced-credit degree, with the general education requirements, major courses, and program learning outcomes of the associate degree embedded, should be included in the prospectus.

The prospectus should pay close attention to how the curriculum provides the breadth of disciplines, soft skills, and preparation for citizenship relative to a traditional baccalaureate degree. While a reduced-credit undergraduate degree may have abbreviated general education, minor, or elective requirements, the curriculum developed is expected to approach the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions in a manner befitting a traditional baccalaureate/bachelor's degree.

### **Communication and Transparency**

It is the responsibility of the institution to communicate with all stakeholders that the reduced-credit undergraduate degree may not fulfill admission and pre-requisite requirements for some graduate and professional programs, and/or may not meet expectations of some future employers. The institution should document this in a public and transparent manner.

Since a reduced-credit undergraduate degree is relatively new to accreditors, universities, postsecondary institutions, and most importantly, students and parents, the institution should consider including the following information concerning the degree in published materials such as the catalog, website, and other places where consumer disclosures are typically made using language suitable for first-generation students:

- the nature, goals, and program outcomes for the reduced-credit undergraduate degree,
- the time-commitment from the student,
- the delineation of the difference between the 90- and 120-hour versions of the degree,
- the cost variation (if any) for students pursuing the reduced-credit degree part-time vs. full-time or online vs. in-person, and
- the cost comparisons between the reduced-credit hour degree and 120 credit hour degrees it offers (or relative to options offered at other institutions).

In developing its prospectus, the institution should include this information to support the approval of the new degree. Arguments provided in offering a reduced-credit undergraduate degree are the reduction in student debt and increase in student completion rate. Therefore, the institution should identify metrics around student debt, retention rate, and graduation rate. In addition, employment data, student learning outcomes, and student satisfaction should be included in the communication.

#### **Document History**

*Approved: SACSCOC Executive Council, March 2025*