Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges
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TRANSFER AND AWARD OF EXTERNAL ACADEMIC CREDIT

Good Practices

These good practices provide guidance for developing, implementing, and maintaining effective transfer and external credit policies that serve both institutional goals and student needs. The increasing mobility of students across institutional boundaries and the growing number of educational pathways requires thoughtful approaches to credit evaluation that recognize learning while preserving academic standards.

Fundamental Principles

Institutional Responsibility and Authority

Each institution maintains primary responsibility for determining its own transfer credit policies and procedures, exercising this authority within the context of its educational mission, educational programs, and student population. The receiving institution bears the responsibility for establishing reasonable policies for evaluating student knowledge and prior learning. These responsibilities include the expectation of thoughtful policy development that reflects good practices while serving the institution's unique context and educational objectives. Helpful resources regarding good practices in the award of transfer and external credit are available through the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) guidelines and procedures.

Transparency and Full Disclosure

Institutions must publish clear, comprehensive transfer and external credit policies, ensuring prospective and currently enrolled students understand both opportunities and limitations before enrollment. It is important for students to understand the implications of their transfer and external credit decisions, including the distinction between credit acceptance for admission purposes and credit applicable toward specific degree requirements. Full disclosure with prospective and currently enrolled students includes information about the likelihood of credit transfer, potential credit loss, and the impact on time to degree completion. Such communication ensures students can make informed decisions about their educational pathways.

Policy Development and Implementation

Policy Components

Effective transfer and external credit policies address multiple dimensions of credit evaluation, beginning with clear criteria for accepting credit. Institutions should establish comprehensive standards that address the educational quality of sending institutions, the comparability of coursework, and the appropriateness of credit for specific degree programs. While institutional accreditation may be used as an indicator of the quality of sending institutions, it is not a required policy element and its inclusion in institutional policies could limit the institution's flexibility in accepting credit from high-quality domestic or international institutions or non-traditional educational providers.

Grade requirements may be included as a component of transfer credit policies, with for example, institutions requiring a minimum grade of C or equivalent for credit acceptance. This standard reflects the expectation that students have demonstrated adequate mastery of course content while maintaining reasonable expectations for transfer eligibility. Institutions should clearly communicate how different grading systems or competency-based programs convert to their standards and address situations where grading scales differ significantly from institutional practices.

Time limitations for course currency also may be an important policy component, particularly for rapidly evolving fields where knowledge and practices change significantly over time. In addition, some institutions establish currency requirements that distinguish between different types of coursework, recognizing that some disciplines' courses may retain relevance longer than technical or scientific disciplines where the pace of change may be accelerated.

Appeals processes provide safeguards for students who believe their transfer credit may have been evaluated incorrectly. These processes should be clearly defined, published and accessible, and managed by qualified personnel who can provide timely resolution.

Quantitative Limitations and Degree Integrity

Reasonable credit transfer limits that maintain degree integrity while maximizing student progress toward completion are expected. When developing limits on the award of external credit, institutions should ensure that institutional policies ensure that degrees awarded meet the expectations set by SACSCOC's *Principles of Accreditation* for the minimum number of credit hours earned through instruction offered by the institution. Most institutions establish stricter limits for graduate credit than for undergraduate credit, in alignment with SACSCOC standards. Institutions also may establish limits that distinguish between credit limitations for overall degree requirements and limitations for the specific educational program or academic major.

Test-based credit represents a special category requiring separate consideration. Many institutions set limits upon the number of credits that may be accepted from standardized examinations, recognizing the value of this pathway while ensuring substantial coursework completion at the degree-granting institution. The establishment of quantitative limits ensures that students complete sufficient coursework within the degree-granting institution's academic environment, facilitate faculty-student interaction, and maintain the integrity of institutional degrees.

Course-Specific Restrictions and Academic Standards

Decisions regarding the award of academic credit should include the engagement of and oversight by individuals academically qualified to make the necessary judgements. Knowledge of the specific discipline is essential to ensure that these academic decisions are grounded in good educational practice and uphold the quality and integrity of academic credit awarded by the institution.

Institutions must clearly identify categories of coursework that do not meet transfer credit standards, providing transparent explanations for these exclusions. Remedial and developmental coursework typically does not qualify for transfer credit because it addresses foundational skills rather than college-level learning outcomes. Similarly, English as a Second Language courses, while valuable for student development, generally focus on language acquisition rather than academic content that contributes to degree requirements.

Technical credit or non-credit learning experiences often fall outside transfer credit eligibility because they may not represent college-level or academic learning, though institutions may make exceptions for courses or experiences that include substantial theoretical content or those that align with specific degree program student learning outcomes. In these cases, specific articulation agreements or cooperative academic arrangements are often developed to ensure regular review in support of the quality and integrity of the educational experience and to verify the appropriate award of academic credit.

These exclusions should be applied consistently and communicated clearly to students, helping them understand how their previous coursework aligns with institutional standards and degree requirements. Institutions should regularly review these categories to ensure they remain appropriate and do not create unnecessary barriers to student progress, while maintaining expectations of educational quality and integrity.

Test-Based Credit Recognition and Alternative Pathways

Standardized Examination Programs

College Level Examination Program (CLEP) credit, Advanced Placement (AP) and International Baccalaureate (IB) programs represent well-established pathways for earning college credit through standardized examinations. Institutions should maintain current knowledge of these examination systems and establish clear score thresholds that align with their academic standards. Regular review of these standards ensures they remain appropriate as examination systems evolve and institutional needs change.

Articulation Agreements and Partnership Development

Formal articulation agreements with frequently used sending institutions can streamline transfer processes while ensuring academic quality and student success. These agreements should reflect current curriculum and standard alignment while providing clear pathways for student transfer and degree completion. Regular review and updating of these articulation agreements by individuals who are academically qualified to make these judgements ensure that agreements remain current and effective. This review should consider changes in curriculum, degree requirements, faculty qualifications, and educational practices at both institutions, making necessary adjustments to maintain agreement effectiveness.

Cooperative academic arrangements with non-Title IV entities or with non-credit providers require additional emphasis on the criteria used to evaluate the quality and integrity of student learning for which academic credit is being considered. The expectation for a thorough review is higher if the institution

plans to transcipt the credit as institutional credit. Institutions who engage in these practices are assuming responsibility for the credit reported on its transcripts, even in cases when the instruction has been provided by an academic partner or non-credit provider. These agreements should include engagement of and oversight by individuals who are academically qualified to verify the comparability of credit earned through a cooperative academic arrangement with credit earned through instruction provided by the institution. Such cooperative academic arrangements are reviewed as part of the initial accreditation and reaffirmation processes. Institutions are further reminded that in these cases, even though the credit may be transcripted as institutional credit, the hours earned through such arrangements may not be considered in the calculation of the minimum number of hours required for graduation through instruction offered by the institution.

Special Populations and Diverse Pathways

Military and Veteran Students

Military personnel and veterans bring unique educational experiences that require specialized evaluation approaches. The American Council on Education (ACE) provides recommendations for military training and education that help institutions make appropriate credit awards. ACE's Learning Evaluations maintain comprehensive evaluation programs for formally structured courses offered by the military and civilian non-collegiate sponsors. However, these recommendations require interpretation within institutional contexts and degree program requirements. Military transcript evaluation often involves translating military occupational specialties and training programs into civilian academic equivalents. This process requires understanding of military education systems, training objectives, and competency standards. Institutions should develop expertise in military transcript evaluation or establish relationships with specialists who can provide this service.

In addition, the award of credit for prior learning may be appropriate for military personnel whose professional experience demonstrates learning outcomes equivalent to college coursework. This assessment requires careful development of evaluation criteria and procedures that maintain academic standards while recognizing valuable learning achieved through military service.

Adult and Non-Traditional Students

Prior learning assessment provides a mechanism for recognizing learning achieved through professional experience, corporate training, self-directed study, and other non-traditional pathways. For learning that has not been validated through the ACE formal credit recommendation process or through credit-by-examination programs, institutions often consider the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning (CAEL) procedures and processes for prior learning assessment.

Portfolio-based assessment allows students to demonstrate learning through comprehensive documentation of their knowledge and skills. This approach requires clear guidelines for portfolio development, evaluation criteria, and faculty training in assessment techniques. The process should maintain academic standards while providing appropriate opportunities for students to demonstrate their learning.

Professional certifications and licenses also may warrant credit recognition when they demonstrate learning equivalent to college coursework. This recognition requires careful evaluation of certification requirements, knowledge domains, and competency standards to evaluate alignment with expected student learning outcomes and ensure appropriate credit awards.

International Students and Global Education

International student transcript evaluation requires specialized knowledge of international educational systems, grading scales, and cultural contexts. Understanding international education systems extends beyond credit calculation to include recognition of different educational philosophies, assessment approaches, and academic standards. This understanding helps institutions make appropriate credit decisions. Credential evaluation services (such as the World Education Services [WES]) can provide valuable assistance in this process, offering expertise in international education systems and translation of foreign credentials into U.S. equivalents. AACRAO's Electronic Database for Global Education (AACRAO EDGE) developed by the International Education Standards Council (IESC) also provides information to assist institutions in international credential evaluation.

Like an institution's practices related to the award of credit for CLEP, AP, and IB programs, institutions are encouraged to consider developing equivalency expectations related to the award of credit for comparable international student learning experiences, including (but not limited to):

- General Certificate of Education (CGE) grades,
- Singapore-Cambridge General Certification of Education (CGE) grades,
- French Baccalauréat results,
- German Abitur scores,
- Swiss Maturity scores,
- Cambridge Pre-U Principal Subject scores,
- Caribbean Advanced Proficiency Examinations (CAPE),
- Indian Standard XII results from the Central Board of Secondary Education (CBSE) and the Council for the Indian School Certificate Examinations (CISCE), and
- Diplôme d'études collégiales (DEC) through an accredited Collège d'enseignement général et professionnel (CEGEP).

Dual enrollment and Early College Programs

Dual enrollment programs allow high school students to earn college credit while completing their secondary education, creating opportunities for accelerated progress toward degree completion. The credit earned through these programs is considered institutional credit and must adhere to the same standards as other institutional courses. Quality assurance in Dual enrollment programs extends beyond instructor qualifications to include curriculum alignment, assessment standards, and ongoing evaluation of student outcomes. Course content and rigor of dual enrollment courses are expected to be comparable to that of the same courses taught to the institution's other students (see SACSCOC policy, *Dual Enrollmen*t). Institutions are encouraged to implement comprehensive monitoring systems that include Dual enrollment student performance in subsequent coursework, ensuring that credit awards accurately reflect student preparation and learning.

The National Alliance of Concurrent Enrollment Partnerships (NACEP) publishes comprehensive Standards for Dual Enrollment Programs that guide program development and operation. NACEP Standards address faculty qualifications, curriculum alignment, student support services, and program evaluation, providing a framework for ensuring quality and consistency in Dual enrollment offerings.

Evaluation Processes and Institutional Procedures

Faculty Engagement and Academic Judgment

Effective credit evaluation requires meaningful involvement of academically qualified individuals in decision-making processes, particularly for courses that require specialized knowledge or professional judgment that have not been previously articulated by the institution. Faculty members bring disciplinary expertise that enables accurate assessment of course content, learning outcomes, and academic rigor. This expertise becomes particularly important when evaluating courses from unfamiliar institutions or programs that do not align clearly with institutional offerings. The involvement of individuals academically qualified in transfer credit evaluation also serves broader institutional purposes, including curriculum development, articulation agreement creation, cooperative academic arrangements, and ongoing assessment of transfer student preparedness.

Documentation and Record-Keeping

Comprehensive documentation supports both individual student needs and institutional effectiveness in transfer credit management. Official transcripts from accredited institutions provide the foundation for credit evaluation, supplemented by course syllabi, detailed course descriptions, and catalog information that enables accurate assessment of learning outcomes and content coverage. Institutional record-keeping systems may maintain detailed documentation of evaluation decisions, including rationale for credit awards and denials. This documentation can serve multiple purposes, including student appeals, policy review, and consistency in future evaluations. Accessible databases of previously evaluated courses also can streamline the evaluation process while ensuring consistent treatment of similar coursework.

Policy Review and Assessment

Regular review of transfer credit policies ensures they remain current, effective, and aligned with institutional goals and student needs. During this review, it may be helpful to examine policy outcomes, including transfer student success rates, time to degree completion, and satisfaction with transfer credit processes. Assessment of transfer credit policies may also consider external factors, including changes in accreditation standards, state regulations, and educational practices at sending institutions.

Conclusion

Effective transfer and external credit policies require ongoing attention to the balance between institutional standards and student success, recognizing that these policies significantly impact student access, progress, and completion. The development and implementation of these policies should reflect institutional mission and values while maintaining flexibility to address student needs and educational pathways.

Regular review and refinement of transfer credit policies, combined with transparent communication and implementation, serve the best interests of both institutions and students. This ongoing attention ensures that policies remain current, effective, and aligned with changing educational landscapes and student populations. Institutions should adapt these good practices to their specific contexts, missions, and student populations while maintaining compliance with accreditation standards and regulatory requirements.

Document History

Endorsed: SACSCOC Board of Trustees, December 2025