



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

## **THE QUALITY AND INTEGRITY OF EDUCATIONAL CREDENTIALS**

### **Policy Statement**

**Introduction:** The national priority to increase the percentage of people holding college-level credentials has resulted in creative educational pathways. Examples of pathways include combined programs (so-called “two-plus-two” or “three-plus-two” arrangements), dual enrollment, consortia, cooperative academic arrangements, degree completion program arrangements, state-wide articulation arrangements, credit for prior learning, and diploma and certificate credit conversion to degree credit. Additionally, various “applied” associate and baccalaureate credentials [e.g., Associate of Applied Science (AAS) and Bachelor of Applied Science (BAS)] are proliferating to meet the needs of career-minded students wishing to enter the work force directly after graduation.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) supports innovative efforts of educational leaders to address this national priority effectively; however, SACSCOC has an obligation to ensure that educational pathways maintain or enhance the quality and ensure the integrity of educational credentials. Therefore, the Commission expects member institutions to be in compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* and the stipulations of this policy as outlined below.

**The Undergraduate Degree:** For purposes of accreditation, an undergraduate degree is characterized, among other things, as a coherent body of knowledge and skills at the collegiate level, including an appropriate general education component. To maintain the integrity of the undergraduate degree, the degree-granting institution is responsible for the quality of all credits that constitute the degrees it grants.

The higher education community has traditionally understood applied educational programs (e.g., certificates, diplomas, AAS, BAS, and other types of applied programs,) will include discipline-specific courses not designed for transfer to a traditional baccalaureate or non-applied associate degree program. Recent innovative educational pathways have the potential to blur that commonly-held distinction between transfer and non-transfer programs. With the shifting paradigm, it is incumbent on institutions to provide honest and open disclosure regarding their degrees and constituent courses. Therefore, the institution must clearly disclose whether the intent of each of its undergraduate degrees is “intended for transfer” or “not intended for transfer.”

All lower-division courses within educational programs that are characterized as “intended for transfer” will be considered transfer courses and, therefore, expected to meet transfer-quality accreditation standards. In some cases, institutions may elect to accept courses characterized as “not intended for transfer.” In doing so, the accepting institution must demonstrate comparable course content and comparable learning outcomes, and ensure that courses rise above the level of basic skills and constitute more than a training experience. All general education courses are expected to meet the transfer-level quality accreditation standards defined by the *Principles of Accreditation* in Standard 6.2.a (*Faculty qualifications*), Core

Requirement 9.1 (*Program content*); Core Requirement 9.3 (*General education requirements*), and Standard 10.8 (*Evaluating and awarding academic credit*).

All courses on an institution's transcripts for undergraduate degrees, whether taught by the institution, transferred from domestic or international institutions, or taught elsewhere and transcribed as the institution's own (e.g., dual enrollment, study-abroad, cross-registration, consortia) should be evaluated to ensure that the courses meet (1) the requirements for the degree the institution awards and (2) applicable accreditation standards. This evaluation must be done by persons academically qualified to make such judgments.

Any undergraduate degree will be viewed and evaluated as a single degree in its entirety, including all lower-division courses.

**Educational Pathways and Blocks of Credit:** All lower-division courses, including those within blocks of credit which are subject to institutionally-created educational pathways and/or state-wide transfer policy (1) are expected to meet transfer-level quality accreditation standards, or (2) where such educational pathways intentionally include the articulation of courses characterized as “not intended for transfer,” the parties to the educational pathway must demonstrate comparable course content and comparable learning outcomes, and ensure that courses rise above the level of basic skills and constitute more than a training experience. All courses that are part of a block of credit being articulated or transferred must be recorded individually on the students' transcripts.

**Undergraduate Diplomas and Certificates:** Institutions may choose to offer “stackable” educational credentials, combining coherent groups of courses into diplomas and/or certificates that students may complete on the way toward an undergraduate degree. Such credentials are subject to the requirements of this policy.

**Post-baccalaureate and Graduate Credentials:** SACSCOC member institutions are also responsible for ensuring the quality and integrity of educational credentials at the graduate level. This is particularly true when the credential is offered – in part or in the whole – through a collaborative academic arrangement with another entity. Institutions should take great care in initiating and evaluating such arrangements to ensure ongoing compliance with Standard 6.2.a (*Faculty qualifications*), Core Requirement 9.1 (*Program content*), Standard 9.5 (*Institutional credits for a graduate/professional degree*), Standard 9.6 (*Post-baccalaureate rigor and curriculum*), and Standard 10.9 (*Cooperative academic arrangements*).

**Institutional Information:** Institutions must clarify for SACSCOC review committees transfer policies; educational pathways; the relationship of educational credentials to each other, the name, type, intent (Transfer or Non-Transfer), and content of various educational programs; and lower division course offerings (Transfer or Non-Transfer).

**Committee Orientation:** Staff supporting SACSCOC review committees should ensure that committee members have the necessary institutional information and that committee members are sensitive to the mission of the institution when applying the *Principles of Accreditation* and SACSCOC policy.

**Document History**

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