



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

## **THE QUALITY AND INTEGRITY OF UNDERGRADUATE DEGREES**

### **Policy Statement**

**Introduction:** The national priority to sharply increase the percentage of Americans holding undergraduate degrees has resulted in a number of creative educational pathways to facilitate accomplishment of that goal. Examples of educational pathways include two-plus-two arrangements, dual admissions, consortia arrangements, degree completion arrangements, state-wide articulation arrangements, credit for work experience arrangements, diploma and certificate credits being converted into degree credits, and the like. Additionally, various “applied” undergraduate degrees 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) is supportive of the innovative efforts of educational leaders to effectively address this national priority; however, SACSCOC has an obligation to ensure that these educational pathways maintain or enhance the quality and integrity of undergraduate degrees. Therefore, when reviewing an institution offering undergraduate degrees, the Commission will expect the institution to be in compliance with the relevant 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, including an appropriate general education component, all at the collegiate level. To maintain the integrity of the undergraduate degree, the degree-granting institution is responsible for the quality of all credits that constitute the degree it grants.

The higher education community has traditionally understood educational programs that are applied in nature (e.g., certificates, diplomas, AAS and other types of applied associate degree programs, and certain baccalaureate degrees) will include discipline-specific courses not intended to transfer to a traditional baccalaureate or non-applied associate’s degree. Recent innovative educational pathways have the potential to blur that commonly-held distinction between transfer programs and non-transfer programs. With the shifting paradigm, it is incumbent on institutions to provide honest and open disclosure regarding the nature of 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 from programs characterized as “not intended for transfer.” In doing so, the accepting institution must demonstrate that there are 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 always expected to meet transfer level quality accreditation standards. Transfer level quality accreditation standards are defined by the *Principles of Accreditation*, Core Requirement 2.7.2 (Program Content); Core Requirement 2.7.3 (General Education); Comprehensive Standard 3.4.4 (Acceptance of Academic Credit); and, Comprehensive Standard 3.7.1 (Faculty Qualifications).

All courses on the institution's transcript for the undergraduate degree, whether taught by the institution, transferred in from a domestic or an international institution, or taught elsewhere and transcribed as the institution's own (e.g., dual admissions, study-abroad, cross-registration, consortia) should be evaluated to ensure that the courses meet (1) the requirements for the degree the institution intends to award and (2) applicable accreditation standards. This evaluation must be carried out by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments.

Any baccalaureate degree in its entirety will be viewed and evaluated as a single degree, 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 labeled as "not intended for transfer," the parties to the educational pathway must demonstrate that there are 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 comprising a block of credit being articulated or transferred must be unbundled and recorded individually on the student transcript.

**Institutional Information:** Institutions must clarify for SACSCOC review committees transfer policies; educational pathways; 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**

*Approved: Board of Trustees, December 2011*