



RESOURCE MANUAL

for The Principles of Accreditation:
Foundations for Quality Enhancement



Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges

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Organization of the *Manual*

The *Resource Manual* examines all 14 Sections of the *Principles of Accreditation*. In an institution's Compliance Certification, or other SACSCOC templates used by the institution for reporting compliance, it is not required to submit documentation of compliance with Section 1 (Integrity); however, for each standard that requires an institution to submit documentation of compliance in Sections 2 through 14, this *Resource Manual* addresses the following:

The Standard

The wording of each standard is repeated as it appears in the *Principles of Accreditation* (2018). In some instances, the stem of the standard is repeated for clarity. In a Compliance Certification, the institution, through its own internal review process, will make its determination of its compliance with the standard. Each standard is preceded by a number (e.g., 6.5), which begins with the section number, followed by the number of the standard within the section (and if there are sub-standards, followed by a letter). The *Resource Manual* then repeats the wording of the standard from the *Principles of Accreditation*. Standards also have descriptors (e.g., "Faculty development") as a means to quickly identify the content of the standard. Whenever a descriptor appears in a standard, the institution is expected to make a separate determination of overall compliance with the standard when submitting reports to SACSCOC.

If the standard is a **Core Requirement**, it will be designated with the letters "CR" in brackets following the descriptor. Core Requirements are also listed in Appendix A of this document. A Core Requirement is a basic, broad-based, foundational requirement of the *Principles of Accreditation*. The Core Requirements establish a threshold of institutional characteristics required of all institutions seeking initial accreditation or maintaining accreditation. If a member institution is judged by the SACSCOC Board of Trustees to be out of compliance with a Core Requirement, it must be placed on a sanction. Candidacy status requires compliance with all Core Requirements.

Rationale and Notes

The Rationale and Notes provide a further explanation of the standard/requirement along with reasons for its inclusion in the *Principles*. The rationale also references the preamble for each section of the *Principles*, providing overall context for interpretation. In some instances, there may be a note regarding a recent interpretation by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, a related SACSCOC policy, an expanded explanation of a historical interpretation, or an expectation or clarification. The purpose of the rationale is to give some perspective on the standard.

Questions to Consider

For each standard or requirement, there is a series of questions designed to help an institution examine its current processes and practices. *It is extremely important that the questions be seen as helpful prompts, not as mandatory aspects of a review.* In past iterations of this *Resource Manual*, there has been a tendency for these questions to become viewed as necessary parts of an institution's narrative; such an interpretation flies in the face of this document's intent. The *Principles* mean what they say. It is the wording of each standard that is at issue, and evaluation of compliance or noncompliance, either by individuals at the institution or by those who are reviewing an institution, depends on the professional judgment of those persons. So while these "Questions to Consider" offer guidance and advice, they may be neither necessary nor sufficient to document compliance. The written materials to be submitted to SACSCOC must be clear and complete, and include relevant documentation. The best evidence in support of compliance may differ from institution to institution. Those reviewing an institution must be fair and consistent, evaluating what was submitted to make (in conjunction with all others reviewing the same materials) a holistic, professional judgment about what was provided. Appropriate, adequate responses in support of compliance may include different evidence depending on the institution.

Sample Documentation

The same caveats mentioned above apply to the types of evidence and documentation offered by an institution in support of establishing compliance with each standard. It is not sufficient for an institution to merely assert compliance with a standard; it must provide documentation to support its assertions. Appropriate documentation depends on what is under review. This section of the *Resource Manual* suggests the types of materials often submitted for review by SACSCOC. This list is not meant to be exhaustive; institutional representatives may have that perfect bit of evidence that is not covered here. Likewise, the list is not meant to be mandated; institutions may have totally different documentation or only a small subset of what is listed and still establish compliance.

In general, there are two types of evidence: (1) documents that describe how the institution operates: bylaws, strategic plan, catalog, handbooks, manuals, policies, or procedures; and 2) documents that show how the institution operates in practice: meeting minutes, completed inventories, completed evaluations, completed audits, completed course approval forms, completed degree audits, copies of student complaints, assessment rubric results, or redacted transcripts. In most cases, it will be important for an institution to include both types of documentation when responding to the standard.

It is not enough simply to provide documentation; its relevance and timeliness should be discussed and made clear. Documents without a clear narrative as to their applicability and appropriateness can be easily misinterpreted by reviewers. So please, *do not view anything in this Manual to be a simple checklist.*

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, if Applicable

For some standards/requirements, there may be SACSCOC policies, procedures, guidelines, good practices, and approved interpretations that the institution should review during its self-assessment. If there are such documents, they will be referenced in this section.

For the purpose of accreditation, such documents are defined as follows:

Policies and procedures. A policy is a required course of action to be followed by the SACSCOC or its member or candidate institutions. SACSCOC policies may also include procedures, which are likewise a required course of action to be followed by SACSCOC or its member or candidate institutions. The *Principles of Accreditation* require that an institution comply with the policies and procedures of SACSCOC. Policies are approved by vote of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. At its discretion, the Board may choose to forward a policy to the College Delegate Assembly for approval. All policies are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the policies listed.

Guidelines. A guideline is an advisory statement designed to assist institutions in fulfilling accreditation requirements and standards. As such, guidelines describe recommended educational practices for documenting requirements of the *Principles of Accreditation* and are approved by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. The guidelines are examples of commonly accepted practices that constitute compliance with the standard. Depending on the nature and mission of the institution, however, other approaches may be more appropriate and provide evidence of compliance. All guidelines are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the good practices listed.

Good practices. 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 of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees or the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. Good practice documents are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the good practices listed.

Position statements. A position statement examines an issue facing the SACSCOC membership, describes appropriate approaches, and states the SACSCOC stance on the issue. It is endorsed by the Executive Council of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees or the Board itself. Position statements are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). SACSCOC maintains currency on the website and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any of the position statements listed.

Documents. While not official materials, these are templates of required information as part of many submissions to SACSCOC. Reviewers are expecting a reasonably standardized way of presenting the requested information, so these documents should be consulted when writing narratives for submission to SACSCOC. All documents are available on the SACSCOC website (www.sacscoc.org). The Commission maintains currency online and reserves the right to add, modify, or delete any published document at any time. It is the institution's responsibility to check for updates.

Cross-References to Other Related Standards/Requirements, if Applicable

Some standards/requirements are related in content and expectation. In those cases, the standard/requirement is listed.

Additional Materials

In addition, the **appendices** of this *Resource Manual* include the following:

Appendix A: Chart of Standards. Lists all standards of the *Principles of Accreditation* with descriptors and indicates the status of the standard relative to these characteristics: (1) is a Core Requirement; (2) is part of the Fifth-Year Interim Report; (3) is part of the Application for Membership; (4) is reviewed on site even if the off-site committee finds compliance; (5) requires a published institutional policy or procedure; and (6) is closely associated with a SACSCOC policy statement or statements (as identified in the narratives in this report).

Appendix B: Glossary of Terms. Refers to terms in SACSCOC policy, standards, procedures, and practices that have a prescribed definition or an interpretive understanding when applied.

Appendix C: Guidelines for Addressing Distance and Correspondence Education, Off-Campus Instructional Sites, and Branch Campuses. Serves as a guide for institutions and evaluators by providing procedures and criteria for use when evaluating distance learning and correspondence education programs, and in those cases where an institution has off-campus instructional sites offering 50% or more of a program, and/or has branch campuses.

Appendix D: Commission Documents of Special Significance for Institutions. Describes the various Commission documents/policies/forms that may assist institutions in their work with SACSCOC.

Appendix E: Overview of Accreditation. Describes the types of accreditation and the organizational structure of the SACSCOC.

Important Considerations Applicable to *The Principles Of Accreditation*

Application of the Requirements and Standards. SACSCOC bases its accreditation of degree-granting higher education institutions and entities on requirements and standards in the *Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*. These requirements and standards apply to all institutional programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. This includes programs offered through distance and correspondence education, and at off-campus instructional sites and branch campuses. Consequently, when preparing documents for the Commission demonstrating compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation*, an institution must include these sites and programs in its “Institutional Summary Form Prepared for Commission Reviews” and address them in its analysis and documentation of compliance. (See SACSCOC policy [Distance and Correspondence Education](#).)

The Requirement of a Policy. Implicit in every standard mandating a policy or procedure is the expectation that the policy or procedure is in writing and has been 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. At the time of review, an institution will be expected to demonstrate that it has met all of the above elements. If the institution has had no cause to apply its policy, it should indicate that an example of implementation is unavailable because there has been no cause to apply it. (See SACSCOC best practices, [Developing Policy and Procedures Documents](#).) Appendix A contains a summary of standards calling for a policy or procedure. This will also be noted in the “Reference to SACSCOC Documents, if Applicable” section of affected standards.

Organization of the *Principles of Accreditation*. The revision of the *Principles of Accreditation* approved by the SACSCOC College Delegate Assembly in December 2017 represents a major shift in the organization of this key guiding document. Earlier editions of the *Principles* were organized in sections relating to Core Requirements, Comprehensive Standards, and Federal Requirements. While Core Requirements remain, they are not separated out, but instead clearly marked within the text of the document with the designation “CR” and identified in Appendix A. The distinction between Comprehensive Standards and Federal Requirements has been discarded. Institutions are responsible for maintaining compliance with all standards, whether or not they are driven by the SACSCOC membership or as a result of federal expectations related to the role SACSCOC plays as a gatekeeper in establishing the eligibility of its accredited institutions to participate in programs authorized under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, as amended, and other federal programs.

Thus, in an effort to reduce perceived redundancies and to provide a clearer structure to the *Principles*, the current document is structured topically. If a section contains Core Requirements, these will appear as the first standards in that section and will be clearly designated. The standards cover all topics required by federal mandates, and this distinction will continue to play a role in reviews of institutions seeking candidacy and in the fifth-year interim review process. As with standards requiring a policy, standards that are parts of either initial candidacy reviews or part of the Fifth-Year Interim Report will appear in Appendix A. This listing is accurate as of January 2018, but could be updated, for example, if federal requirements change.