



RESOURCE MANUAL

for The Principles of Accreditation:
Foundations for Quality Enhancement



Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges

Third Edition: 2018, First Printing

SECTION 9: Educational Program Structure and Content

- 9.1** Educational programs (a) embody a coherent course of study, (b) are compatible with the stated mission and goals, and (c) are based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education. (*Program content*) [CR]

Rationale and Notes

Collegiate-level educational programs emphasize both breadth and depth of student learning. The structure and content of a program challenges students to integrate knowledge and develop skills of analysis and inquiry.

All programs offered by the institution are directly connected to its mission and to fields of study appropriate to higher education. The term “coherence” in this standard reflects an expectation that, as a student progresses through a program of study, the content of the program demands increasing levels of integration of knowledge. Coherence is a critical component of a program and should demonstrate an appropriate sequencing of courses, not a mere bundling of credits, so that student learning is progressively more advanced in terms of assignments and scholarship required and demonstrates progressive advancement in a field of study that allows students to integrate knowledge and grow in critical skills.

The expectation that a program embodies a coherent course of study applies regardless of the mode of delivery. Thus a program offered online should be developed to ensure the program is designed to offer a coherent course of study. Similarly, a direct assessment, competency-based program should establish that the expected competencies build upon one another. See SACSCOC policies [Distance and Correspondence Education](#) and [Direct Assessment Competency-Based Educational Programs](#).

This standard focuses on the major and the degree or credential. Other standards within this section require additional detail that complement this standard’s emphasis on program coherence [see Standard 9.3 (*General education requirements*) and Standard 9.6 (*Post-baccalaureate program rigor*)], while Standard 9.7 (*Program requirements*) expects educational program requirements to be explicitly published.

NOTES

Because the [Institutional Summary Form Prepared for Commission Reviews](#) lists all programs at the institution, reference should be made to that document. Catalog and web program listings should also match.

Narrative should include examples drawn from a range of the institution’s educational programs across all offered degree levels, but does not have to explicitly address each program. It is presumed each program is described in more detail in the catalog of the institution.

If the institution offers some programs that are unusual, especially for the type of institution, then such programs should certainly be addressed because of parts (b) and (c) of the standard.

Questions to Consider

- Are all programs consistent with the institution's mission and goals?
- If there are highly unusual or unique programs at the institution, how did you determine that these programs are in a field of study appropriate to higher education?
- Are there policies and procedures in place that help ensure program appropriateness and program coherence (e.g., definitions of a major, prerequisite expectations for majors, oversight via curriculum committees)?
- Can the institution demonstrate that degree programs reflect coherence in sequencing, increasing complexity, and linkages between and among program components?

Sample Documentation

- [Institutional Summary Form Prepared for Commission Reviews](#).
- College/university publications listing courses required in each program offered, providing course descriptions, and course and program prerequisites.
- Published definitions of majors and degrees.
- Policies and processes ensuring the coherence of programs and compatibility with the mission of the institution.
- Minutes, institutional forms (preferably not blank) from curriculum committees addressing the issue of appropriateness, mission, and/or coherence.
- Information regarding degree requirements, residency requirements, and other experiences as part of a program.
- Comparative data with similar peer institutions.
- Rationales for programs and their suitability for higher education.
- State mandates providing curriculum requirements and/or guidelines.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC document: [Institutional Summary Form Prepared for Commission Reviews](#)

SACSCOC policies: [Direct Assessment Competency Based Educational Programs](#)
[Distance and Correspondence Education](#)

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

- Standard 9.3 (*General education requirements*)
Standard 9.6 (*Post-baccalaureate program rigor*)
Standard 9.7 (*Program requirements*)
Standard 10.4 (*Academic governance*)

9.2

The institution offers one or more degree programs based on at least 60 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the associate level; at least 120 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the baccalaureate level; or at least 30 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the post-baccalaureate, graduate, or professional level. The institution provides an explanation of equivalencies when using units other than semester credit hours. The institution provides an appropriate justification for all degree programs and combined degree programs that include fewer than the required number of semester credit hours or its equivalent unit.

(Program length) [CR]

Rationale and Notes

This Core Requirement reflects the generally accepted means of determining academic credit required for degrees in higher education. The requirement uses as its basis the semester credit hour or its equivalency. In instances where an institution relies on other means of determining “academic credit” other than semester hours, it must demonstrate that its approach adheres to generally accepted practices described by this Core Requirement. In addition, an institution needs to justify any degrees that include fewer than the required number of hours. See Standard 10.7 (*Policies for awarding credit*) in this *Manual* for more details on the definition of a semester credit hour.

In the case of graduate programs, the expectation is that the first graduate degree (usually the master’s) requires a minimum of 30 semester credit hours. Higher degrees should contain progressively more hours. If that is not the case, then an appropriate justification should be provided.

This standard applies to all programs, including competency-based programs, whether the program is based on the credit hour or not. Common examples are medical programs, where credit hours are not always utilized, and direct assessment programs, where a set of specific competencies are demonstrated rather than the student earning credit hours. In these cases, the institution should provide an appropriate justification that establishes an equivalency of outcomes consistent with the standard. See SACSCOC policy [Direct Assessment Competency Based Educational Programs](#).

Another area in which appropriate justification is often required is combined programs, where students earn multiple degrees while progressing through a program, either at the same level or at different levels. Such combination programs often involve degrees earned from different institutions (dual degrees) or two degrees earned from the same institution (combination degrees). In these types of degrees, some of the same course credit hours are essentially “double-counted” by different institutions or within the same institution. When these programs involve transfer of credit articulation across institutions, care should be taken that the institution follows its own policies and procedures for transfer of credit [see Standard 10.8 (*Evaluating and awarding academic credit*)], but generally articulated transfer of credit programs pose few problems under this current standard.

For combination degrees offered by a single institution, excessive “double-counting” of credits can affect the integrity of the degrees offered. As an example, consider an institution that offers two

distinct master's degrees that require 30 semester credit hours each (the minimum allowed under this standard). If the institution allows a student to earn both degrees by taking 42 total semester credit hours (double-counting six three-semester credit hour courses as applying to each degree), then the institution may face a high burden of proof in justifying this arrangement from an academic perspective. A reasonable reviewer might view this acceptable as a second major under the same degree, but have difficulty accepting that degrees were earned in separate fields.

Another common situation is to allow students to begin graduate work before completing the undergraduate degree, then "double-counting" some of the graduate work to award both a baccalaureate and a master's degree upon completion of the work. For exceptional students, a limited amount of this activity could easily be academically justified. However, if the combined coursework falls far short of 150 total semester hours, or if any student can take part in the program regardless of academic merit, it calls into question the integrity of the undergraduate degree and/or the rigor of the graduate degree. These circumstances require an appropriate justification under this standard. Institutions and reviewers must use their professional judgment in such cases.

NOTES

Institutional credits for coursework that is not at the collegiate level (e.g., developmental courses) do not count as part of the total credit hours needed to earn a degree.

The issue of "double-counting" discussed above does not apply to the application of hours from an associate of arts or associate of science degree to a baccalaureate degree, as these associate degrees are explicitly designed for transfer of credit into the next degree; that design is not the case for the combination degrees discussed above.

Questions to Consider

- If using the semester credit hour as the common measure of course completion, does each degree program meet this standard? If not, is there an appropriate justification?
- What are the institution's policies and procedures related to the establishment of new programs and do they include reference to minimum length for programs at each level?
- If an academic unit other than semester hours is used, what is the unit equivalency to semester credit hours and how does the institution make this determination?
- Are there some programs at the institution that do not rely on the semester credit hour even if most programs do (e.g., medical schools, direct assessment competency-based programs, hybrid programs)?
- How does the institution determine appropriate program length in the case of combination programs and dual degree programs?
- How is program length established and monitored?
- How does the institution justify degrees that include fewer than the required number of hours?

9.3

The institution requires the successful completion of a general education component at the undergraduate level that:

- (a) is based on a coherent rationale.**
- (b) is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree program. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent.**
- (c) ensures breadth of knowledge. These credit hours include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics. These courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession. (*General education requirements*) [CR]**

Rationale and Notes

General education is an integral component of an undergraduate degree program through which students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge. This Core Requirement establishes four key principles regarding the general education component of undergraduate degree programs:

- The General education component is based on a coherent rationale.
- General education courses are college level.
- In order to promote intellectual inquiry, general education courses present a breadth of knowledge, not focusing on skills, techniques, and procedures specific to the student's occupation or profession, and are drawn from specific academic areas.
- The general education component constitutes a minimum number of semester hours, or its equivalent, and comprises a substantial component of each undergraduate degree.

It is essential to understand the general education component of the degree program within the context of the institution's mission and within the expectations of a college-level institution. Through general education, students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principal areas of knowledge: humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. Courses in each of these areas introduce a breadth of knowledge and reinforce cognitive skills and effective learning opportunities for each student. Such courses may also include interdisciplinary studies. It is important, however, that courses selected by students as "general education" do not focus on skills, techniques, and procedures specific to that student's occupation or profession.

The SACSCOC Executive Council adopted the following interpretation in February 2010:

Courses in basic composition that do not contain a literature component, courses in oral communication, and introductory foreign language courses are skill courses and not pure humanities courses. Therefore, for purposes of meeting this standard, none of the above may be the one course designated to fulfill the humanities/fine arts requirement in [this standard].

Note that this interpretation does not preclude the mentioned courses from being part of general education requirements beyond the required courses in the three specifically mentioned areas; while they are “skill courses,” these are not skills specific to a particular occupation or profession. Courses that would not be acceptable as meeting this standard are courses such as “dosage calculations” (specific to occupations) or most upper-level courses with multiple prerequisites (lack breadth of knowledge).

The rationale undergirding the courses that meet general education requirements is often published in institutional documents such as the catalog. It is important that institutions have criteria for evaluating courses for inclusion in the core curriculum, both to maintain adherence to the underlying rationale and to ensure the expected breadth of knowledge.

NOTES

In its publications, an institution is obligated to clearly designate the specific general education courses included in the three areas of knowledge: humanities and fine arts, social and behavioral sciences, and natural sciences and mathematics. Publications should clearly indicate or direct students in their options for selecting general education courses and, in particular, those considered pure humanities/fine arts that are in accord with the interpretation above. Finally, the institution should indicate how it ensures that all students follow the pathway for selecting general education courses as described in its publications.

In its assessment of institutions, the SACSCOC review committee will specifically evaluate whether each of the three subparts in the standard have been addressed. This review should specifically determine (with narrative supporting) its findings under part (c), whether credit hours that constitute the general education program at an institution are (1) drawn from and include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics; (2) are consistent with the Executive Council’s interpretation cited above; and (3) include courses that do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a student’s particular occupation or profession.

Questions to Consider

- Does the institution have a formal guideline or policy that establishes a rationale for its general education requirements?
- How does the institution ensure that the student’s breadth of knowledge acquired through the general education component of the degree program is sufficient and appropriate to its mission?

- What measures does the institution use to ensure that general education represents a substantial component of the undergraduate degree program?
- What process is used to ensure that courses students may take to fulfill general requirements support the goals of the general education component of the degree program?
- What criteria does the institution use to ensure that the desired general education outcomes meet college-level standards?
- Even if there is some variation in general education requirements across some majors, do all undergraduate degree programs include at least one course from the three required areas of study, as well as the requisite total hours?
- Does the institution designate in its publications those general education courses that are considered pure humanities/fine arts in accord with the interpretation above? How has the institution validated that the courses that the institution designates are in accord with the standard?
- Are printed materials describing general education requirements clear as to how a student can meet the requirements?
- How does the institution ensure that all students follow the pathway for selecting general education courses as described in its publications?
- How does the general education program apply to transfer students, distance and correspondence education programs, or competency-based programs?

Sample Documentation

- Description of and rationale for general education, including expected student learning outcomes.
- Publications that consistently describe the general education requirements.
- Explanation of the process used to review or change how students meet general education requirements.
- If requirements vary by major or degree, documentation that the standard is met for all degree-seeking students.
- Specific information as to how general education requirements are met for transfer students as well as students in competency-based, direct assessment programs.
- An explanation (and examples) of how completion of general education requirements is tracked and verified.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

None noted.

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

Standard 8.2.b (*Student outcomes: general education*)

Standard 9.7 (*Program requirements*)

9.4

At least 25 percent of the credit hours required for an undergraduate degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree. (*Institutional credits for an undergraduate degree*)

Rationale and Notes

This standard establishes the general principle addressing the integrity of a degree; that is, if an institution awards an academic degree, then it is responsible for delivering an appropriate portion of the academic experiences applicable to the degree. The standard also establishes the threshold for determining the acceptable portion of coursework that the institution ought to provide for the degree.

NOTES

*Credits “earned through instruction offered by the institution” would not include coursework transferred from other institutions, prior learning assessments, AP or CLEP credits (or credit by examination), or credits earned through a consortium that did not originate from the institution. Unless awarded upon entry into the program, this would include competency-based credits or credit equivalents for competencies or skills exhibited **after** the institution offered instruction on that skill or competency.*

Institutions adopting “reverse transfer” programs should be mindful that this standard applies to such cases. Furthermore, institutions should ensure that transferred coursework is appropriate to the degree being conferred. See Standard 10.8 (Policies for awarding credit) in this Manual.

Questions to Consider

- Does the institution have a policy stating the amount of credit that must be earned through instruction by the institution?
- How does the institution monitor the amount of credit earned at the institution with respect to the total number of credits required for the degree?
- How are the policies disseminated to affected faculty, advisors, and students?
- How does an institution identify on its transcript the name of the institution or source from which a course was taken or credit granted?
- How are competencies determined for students in competency-based programs? How does the institution ensure instruction is provided by the institution?
- How does an institution identify on its transcript coursework earned through collaborative arrangements?

Sample Documentation

- Degree completion policies.

- Sample evidence that verifies that at least 25 percent of the credits required for the degree have been earned at the institution (e.g., redacted degree audit, registrar’s check sheet, advisor’s check sheet).
- Explanation of process for monitoring the amount of credit earned at the institution.
- Policies, procedures, and any operational manuals regarding the awarding of credit.
- Details specific to the “Note” above.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policies: [Agreements Involving Joint and Dual Academic Awards](#)
[Direct Assessment Competency-Based Educational Programs](#)
[Quality and Integrity of Undergraduate Degrees](#)

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

None noted.

9.5 **At least one third of the credit hours required for a graduate or a post-baccalaureate professional degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree.** (*Institutional credits for a graduate/professional degree*)

Rationale and Notes

An institution is responsible for the integrity of its graduate and post-baccalaureate professional degree programs. One means of ensuring this integrity is direct oversight of student work through its own courses. The standard also establishes the threshold for determining the acceptable portion of coursework that the institution should provide for the degree.

NOTE

Credits “earned through instruction offered by the institution” would not include coursework transferred from other institutions or credits earned through a consortium that did not originate from the institution. Unless awarded upon entry into the program, this would include competency-based credits or credit equivalents for competencies or skills exhibited after the institution offered instruction on that skill or competency.

Questions to Consider

- Does the institution have a policy stating the amount of graduate credit that must be earned through instruction by the institution?

- How does the institution monitor the amount of graduate credit earned at the institution with respect to the total number of credits required for the degree?
- How are the policies disseminated to affected faculty, advisors, and students?
- How does an institution identify on its transcript the name of the institution or source from which a graduate course was taken or credit granted?
- How are competencies determined for students in competency-based programs? How does the institution ensure instruction is provided by the institution?
- How does an institution identify on its transcript graduate coursework earned through collaborative arrangements?

Sample Documentation

- Degree completion policies.
- Sample evidence that verifies that at least one third of the credits required for the graduate or post-baccalaureate degree have been earned at the institution (e.g., redacted degree audit, registrar's check sheet, advisor's check sheet).
- Explanation of process for monitoring the amount of graduate credit earned at the institution.
- Policies, procedures, and any operational manuals regarding the awarding of graduate and post-baccalaureate credit.
- Details specific to the "Note" above.

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

SACSCOC policies: [Agreements Involving Joint and Dual Academic Awards](#)
 [Direct Assessment Competency-Based Educational Programs](#)

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

None noted.

9.6

Post-baccalaureate professional degree programs and graduate degree programs are progressively more advanced in academic content than undergraduate programs, and are structured (a) to include knowledge of the literature of the discipline and (b) to ensure engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training. (*Post-baccalaureate rigor and curriculum*)

Rationale and Notes

Graduate education builds upon the foundation of undergraduate education. Hence, there is an expectation that postgraduate professional degree programs and graduate programs demand more rigor and higher-order learning than undergraduate work on the same subject. Post-baccalaureate degree programs are progressively more complex than similar undergraduate programs. This expectation for graduate education also implies that requirements in courses not exclusively designed for graduate credit, but that allow both undergraduate and graduate enrollment, ensure that there is a clear distinction between the requirements of undergraduate students and graduate students.

Effective graduate instruction provides the foundational knowledge and skill development to support independent research and professional practice. Graduates of these programs should have the ability to contribute to a profession or field of study. Although the extent to which students are expected to demonstrate these competencies will vary with the level of the graduate degree, faculty within graduate programs define the skills, knowledge, and competencies required and evaluate the ability of students to engage in scholarly inquiry, research, and informed professional practice.

Questions to Consider

- Are there clear indications of more advanced content in graduate and post-baccalaureate programs when compared to the institution's own undergraduate programs in similar subjects?
- If the institution has no comparable undergraduate programs, are there clear indications of more advanced content in the institution's graduate and post-baccalaureate programs when compared to peer institutions' undergraduate programs in similar subjects?
- What process is used by the institution to establish the expected content and rigor of post-baccalaureate degree programs?
- How does the institution maintain higher rigor for graduate and post-baccalaureate programs if the same course is offered (or cross-listed) to both graduate/post-baccalaureate students and undergraduate students?
- How is the literature of the discipline incorporated into curriculum requirements?
- How does the institution ensure its graduate and post-baccalaureate students are engaged in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training experiences?

Sample Documentation

- Publications that show curricular differentiation between undergraduate and post-baccalaureate programs.
- Comparative course syllabi describing the advanced body of learning to be accomplished through the graduate/post-baccalaureate coursework.
- Graduate or post-baccalaureate studies policies and procedures used to ensure minimum course requirements.
- Examples of independent research projects, portfolios, case studies, theses, dissertations, or other examples of graduate research/professional practice.
- Assessment findings from graduate and post-baccalaureate programs related to research or professional practice with identified expected student learning outcomes beyond the undergraduate level [see Standard 8.2.a (*Student outcomes: educational programs*)].

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

None noted.

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

Standard 8.2.a (*Student outcomes: educational programs*)

9.7 The institution publishes requirements for its undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate professional programs, as applicable. The requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices for degree programs. (*Program requirements*)

Rationale and Notes

Each program of study at the institution has clearly defined requirements regarding what is necessary to complete the program so that potential students are aware of expectations prior to enrollment. These requirements are published so they are accessible to constituencies including faculty, students, and prospective students. Degree requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices found at institutions of higher education. When degree requirements are highly unusual, the expectations are explained and an academic justification is provided.

Commonly accepted practices for the requirements of an undergraduate program address an appropriate number of semester hours, or its equivalent, and a coherent course of study appropriate to that level of higher education. Each undergraduate program of study identifies courses that are program requirements and any prerequisite courses. Specific program requirements are also published, including an appropriate college-level general education component, and if present, cross-curricular and co-curricular requirements (e.g., chapel attendance, service learning, performance

on external examinations). All requirements for the degree should be clearly specified. Similarly, prospective students should have access to specific grade requirements, especially when they represent deviations from broader institutional policies.

Commonly accepted practices for the requirements of a graduate program address an appropriate number of semester hours, or its equivalent, and a coherent course of study appropriate to higher education. Each graduate and post-baccalaureate professional program of study identifies courses that are program requirements and any prerequisite courses. Graduate program requirements allow for an integrated understanding of the discipline. Such programs display a clear rationale and design and include clearly stated and measurable outcomes consistent with the mission of the institution. General requirements for written and oral comprehensive examinations, theses and dissertations, professional practice, and so on, are published as well.

Questions to Consider

- Does the institution have clearly defined program requirements for each program?
- Could a prospective student understand all of the requirements for successful program completion prior to making an enrollment decision?
- What is the process for establishing how the program curriculum conforms to commonly accepted standards and practices?
- Are there specific requirements for what constitutes a major or concentration? Do these adhere to commonly accepted practices? Are they consistently followed at the institution?
- Where and how are program requirements published?
- Do published requirements provide clear, complete, and consistent information about each program?
- If there are requirements beyond a prescribed curriculum, how are these additional requirements determined and published?
- When program requirements change, how is this information made available?

Sample Documentation

- For all educational programs, published documents that contain program completion requirements.
- For undergraduate programs, published documents that also address general education requirements.
- If some programs deviate from general institutional requirements, specific information about how this information is published.
- If program requirements are atypical, additional evidence related to adherence to “commonly accepted standards and practices” (e.g., peer comparisons, reference to programmatic/specialized accreditation requirements, external program reviews, appropriate mission-specific expectations).

Reference to SACSCOC Documents, If Applicable

None noted.

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

- CR 9.1 (*Program content*)
- CR 9.2 (*Program length*)
- CR 9.3 (*General education requirements*)
- Standard 10.3 (*Archived information*)