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

CREDIT HOURS

Policy Statement

As part of its review of an institution seeking initial or continuing accreditation, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) conducts reviews of an institution's assignment of credit hours. Academic credit has provided the basis for measuring the amount of engaged learning time expected of a typical student enrolled not only in traditional classroom settings but also laboratories, studios, internships and other experiential learning, and distance and correspondence education. Students, institutions, employers, and others rely on the common currency of academic credit to support a wide range of activities, including the transfer of students from one institution to another. For several decades, the federal government has relied on credits as a measure of student academic engagement as a basis of awarding financial aid.

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidance to institutions and evaluation committees on the Commission's expectations regarding credits and to set forth the federal regulations regarding the award of credit.

Federal Definition of the Credit Hour. For purposes of the application of this policy and in accord with federal regulations, a credit hour is an amount of work represented in intended learning outcomes and verified by evidence of student achievement that is an institutionally established equivalency that reasonably approximates

1. Not less than one hour of classroom or direct faculty instruction and a minimum of two hours out of class student work each week for approximately fifteen weeks for one semester or trimester hour of credit, or ten to twelve weeks for one quarter hour of credit, or the equivalent amount of work over a different amount of time, or

2. At least an equivalent amount of work as required outlined in item 1 above for other academic activities as established by the institution including laboratory work, internships, practica, studio work, and other academic work leading to the award of credit hours.

Guidelines for Flexibility in Interpretation. An institution is responsible for determining the credit hours awarded for coursework in its programs in accordance with the definition of a credit hour for Federal program purposes. The definition does provide some flexibility for institutions in determining the appropriate amount of credit hours for student coursework.

- The institution determines the amount of credit for student work.
- A credit hour is expected to be a reasonable approximation of a minimum amount of student work in a Carnegie unit in accordance with commonly accepted practice in higher education.
- The credit hour definition is a minimum standard that does not restrict an institution from setting a higher standard that requires more student work per credit hour.
- The definition does not dictate particular amounts of classroom time versus out-of-class student work.
- In determining the amount of work the institution's learning outcomes will entail, the institution may take into consideration alternative delivery methods, measurements of student work, academic calendars, disciplines, and degree levels.

- To the extent an institution believes that complying with the Federal definition of a credit hour would not be appropriate for academic and other institutional needs, it may adopt a separate measure for those purposes.
- Credits may be awarded on the basis of documentation of the amount of work a typical student is expected to complete within a specified amount of academically engaged time, or on the basis of documented student learning calibrated to that amount of academically engaged time for a typical student.

The intent of the above flexibility as provided by Federal guidance is to recognize the differences across institutions, fields of study, types of coursework, and delivery methods, while providing a consistent measure of student work for purposes of Federal programs.

Commission Obligations in the Review of the Credit Hour. The Commission reviews the institution's (1) policies and procedures for determining credit hours, including clock to credit hour conversions, that the institution awards for coursework and (2) the application of its policies and procedures to its programs and coursework. Following the evaluation, the Commission is obligated to make a reasonable determination regarding the institution's assignment of credit hours and whether it conforms to commonly accepted practice in higher education. In doing so, the Commission may use sampling or other methods in its evaluation. As with the identification of non-compliance with other standards, the Commission is obligated to take action in accord with that used in relation to other standards of non-compliance. If the Commission finds systemic non-compliance with this policy or significant non-compliance regarding one or more programs at the institution, the Commission is required to notify the U.S. Secretary of Education.

Procedures

1. **Institutions preparing Compliance Certifications in anticipation of reaffirmation of accreditation (accredited institutions) or initial membership (candidate institutions**).
   The institution will be required to document compliance with Federal Requirement 4.9 (Definition of Credit Hours) as relates to credit hours. If the Board imposes a public sanction or takes adverse action in part or in full for continuing non-compliance with FR 4.9 as applies to the credit hour, the Commission will notify the U.S. Secretary of Education. The institution will be informed of such action.

2. **Institutions undergoing substantive change review related to an academic program review in anticipation of continuing accreditation**.
   The institution will be required to address Federal Requirement 4.9 (Definition of Credit Hours) as part of its prospectus (program expansion) or application (degree level change). Following review of the prospectus, Commission staff will refer the substantive change case to the Commission's Board of Trustees if there is evidence of non-compliance with FR 4.9. For substantive change cases involving level change, the application will automatically be forwarded to the Commission's Board of Trustees.

   As a result of Board review that may include a site visit, if the Board imposes a public sanction or takes adverse action in part or in full for continuing non-compliance with FR 4.9 as applies to the credit hour, the Commission will notify the U.S. Secretary of Education. The institution will be informed of such action.

3. The Commission is not responsible for reviewing every course and related documentation of learning outcomes; rather, the Commission will review the policies and procedures that the institution uses to assign credit hours, with the application verified by a sampling of the institution's degrees and nondegree programs to include a variety of academic activities, disciplines, and delivery modes. The review process for sampling encompasses a varied sample of the institution's degree and nondegree programs in terms of academic discipline, level, delivery modes, and types of academic activities. In reviewing academic activities other than classroom or direct faculty instruction accompanied by out-of-class work, the Commission will determine whether an institution's processes and procedures result in the establishment of reasonable equivalencies for

the amount of academic work described in paragraph one of the credit hour definition within the framework of acceptable institutional practices at comparable institutions of higher education for similar programs.

4. The Commission will notify the U.S. Secretary of Education of its findings of systemic non-compliance with this policy or FR 4.9 or of significant non-compliance regarding one or more programs at the institution only after the Commission follows its review process that includes notification to the institution of non-compliance and a reasonable time period for the institution to respond to the citations and provide documentation of compliance.

5. Comprehensive Standard 3.4.6 reads as follows: "The institution employs sound and acceptable practices for determining the amount and level of credit awarded for courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery." It is to be reviewed in conjunction with FR 4.9.

Document History
Approved: Board of Trustees, June 2011
Edited: January 2012