



Academic Programs: Approval of Creation, Discontinuance and Delivery Site

No. 6500

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Policy Owner:
Cyril Clarke

Policy Author: *(Contact Person)*
Ellen Plummer

Affected Parties:
Undergraduate
Graduate
Faculty
Staff
Other

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1.0 Purpose

Virginia Tech is required to notify or seek approval from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) and the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV) prior to implementing new or significantly modified degree programs, discontinuing degree programs, and/or delivering more than 25% of the credits required by the degree program at an instructional site. The requirements of both agencies must be met; compliance with one does not constitute compliance with the other. This policy defines the framework necessary to ensure that Virginia Tech is in compliance with the SACSCOC substantive change policy. Requirements for compliance with SCHEV are available through the university's SCHEV liaison in the Provost's Office.

Virginia Tech is responsible for following the SACSCOC substantive change procedures and informing SACSCOC of any changes in the university's programs and activities in accordance with those procedures. SACSCOC is responsible for evaluating all substantive changes to assess the impact of the change on the institution's compliance with defined standards (prior to granting approval). If an institution fails to follow the commission's procedure for notification and approval of substantive changes, its accreditation as an institution may be in jeopardy and sanctions may be imposed. The most common types of substantive change involve creating, discontinuing, or adding distance delivery to an academic program or establishing a new instructional site.

2.0 Policy

SACSCOC substantive change guidelines are posted at:
<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/08/SubstantiveChange.pdf>.

Occasionally, differences may exist between the most current version of the SACSCOC substantive change policy and procedures document and the procedures listed in section 3.0 of this policy (6500). In those cases, the institution must follow the procedures, including submission deadlines, described by SACSCOC.

The academic deans or their designees are responsible for ensuring compliance with a substantive change at the college level. The deans are responsible and accountable for the monitoring and timely reporting of all actions that may require the university to provide a substantive change notification to SACSCOC or require approval from SACSCOC. Examples of such changes include but are not limited to:

- Initiating new degree programs
- Initiating new degree completion programs
- Initiating off-campus sites where a student can earn at least 25% of the credits required by a degree program
- Adding or removing a method of delivery for an existing degree program
- Moving an off-campus instructional site
- Initiating dual or joint degrees



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- Initiating a direct assessment competency-based program
- Initiating a merger/consolidation with another institution
- Acquiring a program or site from another institution
- Altering significantly the length of a program
- Initiating programs or courses offered through contractual agreement or consortium
- Entering into a contract with an entity not certified to participate in the USDOE Title IV programs
- Closing a degree program
- Closing an approved off-campus site
- Reopening a previously closed program or off-campus instructional site
- Closing a program at an off-campus instructional site.

The Executive Vice President and Provost and their designees are responsible for compliance with SACSCOC guidelines for the implementation of a substantive change at the university level. Actions that may necessitate substantive change reporting and/or approval are evaluated and approved by the respective university vice president or vice provost. The SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office coordinates submission of required documents and notification of program leaders and college and university administrators once SACSCOC approval has been received.

Programs or courses that have not received prior approval as required by SACSCOC may not be initiated or continued without meeting such requirements. It is important to note that there may be additional approvals or notifications required by SCHEV prior to initiation of the changes.

3.0 Procedures

3.1 New or Modified Degree Programs

Initiation of a new degree program or significant change to an existing degree program follows procedures established by the Commissions on Undergraduate Studies and Policies and Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies. Preparation of full degree proposals typically follow the format required for eventual submission to the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia, with additional material as required by the departmental, college, or university curriculum committees. Both university and SCHEV forms and formats are also used for reporting other significant degree-related actions, such as discontinuance, merger, or changes in title. Information on such forms and procedures is available from the university registrar, the graduate school, or the SCHEV liaison in the Provost's Office. The SCHEV liaison, in conjunction with the Office of the University Registrar, will help coordinate approvals by University Council, the President, the Board of Visitors, and SCHEV as required.

Upon completion of review and approval of significant degree actions by either the Commission on Undergraduate or Graduate and Professional Studies and Policies, either the Vice President and Dean for Graduate Education, in the case of graduate degree actions, or the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs, in the case of undergraduate degree actions, will determine if the approved action is a "substantive change" requiring notification to or approval from SACSCOC based on SACSCOC guidelines. The appropriate vice president or vice provost will notify in writing the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office of his or her decision. Notification of new degrees and/or request for approval of substantive changes will be sent to SACSCOC on at least an annual basis by the SACSCOC expeditor. If the vice president or vice provost cannot determine if a substantive change notification or approval is



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required for a program, he or she notifies the SACSCOC expeditor, who will seek clarification through appropriate channels from the SACSCOC office.

If SACSCOC requires additional information, such as a prospectus, the SACSCOC expeditor will notify the program and the appropriate vice president or vice provost of the requirement.

It is the responsibility of the academic program leaders to provide additional required information to the appropriate vice president or vice provost for subsequent review and approval, providing a copy to the SACSCOC expeditor at the same time. Once the additional information is reviewed and approved, the SACSCOC expeditor will facilitate the formal submission of materials to SACSCOC.

The Provost's Office's SACSCOC expeditor will maintain a record of all correspondence regarding substantive change.

To ensure that all new degree programs have been reported to SACSCOC, the University Registrar and the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office will annually audit all degree proposals that have gone through University Governance.

3.2 Discontinuance of Degree Programs

Degree programs may not be officially discontinued without the approval of both SACSCOC and SCHEV. Once a degree program is approved for closure by the Board of Visitors (BOV), the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office will begin the process of seeking approval from SACSCOC based on the language of the relevant Board of Visitors resolution. Once a program has been approved by the BOV for discontinuance, the department must provide to the Office of the University Registrar, the teach-out plan for the degree program if it is not explicitly stated in the BOV resolution. The SACSCOC expeditor will compile the required information and will facilitate the formal submission of materials to SACSCOC.

If additional information is required by SACSCOC, the SACSCOC expeditor will notify the program and the appropriate vice president or vice provost of the requirement.

It is the responsibility of the academic program leaders to provide additional requested information to the appropriate vice president or vice provost for subsequent review and approval, providing a copy to the SACSCOC expeditor at the same time.

After approval for the closure is secured, the expeditor will inform the registrar's office and the appropriate vice president or vice provost as well as the department requesting the program closure of the approval.

Closure date, as defined by SACSCOC, is the date when the degree program is closed to admission or entry, not the cessation of instruction. Program closure approval is required if a program closes at the main campus or an off-campus instructional site but continues to be offered at other locations. Program closure is also required if a program ceases to offer instruction by a particular method of delivery but continues to offer instruction by other methods of delivery. Colleges and departments are encouraged to contact the SACSCOC liaison or the SACSCOC expeditor in the provost's office to ensure that all SACSCOC requirements are met when closing all or part of a degree program.



3.3 Distance Learning and Associated Sites

Initiating distance learning activities and/or an off-campus site can constitute a substantive change according to the SACSCOC, and may also require reporting to and/or approval from SCHEV. At a minimum, adding a method of instructional delivery to an existing program requires notification to SACSCOC six months prior to implementation.

Each academic dean has responsibility for ensuring that distance learning activity in his or her college is coordinated through Technology-enhanced Learning & Online Strategies and that any new sites proposed for delivering or receiving distance learning credit programming are reported to the University Registrar in advance of initiation, and that appropriate notifications and approvals are obtained prior to initiating the delivery of courses at those sites.

When the Executive Director of Technology-enhanced Learning & Online Strategies is made aware of faculty members planning to deliver an existing academic program through distance learning methodologies (online or classroom-based video-conferencing), the Executive Director will contact the SACSCOC expeditor to determine if SACSCOC notification or approval for a substantive change is required as part of the above process. Courses or programs offered in partnership with an agency, school, or corporation at a new location, or delivered to students at a new site in Virginia, another state, or abroad, are included in the SACSCOC requirements for reporting and prior approval. The Office of the University Registrar maintains a list of SACSCOC- and SCHEV-approved distance learning programs and associated sites.

Sites identified for course delivery through classroom-based video-conferencing should be identified by the University Registrar to the Executive Director of Technology-enhanced Learning & Online Strategies who will ensure that any site(s) on or proposed to be added to the university's list of sites approved to receive credit instruction meets the standards set by the institution for quality before instruction is delivered there.

Virginia Tech must maintain a record of programs that are delivered via distance learning modes and the percentage of the credit hours (less than 25%, at least 25% but less than 50%, 50% or more) provided through distance delivery. This list will be maintained by the Office of the University Registrar.

To ensure that new distance learning activities and associated sites have been reported to SACSCOC, the Office of the University Registrar will produce, annually, a list of degree programs that are taught on-line. Additional data on online courses may be provided by the Strategic Analysis unit within Analytics and Institutional Effectiveness. The University Registrar will provide guidance regarding the percentage of credit thresholds for each program.

3.4 Off-Campus Sites Where Instructor is Present With Students

The academic deans have responsibility for ensuring that site-based classroom instruction programs, *including contract programs that are not distance learning*, are reported to the Vice President and Dean for Graduate Education or the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs in advance of initiation, and that appropriate notifications and approvals are obtained. Existing degree programs offered at a new site through contractual arrangements also must be approved in advance through either the Vice President and Dean for Graduate Education or the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Academic Affairs.

Approval by the appropriate vice president or vice provost of any plans to begin offering instruction at a new site will be communicated to the SACSCOC expeditor for timely reporting to SACSCOC. A full prospectus may be



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required for submission to SACSCOC and will be the responsibility of the program. The Office of the University Registrar maintains a list of SACSCOC-approved off-campus sites where the instructor is present with the students. Further information regarding contract courses may be found in University Policy 6363, Administration of Contract Courses (<http://www.policies.vt.edu/6364.pdf>).

Degree programs that are significantly different from current programs at an existing site and that are significantly different from current programs offered at the Blacksburg campus must be reported to SACSCOC as a substantive change requiring approval and will require submission of a new degree prospectus as part of the approval request. Development of that prospectus is the responsibility of the program. Submission of the final prospectus will be facilitated by the SACSCOC expeditor.

Annually, the University Registrar will conduct an audit of the instructional locations of all for-credit courses. Each college dean will be asked to verify the instructional locations of the courses and the degree credits offered at each location. This information is communicated to the SACSCOC expeditor who then reviews the log of approvals and notifications to identify any new reporting thresholds that programs are approaching.

Closing an off-campus instructional site requires SACSCOC approval. Relocation an off-campus instructional site requires notification to SACSCOC prior to implementation. Departments should contact the SACSCOC liaison or the SACSCOC expeditor within the provost's office for details and assistance. Departments should also contact the SACSCOC liaison or the SACSCOC expeditor within the provost's office for information and assistance related to required notifications and approvals for reopening an instructional site.

3.5 Initiating Joint or Dual Degrees with Another Institution

The academic deans have responsibility for ensuring that agreements involving joint and dual academic awards are reported to the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office in a timely manner. Reporting requirements vary by the type of institution involved in the agreement (SACSCOC member or non-member) and the type of degree program (joint or dual). Reporting requirements are outlined in the SACSCOC policy statement on Agreements Involving Joint and Dual Academic Awards (<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/JointDualAwards.pdf>). The SACSCOC expeditor and, in the case of agreements involving international institutions, the Director of International Support Services will facilitate the inclusion of required components of the agreement and the submission of completed materials to SACSCOC.

3.6 All Other Substantive Changes

Academic programs and other university offices initiating activity other than that which has been identified above, and which may be a substantive change, should contact the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office. These activities include but are not limited to:

- any change in the established mission or objectives of the institution,
- initiating a merger/consolidation, altering significantly the educational mission of the institution, and/or changing governance, ownership, control, or legal status of the institution, or
- a substantial increase in the number of credit hours necessary for successful completion of a program.

The SACSCOC expeditor coordinates these "other" substantive change reporting requirements with appropriate university offices and personnel to ensure that the university remains in compliance.



3.7 Substantive Change Deadlines for SACSCOC

Substantive change prospectus, application, and notification submission deadlines depend on (1) the type of SACSCOC Board of Trustees review required, and (2) the planned implementation date of the substantive change. Required submission deadlines are outlined in the SACSCOC substantive change policy, and generally, include at least six months' lead time between the university's submission and implementation dates.

Substantive change prospectuses, applications or notifications may be submitted to SACSCOC by the president of the university or by the SACSCOC liaison only.

4.0 Definitions

Substantive Change – Substantive change is defined by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) as “a significant modification or expansion of the nature and scope of an accredited institution.”

Distance Learning – Distance learning is considered by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) to be synonymous with Distance Education. Distance Education is defined as “a method of delivery in which the majority of instruction occurs when students and instructors are not in the same location. It includes synchronous (live or in real-time) instruction and asynchronous (not live or in real-time instruction).”

Contract Courses – A contract course is a contractual agreement between Virginia Tech and a school district, agency, military base, or business organization to deliver a for-credit (degree or certificate) graduate course for the sponsoring agency's employees, associates, members, or teachers. The agency and the academic department mutually agree on the course, delivery format, location, timeframe, and cost within certain parameters. These courses are not available to open enrollment.

Off-campus – In the context of this policy, the term “off-campus” refers to the collection of approved instructional sites located outside of Blacksburg, Virginia.

5.0 References

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – *Resource Manual for The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*
<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/08/2018-POA-Resource-Manual.pdf>

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Substantive Change Policy
<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/08/SubstantiveChange.pdf>

Virginia Tech Policy 6364, Distance Learning
<http://www.policies.vt.edu/6364.pdf>

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Distance Education Policy
<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/07/DistanceCorrespondenceEducation.pdf>



Virginia Tech Policy 6363, Administration of Contract Courses
<http://www.policies.vt.edu/6363.pdf>

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools - Policy statement on Agreements Involving Joint and Dual Academic Awards
<https://sacscoc.org/app/uploads/2019/08/JointDualAwards.pdf>

6.0 Approval and Revisions

Approved November 1, 2008 by President Charles W. Steger.

- Revision 1
 - Updated SACS to SACSCOC to be consistent with language from the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges.
 - Updated SACS compliance officer to SACSCOC expeditor. The name of this role was updated to better reflect the facilitative nature of the role.
 - Updated the section on Distance Learning and Associated sites to clarify the role of Technology-enhanced Learning and On-line Strategies and to designate that the University Registrar holds responsibility for maintaining the list of approved distance-learning programs and the associated off-campus instructional sites.
 - Updated university titles.
 - Updated links to the SACSCOC documents.

Approved April 20, 2017 by President Timothy D. Sands.

- Revision 2
 - Updated name of policy from “Substantive Change” to better communicate policy content to university personnel.
 - Added the section on Discontinuance of Degree Programs.
 - Updated the section on Distance Learning and Associated Sites to explain the various reporting thresholds and to reflect the current policy of SACSCOC to not require approval of distance delivery of programs after the first distance program is approved.
 - Updated the section on off-campus sites where instructor is present to include an explanation of the annual audit of instructional locations.

Approved March 1, 2018 by President Timothy D. Sands.

- Revision 3
 - Updated the title to emphasize that this policy refers to an approval process.
 - Updated the Purpose section to include a specific mention of distance delivery of programs. Additional edits were made for clarity and simplification of language.
 - Updated the Policy section to reflect a link to the updated SACSCOC substantive change policy. In addition, text was added to clarify that this policy will be superseded by the most current version of the SACSCOC substantive change policy where conflicting information may exist. Also, additional examples related to distance delivery and program closures at off-campus instructional sites were added.



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- Updated Section 3.2 on the Discontinuance of Degree Programs to include a definition of closure date and clarification of when SACSCOC approval is required.
- Updated Section 3.3 to reflect the change in the SACSCOC substantive policy to require SACSCOC notification of any addition of instructional method to any program. Updated interactive video-conferencing to the term classroom-based video-conferencing. Updated the name of the office of Institutional Research to Strategic Analysis.
- Updated Section 3.4 with information regarding closing or relocating an off-campus instructional site.
- Added section 3.7 to inform readers of the existence of deadlines for submissions to SACSCOC and to clarify that only the president of the university and the SACSCOC liaison for the university may submit substantive changes to SACSCOC.
- Updated section 4.0 with the revised definition of Distance Learning used by SACSCOC. A definition for “off-campus” was added.
- Updated section 5.0 with revised links to SACSCOC documents.

Approved March 3, 2021 by Executive Vice President and Provost, Cyril Clarke.