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**Subject: Substantive Change**

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## **1. Purpose**

As part of the requirements for regional accreditation, Virginia Tech is responsible for following the substantive change procedures of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges (COC) (hereinafter referred to as SACSCOC) and informing SACSCOC of any changes in its programs and activities in accordance with those procedures. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is responsible for evaluating all substantive changes to assess the impact of the change on the institution’s compliance with defined standards. 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.

This policy defines the framework necessary to ensure that Virginia Tech is in compliance with the SACSCOC substantive change policies. While the purpose of this policy is to document the approval and transmittal process to SACSCOC, new and revised degrees and establishment of distance learning sites may also require reporting and prior approval from the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV). The requirements of *both* agencies must be met; compliance with one does not constitute compliance with the other.

## **2. Policy**

Ensuring compliance of “substantive change” as defined by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges is a shared responsibility. SACSCOC substantive change guidelines are posted at: <http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/SubstantiveChange.pdf>.

The academic deans or their designees are responsible for ensuring compliance with substantive change at the college level. The deans are responsible and accountable for monitoring and timely reporting of all actions that may trigger a substantive change notification and/or approval. Examples of such changes are: establishment of a new degree or merger or elimination of an existing degree; organizational changes at the department or college level (creation of a new department, school, or college, or merger of same); initiating an off-campus site that has not previously been approved by SCHEV and SACSCOC such as a new contract site; adding significantly different programs at an approved site; initiating programs/courses offered through contractual agreement or consortium; or offering 25% or more of a program through distance learning.

Dissemination of information about these requirements to departments and relevant committees and individuals is essential and expected. For example, this information should be shared with those engaged in distance learning, or planning to establish a program or coursework in new locations in the U.S. or abroad, or curriculum committees responsible for overseeing changes to a degree program or approval of new ones. Programs or courses that have not received prior approval as required by SCHEV or SACSCOC, or both, may not be initiated or continued without meeting such requirements.

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

### **3. Procedures**

#### **3.1 Academic 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 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 SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office.

Upon completion of review and approval of significant degree actions by either the Commission on Undergraduate or Graduate 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" based on SACSCOC guidelines, and will notify in writing the SACSCOC expeditor in the Provost's Office of his or her decision. The Vice Provost for Enrollment and Degree Management will help coordinate approvals by University Council, the President, the Board of Visitors, and SCHEV as required. 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 required for a program, he or she notifies the SACSCOC expeditor, who will seek clarification through appropriate channels from the SACSCOC office.

If SACSCOC requests 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 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. When 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.

### 3.2 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 and/or approval from SCHEV.

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 interactive video-conferencing (IVC)), 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 interactive video-conferencing (IVC) 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.

### 3.3 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 of any such contract will be reported to the SACSCOC expeditor for timely reporting to SACSCOC. A full prospectus may be required for submission to SACSCOC and will be the responsibility of the program. The Office of the University Registrar maintains a list of SACSCOC- and SCHEV-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/6363.pdf>).

### 3.4 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.

### 3.5 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.

## 4. 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 defined by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) as "a formal educational process in which the majority of the instruction (interaction between students and instructors and among students) in a course occurs when students and instructors are not in the same place. Instruction may be synchronous or asynchronous. A distance education course may use the internet; one-way and two-way transmissions through open broadcast, closed circuit, cable, microwave broadband lines, fiber optics, satellite, or wireless communications devices; audio conferencing; or video cassettes, DVD's and CD-ROMs if used as part of the distance learning course or program.

**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.

## 5. References

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – *The Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement*  
<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/PrinciplesOfAccreditation.PDF>

Commission on Colleges Southern Association of Colleges and Schools – Substantive Change Policy  
<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/081705/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

<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/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

<http://www.sacscoc.org/pdf/JointDualAwards.pdf>

## **6. 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.