Standard Four
The Academic Program

The institution’s academic programs are consistent with and serve to fulfill its mission and purposes. The institution works systematically and effectively to plan, provide, oversee, evaluate, improve, and assure the academic quality and integrity of its academic programs and the credits and degrees awarded. The institution sets a standard of student achievement appropriate to the degree or certificate awarded and develops the systematic means to understand how and what students are learning and to use the evidence obtained to improve the academic program.

4.1 The institution offers collegiate-level programs consisting of a curriculum of studies that leads to a degree in a recognized field of study and requires at least one year to complete. The institution for which the associate’s degree is the highest awarded offers at least one program in liberal studies or another area of study widely available at the baccalaureate level of regionally accredited colleges and universities.

4.2 The institution publishes the learning goals and requirements for each program. Such goals include the knowledge, intellectual and academic skills, competencies, and methods of inquiry to be acquired. In addition, if relevant to the program, goals include creative abilities and values to be developed and specific career-preparation practices to be mastered.

4.3 Programs leading to degrees or other awards have a coherent design and are characterized by appropriate breadth, depth, continuity, sequential progression, and synthesis of learning. Coherence is demonstrated through learning goals, structure, and content; policies and procedures for admission, retention, and completion; instructional methods and procedures; and the nature, quality, and extent of student learning and achievement.

4.4 The institution offering multiple academic programs ensures that all programs meet or exceed the basic quality standards of the institution and that there is a reasonable consistency in quality among them. The institution provides sufficient resources to sustain and improve its academic programs.

Assuring Academic Quality
4.5 Through its system of academic administration and faculty participation, the institution demonstrates an effective system of academic oversight, assuring the quality of the academic program wherever and however it is offered. (See also 3.14)

4.6 The institution develops, approves, administers, and on a regular cycle reviews its academic programs under institutional policies that are implemented by designated bodies with established channels of communication and control. Review of academic programs includes evidence of student success and program effectiveness and incorporates an external perspective. Faculty have a substantive voice in these matters.

4.7 The institution undertakes academic planning and evaluation as part of its overall planning and evaluation to enhance the achievement of institutional mission and program objectives. These activities are realistic and take into account stated goals and available resources. Additions and deletions of programs are consistent with institutional mission and capacity, faculty expertise, student needs, and the availability of sufficient resources required for the development and improvement of academic programs. The institution allocates resources on the basis of its academic planning, needs, and objectives.
4.8 The institution undertaking substantive changes (e.g., the initiation of degrees at a higher or lower level, off-campus programs, programs that substantially broaden the scope of the academic offerings, distance learning programs, correspondence education programs, competency- and mastery-based programs, contractual relationships involving courses and programs, academic programs overseas) demonstrates its capacity to undertake and sustain such initiatives and to assure that the new academic programming meets the standards of quality of the institution and the Commission’s Standards and policies. In keeping with Commission policy, the institution initiating substantive changes seeks Commission approval prior to implementation. The institution recognizes and takes account of the increased demands on resources made by programs offered at a higher degree level.

4.9 When programs are eliminated or program requirements are changed, the institution makes appropriate arrangements for enrolled students so that they may complete their education with a minimum of disruption.

4.10 If the institution depends on resources outside its direct control (for example, classrooms, information resources, information technology, testing sites), a written agreement ensures the reasonable continued availability of those resources. Clear descriptions of the circumstances and procedures for the use of such resources are readily available to students who require them. (See also 7.21)

4.11 Students completing an undergraduate or graduate degree program demonstrate collegiate-level skills in the English language.

4.12 Expectations for student achievement, independent learning, information literacy, skills in inquiry, and critical judgment are appropriate to the subject matter and degree level and in keeping with generally accepted practice.

**Undergraduate Degree Programs**

4.13 Undergraduate degree programs are designed to give students a substantial and coherent introduction to the broad areas of human knowledge, their theories and methods of inquiry, plus in-depth mastery of at least one disciplinary or interdisciplinary area. Programs have an appropriate rationale; their clarity and order are visible in stated requirements in official publications and in student records.

4.14 Each undergraduate program includes a general education requirement and a major or concentration requirement. At the baccalaureate level, curricula include substantial requirements at the advanced undergraduate level, with appropriate prerequisites. The institution also affords undergraduate students the opportunity to pursue knowledge and understanding through unrestricted electives.

4.15 Graduates successfully completing an undergraduate program demonstrate competence in written and oral communication in English; the ability for scientific and quantitative reasoning, for critical analysis and logical thinking; and the capability for continuing learning, including the skills of information literacy. They also demonstrate knowledge and understanding of scientific, historical, and social phenomena, and a knowledge and appreciation of the aesthetic and ethical dimensions of humankind.

**General Education**

4.16 The general education requirement is coherent and substantive. It embodies the institution’s definition of an educated person and prepares students for the world in which they will live. The
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requirement informs the design of all general education courses, and provides criteria for its evaluation, including the assessment of what students learn.

4.17 The general education requirement in each undergraduate program ensures adequate breadth for all degree-seeking students by showing a balanced regard for what are traditionally referred to as the arts and humanities, the sciences including mathematics, and the social sciences. General education requirements include offerings that focus on the subject matter and methodologies of these three primary domains of knowledge as well as on their relationships to one another.

4.18 The institution ensures that all undergraduate students complete at least the equivalent of 40 semester credits in a bachelor's degree program, or the equivalent of 20 semester credits in an associate's degree program in general education.

The Major or Concentration

4.19 The major or area of concentration affords the student the opportunity to develop knowledge and skills in a specific disciplinary or clearly articulated interdisciplinary area above the introductory level through properly sequenced course work or competencies. Requirements for the major or area of concentration are based upon clear and articulated learning objectives, including a mastery of the knowledge, information resources, methods, and theories pertinent to a particular area of inquiry. Through the major or concentration, the student develops an understanding of the complex structure of knowledge germane to an area of inquiry and its interrelatedness to other areas of inquiry. For programs designed to provide professional training, an effective relationship exists between curricular content or competencies and effective practice in the field of specialization. Graduates demonstrate an in-depth understanding of an area of knowledge or practice, its principal information resources, and its interrelatedness with other areas.

Graduate Degree Programs

4.20 Graduate degree programs are designed to give students a mastery of a complex field of study or professional area. Programs have an appropriate rationale; their clarity and order are visible in stated requirements, in relevant official publications, and in the learning outcomes of graduates. Learning objectives reflect the high level of complexity, specialization, and generalization inherent in advanced academic study.

4.21 Graduate programs are not offered unless resources and expectations exceed those required for an undergraduate program in a similar field.

4.22 Faculty responsible for graduate programs are sufficient by credentials, experience, number, and time commitment for the successful accomplishment of program objectives and program improvement. The scholarly expectations of faculty exceed those expected for faculty working at the undergraduate level. Research-oriented graduate programs have a preponderance of active research scholars on their faculties. Professionally-oriented programs include faculty who are experienced professionals making scholarly contributions to the development of the field.

4.23 Students admitted to graduate degree programs are demonstrably qualified for advanced academic study.

4.24 The institution's graduate programs have cohesive curricula and require scholarly and professional activities designed to advance the student substantially beyond the educational accomplishments of a baccalaureate degree program. The demands made by the institution's graduate programs on students' intellectual and creative capacities are also significantly greater than those expected at the undergraduate level; graduate programs build upon and challenge
students beyond the levels of knowledge and competence acquired at the undergraduate level. The institution offering both undergraduate and graduate degree programs assesses the relationship and interdependence of the two levels and utilizes the results for improvement.

4.25 Degree requirements of the institution's graduate programs take into account specific program purposes. Research-oriented doctoral programs, including the Ph.D., and disciplinary or research-oriented master's degree programs, are designed to prepare students to generate new knowledge; they emphasize the acquisition, organization, utilization, generation, and dissemination of knowledge. Doctoral degree programs afford the student substantial mastery of the subject matter, theory, literature, and methodology of a significant field of study. They include a sequential development of research skills leading to the attainment of an independent research capacity. Students undertake original research that contributes to new knowledge in the chosen field of study. Disciplinary or research-oriented master's programs have many of the same objectives but require less sophisticated levels of mastery in the chosen field of study than does the research doctorate. While they need not require students to engage in original research, they do provide an understanding of research appropriate to the discipline and the manner in which it is conducted.

4.26 Professional, performance, or practice-oriented programs at the doctoral or master's degree levels are designed to prepare students for professional careers involving the application or transmission of existing knowledge or the development of new applications of knowledge within their field. Such programs afford the student a broad conceptual mastery of the field of professional practice through an understanding of its subject matter, literature, theory, and methods. They seek to develop the capacity to identify, evaluate, interpret, organize, and communicate knowledge, and to develop those analytical and professional skills needed to practice in and advance the profession. Instruction in relevant research methodology is provided, directed toward the appropriate application of its results as a regular part of professional practice. Programs include the sequential development of professional skills that will result in competent practitioners. Where there is a hierarchy of degrees within an area of professional study, programs differ by level as reflected in the expected sophistication, knowledge, and capacity for leadership within the profession by graduates.

4.27 Programs encompassing both research activities and professional practice define their relative emphases in program objectives that are reflected in curricular, scholarly, and program requirements.

4.28 Students who successfully complete a graduate program demonstrate that they have acquired the knowledge and developed the skills that are identified as the program's objectives.

Integrity in the Award of Academic Credit

4.29 The institution's degrees and other forms of academic recognition are appropriately named, following practices common to American institutions of higher education in terms of length, content, and level of the programs. The institution ensures that minimum degree requirements are 60 semester credits at the associate's level; 120 semester credits at the baccalaureate level; and 30 semester credits at the master's level. The institution demonstrates restraint in requiring credits above the minimum for undergraduate degrees.

4.30 The institution offering competency-based programs, including through direct assessment, produces a transcript for each student showing the credit equivalencies of the competencies attained, in order to demonstrate the comparability of the program and provide students and graduates with transcripts facilitating evaluation of their achievements by other academic
institutions and outside entities. Commission Standards and policies regarding the award of
credit guide institutions offering competency-based programs to ensure that such programs are
at least equivalent in breadth, depth, and rigor. The institution certifies the attainment of
competencies for students who have achieved the stated objectives only at levels at or
approaching excellence.

4.31 The institution offers required and elective courses as described in publicly available print and
digital formats with sufficient availability to provide students with the opportunity to graduate
within the published program length.

4.32 The institution demonstrates its clear and ongoing authority and administrative oversight for the
academic elements of all courses for which it awards institutional credit or credentials. These
responsibilities include course content, the specification of required competencies, and the
delivery of the instructional program; selection, approval, professional development, and
evaluation of faculty; admission, registration, and retention of students; evaluation of prior
learning; and evaluation of student progress, including the awarding and recording of credit.
The institution retains, even with contractual, dual enrollment, or other arrangements,
responsibility for the design, content, and delivery of courses for which academic credit or
degrees are awarded. The institution awarding a joint, dual, or concurrent degree demonstrates
that the program is consistent with Commission policy and that the student learning outcomes
meet the institution’s own standards and those of the Commission. (See also 3.18)

4.33 The evaluation of student learning or achievement and the award of credit or certification of
competencies are based upon clearly stated criteria that reflect learning objectives and are
consistently and effectively applied. They are appropriate to the degree level at which they are
applied.

4.34 Credit awards are consistent with Commission policy and the course content, appropriate to the
field of study, and reflect the level and amount of student learning. The award of credit is based
on policies developed and overseen by the faculty and academic administration. There is
demonstrable academic content for all experiences for which credit is awarded, including study
abroad, internships, independent study, and service learning. No credit toward graduation is
awarded for pre-collegiate-level or remedial work designed to prepare the student for collegiate
study.

4.35 Credit for prior experiential or non-collegiate sponsored learning is awarded only with
appropriate oversight by faculty and academic administration and is limited to 25% for
credentials of 30 credits or fewer. When credit is awarded on the basis of prior experiential or
non-collegiate sponsored learning alone, student learning and achievement are demonstrated to
be at least comparable in breadth, depth, and quality to the results of institutionally provided
learning experiences. The policies and procedures for the award of credit for prior or experiential
learning are clearly stated and available to affected students.

4.36 Students complete at least one-fourth of their undergraduate credits, including substantial
advanced work in the major or concentration, at the institution awarding the degree.

4.37 The institution that advances students through their academic programs through transfer or
articulation agreements, prior learning assessment, credit recommendation services, or other
extra-institutional arrangements evaluates the effectiveness of such arrangements to ensure
student achievement in institutionally offered coursework validates the suitability of the credit
awards.
In accepting undergraduate transfer credit from other institutions, the institution applies policies and procedures that ensure the credit accepted reflects appropriate levels of academic quality and is applicable to the student's program. The institution's policies for considering the transfer of credit are publicly available to students and prospective students on its website and in other communications. The information includes the criteria established by the institution regarding the transfer of credit earned at another institution of higher education along with a list of institutions with which it has articulation agreements. (See also 9.19)

The institution protects academic quality and integrity in the acceptance of transfer credit and seeks to establish articulation agreements with institutions from which and to which there is a significant pattern of student transfer. Such agreements are made available to those students affected by them.

In accepting transfer credit, the institution exercises the responsibility to ensure that students have met its stated learning outcomes of programs at all degree levels. The acceptance of transfer credit does not substantially diminish the proportion of intermediate and advanced coursework in a student's academic program.

At the graduate level, the institution accepts credit in transfer on a strictly limited basis to preserve the integrity of the degree awarded.

The institution publishes requirements for continuation in, termination from, or re-admission to its academic programs that are compatible with its educational purposes. Decisions about the continuing academic standing of enrolled students are based on clearly stated policies and applied by faculty and academic administrators.

Graduation requirements are clearly stated in appropriate publications and are consistently applied in the degree certification process. The degrees awarded accurately reflect student attainments.

Faculty, with administrative support, ensure the academic integrity of the award of grades and certification of competencies, where applicable, and credits for individual courses. The institution works to prevent cheating and plagiarism as well as to deal forthrightly with any instances in which they occur. It works systematically to ensure an environment supportive of academic integrity.

The institution offering programs and courses for abbreviated or concentrated time periods or via distance or correspondence learning demonstrates that students completing these programs or courses acquire levels of knowledge, understanding, and competencies equivalent to those achieved in similar programs offered in more traditional time periods and modalities. Programs and courses are designed to ensure an opportunity for reflection and for analysis of the subject matter.

Courses and programs offered for credit off campus, through dual enrollment, through distance or correspondence education, or through continuing education, evening, or weekend divisions are consistent with the educational objectives of the institution. Such activities are integral parts of the institution and maintain the same academic standards as courses and programs offered on campus. Faculty and students receive sufficient support for instructional and other needs. Students have ready access to and support in using appropriate learning resources. The institution maintains direct and sole responsibility for the academic quality of all aspects of all programs and assures adequate resources to maintain quality.
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4.47 All students, including those enrolled in off-campus courses, distance learning courses, correspondence education courses, and/or competency-based programs have sufficient opportunities to interact with faculty regarding course content and related academic matters.

4.48 The institution offering distance education or correspondence education has procedures through which it establishes that the student who registers for such a course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the program and receives the academic credit. In carrying out these procedures, the institution protects student privacy.

4.49 The institution offering certificates, badges, and other forms of academic recognition based on competencies or courses offered for credit ensures the coherence and level of academic quality are consistent with its degree programs.