



Accreditation and Program Integrity
Office of the Provost
4400 University Drive, MSN 3A2, Fairfax, Virginia 22030
Phone: 703-993-8770

To: Graduate Council and Undergraduate Council

CC: Laurence Bray, Associate Provost, Graduate Education
Bethany Usher, Associate Provost, Undergraduate Education

From: Matt Smith, Director of Accreditation *MJS*

Re: Review and Reminder of key SACSCOC Policies

Date: September 24, 2019

As a follow-up to the Council meetings held on September 18, 2019, this memo serves to provide members of the Graduate and Undergraduate Councils with information regarding a few key policies and requirements of Mason's regional accreditor, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). As we are now beginning preparations for our decennial reaffirmation of accreditation, it is important to ensure that we are (and remain!) in compliance with the SACSCOC accrediting standards.

1. SACSCOC Substantive Change Reporting Requirements

Mason is required to report to SACSCOC any change that reaches the threshold of what they define as a "substantive change." These include, but are not limited to:

- Adding courses or programs that represent a "significant departure," either in content or method of delivery, from those that were offered when the institution was last evaluated.
- Closing a program, off-campus site, branch campus, or institution.
- Establishment of an additional location geographically apart from the main campus at which the institution offers at least 50% of an educational program.
- Entering into a contract by which an entity not eligible for Title IV funding offers 25% or more of one or more of the accredited institution's programs.
- Entering into a collaborative academic arrangement that includes on the initiation of a dual or joint academic program with another institution.
- A substantial increase in the number of credit hours awarded for successful completion of a program.

Mason has a policy specifically addressing substantive change (University Policy 3003). Please note that this policy places responsibility for reporting with the deans, with required notification to the Office of the Provost of any intent to implement a change, *prior to such implementation*. As Director of Accreditation, I serve as the point of contact for questions, discussions, and notifications regarding possible substantive changes within each college/school. **If you are considering any change to programming, courses offered at locations off-campus, etc., please reach out to me for a preliminary review and**

discussion as to whether the change meets SACSCOC’s definition of a “substantive change.” My email address is: msmit55@gmu.edu.

2. SACSCOC Faculty Qualifications Requirements

SACSCOC requires us to *document and justify* the qualifications for all faculty members, and they have very specific guidance describing the required qualifications. **The general rule of thumb is that a master’s degree with 18+ hours in the teaching discipline is required to teach at the undergraduate level, and a terminal degree is required to teach at the graduate level.**

There are a few exceptions to this rule, including the possibility of counting professional experience, but such scenarios are not altogether straightforward. Another expectation from SACSCOC regarding faculty qualifications involves graduate teaching assistants (GTA’s) and graduate lecturers (GL’s). **Specifically, SACSCOC requires that each graduate student who serves as the instructor of record for a course must have 18+ graduate credits in the teaching discipline, and they must be trained, supervised, and evaluated by faculty.**

Our office is finalizing a faculty credentialing manual to provide guidance and consistent procedure around this rather complex issue. In addition to specific information regarding how Mason will handle the exceptions to SACSCOC’s credentialing guidance, the manual will include information on documentation and justification procedures that will be instrumental in the University’s ability to demonstrate compliance with this standard.

As part of our efforts to document and justify the qualifications of our faculty, we are reviewing documentation and justification information currently on file within the Office of the Provost. We will soon begin working to backfill any gaps identified in the database. **To that end, when discussing this issue with faculty in your academic units, please pass along to them the following important message:**

Timely responses to any requests for curriculum vitae, official graduate transcripts, translations/certifications of international transcripts, and justifications for instruction outside the degree discipline are essential to maintaining our accreditation. These requests should *not* be interpreted as questioning of a faculty member’s qualifications. Rather, these requests are intended to solidify the University’s compliance with the accrediting standards through careful documentation and justification of the qualifications for each instructor of record.

Only by leaving no stone unturned and reviewing the credentials and qualifications with a critical eye (akin to how SACSCOC reviewers will review them) can we ensure that we will be able to make the best case for compliance. If you have any questions about whether an individual faculty member is qualified to teach a given course, please feel free to contact me.



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3. Key Take-Away Messages

If you are considering a change in programming, whether new or modified, offerings off-campus, or others as outlined in University Policy 3003, please contact us, and we can do a preliminary review to determine whether or not a change is substantive and what, if any, are our obligations under SACSCOC policy. We will be reaching out to deans' offices on a regular basis to ask if changes have occurred.

Also, please do not hesitate to contact this office for guidance regarding documenting and justifying faculty and graduate student instructor qualifications. And, be on the lookout for the Mason Credentialing Manual, which we anticipate will be ready for distribution by November 1.

I greatly appreciate your commitment to the excellent work we do here at Mason, and I look forward to working with you all in the coming years as we strive to document our excellence during this reaffirmation initiative.