



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

REDUCED CREDIT UNDERGRADUATE DEGREE

Guidelines

For the purposes of the Southern Association of Colleges Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), reduced credit undergraduate degree programs are those that require fewer credit hours and shorter time-to-completion than traditional or standard baccalaureate degrees. The standard baccalaureate degree usually consists of at least 120 semester credit hours (or the equivalent quarter credit hours or clock hours) and is designed to be completed in four years (or eight academic semesters, or the equivalent). By contrast, reduced credit undergraduate degree programs typically require 90 to 100 semester credit hours, or the equivalent.

SACSCOC is supportive of curriculum renewal, innovation, continuous improvement, and exploration. These guidelines provide information to (1) assist institutions when initially seeking to offer, and then subsequently offering, a reduced credit undergraduate degree program; and (2) assist peer reviewers when evaluating an application from an institution that is seeking to offer a reduced credit undergraduate degree. SACSCOC has also published a policy on Reduced Credit Undergraduate Degrees which should be accessed and used in the creation of the Substantive Change prospectus.

Regardless of the approach used to design and produce a new option for students that provides a more rapid completion of an undergraduate degree, institutions must ensure that these reduced credit programs comply with all Principles of Accreditation: Foundations for Quality Enhancement (Principles). This applies to all educational programs and services, wherever the program is located or however it is delivered.

In addition, institutions should demonstrate clear institutional control and faculty involvement in the development of any academic program, and care should be given that programs align with the institutional mission and goals. Establishing a reduced credit undergraduate degree follows the SACSCOC Substantive Change guidelines.

In a Substantive Change prospectus for a reduced credit undergraduate degree, the institution must clearly describe the nature and goals of the proposed reduced credit hour undergraduate degree. These elements of the degree are the basis for the institution addressing how compliance with the faculty, curriculum, education policy, learning outcomes, and other related

standards of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges will be met.

Credit Hours Required

The reduced credit undergraduate degree requires fewer than 120 credit hours, but more than 89 credit hours. If the institution wishes to offer a program below 90 credit hours, the option of certificates should be considered.

Degree Content

Among the goals of a reduced credit undergraduate degree is the desire to move students more rapidly into the workforce and reduce the cost of the degree for students. Thus, the content of the degree may not be suitable for all disciplines. Whether embedded in a baccalaureate degree, a stand-alone degree, or one that builds on an associate degree, these degrees are likely to prepare graduates for high-demand workforce disciplines and should be limited to workforce-related disciplines (such as: technology, professional programs, nursing, or similarly specialized disciplines).

While SACSCOC expects reduced credit undergraduate degrees to address workforce-related disciplines, it is the responsibility of the institution to build a case for what kinds of workforce needed majors/disciplines would lend themselves to this degree format and clearly justify why a reduced credit degree is more appropriate for the goals of the degree than a traditional bachelor's degree. The prospectus should also indicate the relationship between the reduced credit undergraduate degree to workforce needs.

Degree Name

To clearly distinguish these degrees from other award levels, institutions should refer to three-year programs as something other than solely a "baccalaureate or bachelor's degree" to avoid confusion or misrepresentation. The institution may choose an appropriate name for the reduced-credit undergraduate degree program, as long as it includes a modifier within the degree name that clearly distinguishes it from traditional baccalaureate degree programs that require a minimum of 120 semester credit hours.

Degree Structure

The institution should design an appropriately strong curriculum framework and provide an explanation of how curricular breadth and depth are ensured. The reduced credit undergraduate degree may be considered embedded in and lead to completion of a baccalaureate degree at those institutions offering baccalaureate degrees. These institutions must describe the path to completion of the baccalaureate degree from the reduced credit degree: for example, how the General Education coursework supports the baccalaureate degree, that the program outcomes for the reduced credit degree represent a subset of the outcomes for the baccalaureate degree. Similarly, for those institutions offering associate degrees (which may include embedded certificates and/or a diploma program), a path to completion of the reduced credit degree, with the General Education, major courses, and verifiable program learning outcomes of the associate degree embedded, should be included in the prospectus.

General Education: The institution is expected to demonstrate a proportional breadth of general education learning outcomes that are encompassed in a four-year program and required in the SACSCOC standard CR 9.3 (General Education requirements). The curriculum breadth should be carefully designed to include those skills, abilities, and dispositions typical of a traditional

baccalaureate, such as critical thinking, soft skills, and a broad introduction to a variety of disciplines to teach students how to pose and solve problems using different modalities. In some cases, institutions may choose to embed a limited number of student-learning outcomes typically found in the traditional baccalaureate general education curriculum into required courses in the major. Additionally, the reduced-credit degree may have more abbreviated, limited, or eliminated elective or minor requirements.

Major/Discipline and Required Related Content: Instead of simply removing all the electives, institutions preparing a reduced credit undergraduate degree should be intentional and perhaps more prescriptive of the hours required for the major and required related coursework to make certain the goals of the degree are met (i.e., compliant with Core Requirement 9.1, Program Content). As mentioned above, this could be accomplished by providing an introduction, development, and mastery of liberal arts learning outcomes together with the more in depth and narrowly focused major/discipline related content. The knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions of graduates must be clearly stated and consistent with the content of the degree. Evidence of how the student learning outcomes will be introduced, practiced, applied, and assessed at various levels across the curriculum must be included in the prospectus. Except for Standard 9.2 that addresses program length, it is expected that institutions with reduced credit degrees will be compliant with the Principles of Accreditation: Foundation for Quality Enhancement.

The prospectus should pay close attention to how the curriculum provides the breadth of disciplines, soft skills, and preparation for citizenship relative to a traditional baccalaureate degree. While a reduced credit undergraduate degree may have abbreviated general education, minor, or electives requirements, the curriculum is expected to approach the knowledge, skills, abilities, and dispositions in a manner befitting a baccalaureate degree.

Communication and Transparency

Since the United States National Center for Education Statistics defines a bachelor's degree as "A degree granted for the successful completion of a baccalaureate program of studies, usually requiring at least four years (or equivalent) of full-time college-level study," any reduction in what is generally accepted should be clearly identified. This information should be identified in all marketing materials and on official websites, as well as included in transcripts and diplomas.

It is the responsibility of the institution to communicate with all stakeholders that the reduced credit undergraduate degree may not fulfill admission and pre-requisite requirements for some graduate and professional programs, and/or may not meet expectations of some future employers. The institution should document this in a public and transparent manner.

If a four-year baccalaureate degree is offered at an institution implementing the three-year option in the same field, the institution should make that clear to all students, other colleges and universities, and employers, as well as the public. The institution is required to document this in a public and transparent manner.

Since a reduced credit undergraduate degree is relatively new to accreditors, universities, U.S. employers, postsecondary institutions, and, most importantly, students and parents, the institution should consider including the following information concerning the degree in published materials such as the catalog, website, and other places where consumer disclosures are typically made using language suitable for first-generation students:

- the nature, goals, and program outcomes for the reduced credit undergraduate degree,
- the time-commitment from the student,
- the delineation of the difference between the 90- and 120-hour versions of the degree,
- the cost variation (if any) for students pursuing the reduced credit degree part-time vs. full-time or online vs. in-person, and
- the cost comparisons between the reduced credit hour degree and 120 credit hour degrees it offers (or relative to options offered at other institutions).

In developing its prospectus, the institution should include this information to support the approval of the new degree. Arguments provided for offering a reduced credit undergraduate degree include reducing student costs, increasing student completion rates, and fostering a more rapid entry of prepared students into the workforce. Therefore, the institution should identify metrics around student debt, retention rate, and graduation rate. In addition, employment data, student learning outcomes, and student satisfaction should be included in the communication.

Document History

Approved: SACSCOC Executive Council, March 2025

Revised: SACSCOC Executive Council, March 2026

Revised: SACSCOC Executive Council, June 2026