



*Southern Association of Colleges and Schools
Commission on Colleges
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THREE-YEAR BACCALAUREATE DEGREE PROGRAMS

Position Statement

For SACSCOC purposes, three-year baccalaureate degree programs — i.e., bachelor's degrees — are those that require fewer credit hours and shorter time-to-completion than customary 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, three-year baccalaureate degree programs typically require 90 to 100 semester credit hours or the equivalent.

Purposes of a Credential

A credential serves multiple purposes. Successful completion of a credential, such as a baccalaureate degree, conveys skills, abilities, knowledge, dispositions, and competencies. Additionally, access to opportunities such as graduate school, employment, and promotions are some of the purposes of a credential. A credential's outcomes are carefully defined by an institution and are supported by the program's curriculum. Continuous refinement of teaching and learning is tracked through the assessment of a program's learning outcomes.

The value of a baccalaureate degree at nearly all U.S. institutions of higher learning is based upon assurances that the program provides both breadth and depth of learning in a major, i.e., in a defined discipline or area of study. The major is augmented with general education requirements. Thus, the baccalaureate degree signifies the achievement of both specific and general knowledge and abilities.

Educational organizations such as the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U) and the Lumina Foundation agree that a baccalaureate education should, at a minimum, prepare students with the following:

- intellectual skills such as quantitative literacy and critical thinking,
- knowledge of cultures and the physical world,
- awareness of ethical reasoning and civic literacy, and
- an understanding of how to form and answer questions using a variety of intellectual approaches that different disciplines require.

There are also intangible values associated with the baccalaureate degree, such as the mastery of learning, creative problem solving, and resilience and commitment to long-term goals.

Interest in the Three-Year Baccalaureate Degree

Since 1999, the thirty-eight European nations engaged in the Bologna Process have pursued changes and reforms in education, including development of a three-year baccalaureate degree. In the United States, an interest in bringing graduates into the workforce faster and a desire to reduce costs to baccalaureate degree students has increased interest in three-year baccalaureate degrees. Institutions are introducing three-year options through a number of strategies, including:

- adding year-round (including summer) options to lower time-to-completion to three years with or without lowering required credit hours;
- accepting more credits toward the baccalaureate degree, such as: liberalizing acceptance of Advanced Placement credits, accepting credits from the high school International Baccalaureate degree, and/or accepting credit for prior learning;
- innovating term length and the number of credits offered in a term;
- incentivizing students who do not switch majors after they enroll; and
- reducing the number of required credits by recreating curricula and updating baccalaureate degree learning outcomes.

Some institutions do not create a speedier completion of a baccalaureate degree by taking away credits from the curriculum; instead, they find ways to help students progress more quickly through introduction-level material while allowing additional time on the subjects requiring more focus and complex thinking. This requires innovative approaches to traditional seat-time metrics and an understanding of what students can learn on their own and what needs to be taught in the classroom.

SACSCOC and the Three-Year Baccalaureate

SACSCOC is supportive of curriculum renewal, innovation, continuous improvement, and exploration. A plan for a three-year baccalaureate degree that pares program content from a traditional four-year curriculum should keep in mind the purposes of a baccalaureate degree and the promise of both breadth and depth of curricula. Regardless of the vehicle used to produce a new option for students that provides a more rapid completion of a baccalaureate degree, three-year baccalaureate programs are expected to comply with SACSCOC's *Principles of Accreditation* and policies. This expectation applies to all educational programs and services, wherever located or however delivered. In addition, institutions are expected to demonstrate clear institutional control and faculty involvement in the development of three-year baccalaureate programs. Institutional costs are not noticeably decreased with the delivery of a three-year baccalaureate degree; rather, the opposite is often the case because the traditional fourth year of tuition is forgone with the three-year option. Thus, the revenue impact of three-year programs should be addressed in institutional discussions.

Clarity through Policies or Guidelines

The institution should maintain written and published guidelines or policies that provide detailed explanations of the particulars of all credentials awarded, including three-year baccalaureate degrees. Special care is needed for institutions to transparently communicate how the program is structured and any extra responsibilities the student may have in registering for and completing the three-year degree.

Substantive Change

An institution offering a three-year baccalaureate degree ensures all substantive change obligations related to the program are met as defined in the [Substantive Change Policy and Procedures](#). For example, obligations for "New Program-Approval," "New Program-Notification," "Cooperative Academic Arrangement with Title IV Entities," and/or another substantive change type(s) apply without exception to a three-year baccalaureate.

Currently, a three-year baccalaureate degree is not a separately defined substantive change type in policy. If a proposed program does not meet all *Principles of Accreditation* requirements -- viz., Core Requirement 9.2 (program length) -- and all SACSCOC policy requirements, then the institution should provide in its substantive change submission(s)

- its identification of the specific *Principles of Accreditation* and policies for which it may be non-compliant if the proposed program is implemented, and
- a thorough, reasoned, academic rationale for why the proposed program should be approved given its possible non-compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* and/or policies.

Questions to Guide Institutional Discussions

The following questions are intended to provide guidance for institutional discussions:

1. What was the process used to involve the faculty in the planning and implementation of the three-year baccalaureate degree?
2. How does the three-year baccalaureate maintain both the breadth and depth of the curriculum that is expected in a bachelor's degree?
3. Does the three-year baccalaureate support the mission of the institution?
4. Does the three-year baccalaureate impact institutional reputation?
5. What is the financial impact on the institution?
6. How will the financial impact on the institution be mitigated?
7. Has the institution determined the student learning outcomes for the three-year baccalaureate programs?
8. How do student learning outcomes for the three-year baccalaureate differ from the institution's traditional four-year baccalaureate?
9. How will the institution ensure the quality and integrity of the three-year baccalaureate degree?

Document History
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