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ACAP
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Dr. Garrison Walters, Executive Director

July 17, 2008

MEMORANDUM

To: Members of the Advisory Committee on Academic Programs
From: Dr. Gail M. Morrison, Director, Academic Affairs and Licensing 

Discussion of Transfer Policies for Online General Education Coursework

Background

At the recent Advisory Committee on Academic Programs (ACAP) retreat of June 3-4, institutional representatives unanimously agreed that the Statewide Agreement on Transfer and Articulation for coursework should carry with it certain stipulations with regard to the transfer of sections of courses offered online. In particular, the completeness and quality of coursework offered online were questioned when either wet laboratories (for science-related courses) or oral and aural language skill (especially for speech and foreign language courses) were necessary in order to achieve the learning outcomes associated with particular courses.

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) requires that all coursework, regardless of mode of delivery, must demonstrate the same quality. The concept of "best practice"—however it might be defined—also demands this demonstration of quality. Conceptually, therefore, the issue of quality in online coursework appears to be clear.

In response to reported concerns about some coursework offered online, at the retreat, the Vice President for Academic Affairs of the State Technical College System stated that online course syllabi in the technical colleges will show wet laboratories for science courses and suitable on-site demonstration of language capacity for speech and foreign language course offerings. Representatives of the

institutions suggested they, too, would re-examine their syllabi to ensure quality in online sections.

At the meeting of June 3-4, staff requested that institutional representatives provide ideas for changing the language of the Statewide Agreement on Transfer and Articulation (1997, as revised, and online) to assure that the online coursework does include the elements mentioned above. One representative responded to that request.

In South Carolina, the responsibility for guaranteeing that online coursework is meeting the recognized learning outcome standards associated traditionally with the offering of onsite courses in the same fields rests principally with the institutions offering the online courses and those institutions receiving student transfers who have taken those online sections. The Statewide Agreement on Transfer and Articulation contains a provision which permits any receiving institution to request that the Commission on Higher Education evaluate the abilities of transfer students for any course(s) from a sending institution. This provision states:

All claims from any public two- or four-year institution challenging the effective preparation of any other public institution's coursework for transfer purposes will be evaluated and appropriate measures will be taken to reassure that the quality of the coursework has been reviewed and approved on a timely basis by sending and receiving institutions alike.

Although staff have reiterated this provision to institutions on several occasions since 1996, this provision has never been appropriated for use any two- or four-year institution.

In conclusion and in keeping with the June 4 conversation of Advisory Committee on Academic Programs member institutions, the statewide policy and process for evaluating disputed coursework for online sections needs to be revised.

What is to be Done?

Choices are very limited in what can be done to regulate the transfer of online coursework and to ensure its quality. These choices are:

1. Enforce current provisions of the Statewide Agreement on Transfer and Articulation by having receiving institutions with concerns declare these in writing to the Commission for resolution at a meeting of the Advisory Committee on Academic Programs.

2. Revise language of the current policy to assure that all sections of all online courses in the sciences have wet labs consistent with onsite delivered sections of the same courses; and that all sections of all online courses in speech and foreign language have individually verifiable aural-oral exercises.
3. Accept all coursework from any SACS accredited institution regardless of mode of delivery.

At the very least, the Advisory Committee needs to develop consensus around appropriate policy statements for these issues to ensure common understanding of the practices and equitable treatment of credit awards related to online courses in the three disciplines in question.