SACS COC
SOUTHERN ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGES AND SCHOOLS
COMMISSION ON COLLEGES

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Dr. Bruce H. Leslie
Chancellor
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201 West Sheridan
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Dear Dr. Leslie:

We have received several questions regarding "majors" or variants on majors within associate-level transfer degree programs. In this letter, I shall set forth my interpretation of the issues, while acknowledging that final interpretation of the *Principles of Accreditation* rests with our peer review committees, and ultimately with the Board of Trustees of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC). This letter centers around four questions we have received.

1) Does SACSCOC require majors within degree programs?

Clearly the answer is no. We do not specify nomenclature of degrees, although there are a couple of standards that could be cited were nomenclature misleading or a course of study lacking in coherence. These include Core Requirement (CR) 2.7.2, Program Content, and Comprehensive Standard (CS) 3.5.3, Undergraduate Program Requirements. At the associate's degree level, we have many institutions in the membership that offer the AA and the AS degrees without specified majors. In these cases, institutions use the advising process and student career plans to fit the coursework within the degree to the field of study the student intends to pursue upon transfer.

Of course, if there is a sufficiently coherent body of coursework within the degree program, an institution might be able to justify offering majors, concentrations, or other specified fields of study. The presence of a field of study as something that either appears in the degree name itself, and/or is transcripted (or, frankly, publicized in catalogs or other materials) implies a coherency to that study such that SACSCOC reviewers would tend to view this as a distinct "program of study." In such cases, CR 2.7.2, Program Content, would suggest the need for coherency in the content of the degree program as well as a field of study appropriate to higher education. Likewise, CS 3.3.1.1, Institutional Effectiveness – Educational Programs, would appear to apply in terms of the expectation that the defined field of study would exhibit appropriate expected student learning outcomes, would be subject to assessment, and be able to show that the results from assessment activities are being used to make program improvements. The wording of CS 3.4.11, Academic Program Coordination, suggests the institution would assign program and curricular responsibilities to someone qualified in the specific field of study. By similar reasoning, several other standards that speak to educational programs and educational policies would apply (e.g., CR 2.8, Faculty; CR 2.9, Learning Resources and Services; CS 3.4.1, Academic Program Approval; CS 3.4.5, Academic Policies; and CS 3.4.7, Consortial Relationships/Contractual Agreements).

2) If a "major" is not formally defined, may one still be listed on a transcript showing an AA or AS degree based on the intended transfer field of the student? In other words, can a 4-year institution's "university major" be placed on the associate degree transcript?

The answer is no. This would be very misleading for a number of reasons. First, the 2-year institution does not have control over the major a student chooses to pursue upon transfer – if even whether or not the student continues his or her studies. Second, if there is no coherent body of knowledge within the AA or the AS degree that matches the "university major," then it is misleading to the public as to the content of the granted degree.

3) As a 2-year college, it is important that "every course counts" when a student transfers, meaning the AA or AS curriculum needs to align as closely as possible with the student's intended major upon transfer. May we "customize" the sequence of courses in the AA or AS degree being pursued by the student to align with the specific "major" requirements at the specific university to which the student plans to transfer so as to maximize the transfer of every course and provide the numerous benefits this affords to our students and taxpayers?

Yes, by all means. In fact, if an institution's mission is to provide the first two years of study in a 4-year degree plan, it would seem that the institution would be morally obligated to do this (and quite possibly, legally obligated as well). Maintaining contact with those schools where transfers are most likely and designing degree maps based on the curriculum requirements of the other institution is good practice. Publishing such course of study maps or check sheets for each potential major at the 4-year institution is common practice and should be encouraged; these are of tremendous use to students and to advisors. Formal articulation agreements may also be pursued. Aggressive advising of students based on career/transfer plans is critical.

4) If we advise as suggested in the answer above, can we call the courses of study mapped out for our AA or AS students a "major"?

Only if the course of study within the AA or AS degree has sufficient content in the "major" field of study to justify that name should that course of study be called a "major." Otherwise, it is misleading at best, and probably a violation of several standards within the *Principles of Accreditation* – to possibly include the Principle of Integrity.

I fully understand the desire to attract students on the basis of their ability to transfer into a broad set of majors offered at 4-year colleges and universities. Many institutions speak in terms of preparation of students for transfer into specific majors, and that is certainly appropriate if the advising maps are accurate. There are groupings of 4-year majors that often have common – but different – sets of courses

that serve as appropriate foundations to take in the first two years of college. Discussion of advising maps and articulation agreements are certainly appropriate. In some cases, it might be appropriate to refer to a degree path as serving as a "pre-major." But unless the course of study has a coherency and content that is generally accepted as constituting a "major," it should not be called a "major."

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,

Belle S. Wheelan, Ph.D.
President

BSW/MSJ:rb

cc: Dr. Ricky N. Baser, President, Northwest Vista College
Dr. Michael Flores, President, Palo Alto College
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