

Academic Change Advisory from the Office of Compliance and Accreditation

Proponents of any academic changes will be required to seek guidance from the Office of Compliance and Accreditation (OCA) well in advance of the issue being brought up at AAC or Graduate Affairs. Many academic changes may be considered to be substantive change issues, as determined by SACS – COC. A full year of lead time is recommended because substantive change issues require prior notification to, and possibly prior approval from, SACS. The SACS approval process can be lengthy. Certain program changes require a prospectus to be submitted six or more months prior to expected implementation. A prospectus may take up to four months to create. Further, the SACS approval process may take two to four months, and even require an on-site visit. If the program change is one that requires SACS approval, and approval has not been given, your program will be held up until approval is received. Alignment of any program recruiting timeline needs with SACS approval timelines are outside the purview of the OCA.

As a faculty member, it may be difficult to determine whether an issue is substantive change and which type of SACS procedure will be required, if any. Substantive change is broadly defined as, “A significant modification or expansion of the nature and scope of an accredited institution.” More details can be found on the SACS website: <http://www.sacscoc.org/SubstantiveChange.asp> The OCA’s ultimate goal is to help you get your program changes approved while complying with the SACS requirements.

SACS has recently posted its unreported substantive change policy. Below is an excerpt.

Non-Compliance with Reporting Requirements

If an institution fails to follow this substantive change policy and its procedures, the accreditation of the institution may be placed in jeopardy, the institution’s case may be referred to the Commission for the imposition of a sanction, or the institution may lose its Title IV funding or be required by the U.S. Department of Education to reimburse it for money received by the institution for unreported substantive changes.

Source: <http://www.sacscoc.org/documents/UnreportedSubchange.pdf>

How to Seek Guidance from the OCA

The determination of substantive change can often be ambiguous. The OCA will provide an initial determination only after the program change sponsor provides specified information in full. Note that the determination will depend upon what a university already has, in terms of the status quo, or reference point.

Refer to The Office of Compliance and Accreditation web page for procedures and forms. The forms reflect a distillation of the information that SACS requires. Please briefly address these items for the initial pass to OCA. Note that at a later date, you will need to provide more complete answers. Use your judgment or feel free seek guidance from the OCA if something seems undoable or irrelevant in the context of your proposed change.