

**South Carolina Commission on Higher Education**  
**Policies and Procedures for Academic Degree Program Productivity**

**Section A: Background and Rationale**

In its enabling legislation, the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education is charged with “examining the state’s institutions of higher education relative to both short and long-range programs and missions”—including “curriculum offerings”—with an eye toward “reducing duplication, increasing effectiveness, and achieving economies” (South Carolina Code, §59-103-20). Relative to academic programs at the public colleges and universities, the Commission meets this accountability mandate in four ways: 1) planning the state’s academic program array, including the approval of all new academic degree programs; 2) coordinating the statewide peer review of existing academic degree programs; 3) monitoring institutional compliance with statewide degree program productivity standards; and, 4) assessing the “curricula offered to achieve mission” component (indicator 1B) of the performance funding process.

Given the dynamic nature of the state’s needs regarding academic programming, it is imperative that the Commission, in concert with the public institutions of higher learning, frequently assess the relevance and utility of its accountability functions. For example, in 1998 the Commission approved extensive revisions to its new program approval and existing program review policies. In 2001, the Commission altered the performance funding indicator system in such a manner as to emphasize critical measurements of institutional success. Because the agency’s academic accountability functions are interrelated (e.g., existing program review incorporates the degree productivity standards into its procedures), the Commission staff believes that ongoing review and revision of the academic degree program productivity policy is also warranted in order to maintain the currency of the entire accountability process.

There are a number of reasons why the Commission relies on student enrollment data to help measure the effectiveness of existing academic degree programs.

- First, monitoring numbers of degrees awarded from and student enrollment in academic programs enables the Commission to determine if the state is indeed funding programs that are meeting the needs of students at state-supported universities. Low enrollment in a degree program may indicate that a program has lost its relevance to students and to the state as a whole.
  
- Second, use of degree program productivity standards enables the Commission to guard against unnecessary program duplication by identifying “low growth” discipline areas. This information can be used strategically by institutions and by the Commission to guide new program development.

- And, third, maintenance and use of rigorous productivity standards by the entire higher education community shows a willingness to engage in thoughtful self-evaluation of a core mission area, thus lessening the possibility of additional external mandates from the General Assembly.

**Section B: Policies**

1. For Commission purposes, academic degree program productivity is defined as the capacity of an academic degree program to award degrees and enroll majors relative to the criteria established by the Commission. The policies in this document pertain to degree programs offered at public four-year institutions only. (The Commission maintains separate program productivity policies for degree programs at public two-year institutions.)
2. The following table displays the standards used for measuring academic degree program productivity at public senior institutions in South Carolina. Degree programs must meet at least one of these standards in order to comply with Commission policy. For purposes of this policy, degree programs are defined as active baccalaureate, master’s, first professional, and doctoral programs.

**Academic Degree Program Productivity Standards  
(Five-Year Average Benchmarks)**

| <b>Degree Level</b>                                  | <b>Degrees Awarded<sup>1</sup></b> | <b>Major Enrollment<sup>2</sup></b> |
|--|------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Baccalaureate  | 5                                  | 12.5 <sup>3</sup>                   |
| Master’s/1 <sup>st</sup> Professional/<br>Specialist | 3                                  | 6 <sup>4</sup>                      |
| Doctoral   | 2                                  | 4.5 <sup>5</sup>                    |

3. The Commission will review institutional compliance with the program productivity standards on a biennial basis starting in 2003. Each degree program at each senior institution will be reviewed. Staff will use the Commission on Higher Education Management Information System (CHEMIS) and the Commission’s *Academic Degree Program Inventory* as data sources.

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<sup>1</sup> A five-year average (i.e., divide cumulative number over five-year period by five) of degrees awarded by the program

<sup>2</sup> A five-year average (i.e., divide cumulative number over five-year period by five) of headcount enrollment in the program

<sup>3</sup> Upper-division majors

<sup>4</sup> G-1 enrollments

<sup>5</sup> G-2 enrollments

4. For purposes of calculating compliance with program productivity standards, the following policies will apply: 1) different degree designations within the same major/six-digit Classification of Instructional Programs (CIP) code (e.g., BS/BA, AB/BA, MS/MA) will be counted together; and, 2) jointly offered programs will be counted at each institution offering the degree.
5. The Commission will review active degree programs only. Programs for which the Commission has received official institutional notification of termination will not be reviewed.
6. The Commission will begin review of new academic degree programs in the sixth year of operation for baccalaureate, first professional, and doctoral programs and in the fourth year of operation for master's and specialist programs.
7. Enrollment and degrees awarded data for existing off-site and distance education programs will be counted together with appropriate on-campus programs.
8. Academic degree programs that meet at least one of the two productivity standards detailed in policy B.2 receive continuing approval status from the Commission. (Note: this status will not be factored into performance funding calculations.)
9. Unless exempted by the Commission (see policy B.10 below), academic degree programs that fail to meet both productivity standards detailed in policy B.2 above are placed on probationary status for a four-year period, during which time institutions will be expected to enhance degree program enrollment and degrees awarded. (Note: this status will not be factored into performance funding calculations.) Institutions will have 60 days from the date of Commission action on initial probationary status to provide the Commission with a plan for meeting the degree program productivity policy within the four-year probationary period. At the end of the probationary period, the Commission will recommend continuing approval status for programs meeting program productivity standards and termination of programs that again fail to meet the standards. The Commission will remove probationary status from such programs no sooner than the next annual degree program productivity review.
10. On a program-by-program basis, the Commission will entertain exemptions to the academic program productivity standards detailed in policy B.2 above. In most cases, programs approved for exemption will be considered essential to the basic mission of the American university (i.e., the arts and sciences) or deemed so unique in their subject matter and value to the higher education community in South Carolina as to make them essential. (See C.2 below for more specific criteria.)

11. The Commission will review petitions for exemption on a biennial basis. Exemption requests must be made in writing to the Commission staff (see Procedure C.2 below) and must be approved by the chief academic officer and president of the institution. In most cases, the Commission will award exemptions for the lifetime of a degree program, unless an institution decides to terminate a program. Institutions may select noncompliant degree programs from any degree level for possible exemption. Institutions must re-petition for exempt status for programs that undergo curricular changes requiring Commission degree program modification approval as outlined in the *Guidelines for the Approval of New Academic Degree Programs*.

### **Section C: Procedures**

1. During spring semester of each academic year in which a review occurs, the Commission will distribute to each institution the academic degree program productivity data specific to its array of active degree programs. These data will include Commission recommendations for continuing approval status for programs complying with policy B.2 above, probationary status for those programs failing to meet the criteria outlined in policy B.2, and terminated status for those programs found noncompliant with policy B.9 above (i.e., failing to meet standards after the four-year probationary period).
2. Institutions will then have the opportunity to respond in writing to program productivity data and the recommendations based on the data. At this time, institutions may petition the Commission staff for possible exempt status for noncompliant programs by submitting a Petition for Exemption from Program Productivity Standards to the Commission staff. A separate Petition is required for each program for which an institution seeks exempt status. Only programs failing to meet the Commission's productivity standards are eligible for possible exemption. Petitions should be no longer than three pages in length and should address the following two essential questions: 1) How is the program critical to the fundamental mission of the university? and 2) Why should the program be absolved from the Commission's program productivity standards?
3. Subsequent to staff changes made to the data or recommendations as a result of institutional responses, the Commission's Committee on Academic Affairs and Licensing will review the annual report on degree program productivity as drafted by the Commission staff at its September meeting. This report will include staff recommendations for continuing approval status, probationary status, terminated status, and exempt status. Pending a favorable recommendation, the Committee will then forward the report to the full Commission for review at its September meeting.

4. Pending a favorable review by the full Commission, recommendations for continuing approval status, probationary status, and exempt status will take effect immediately (i.e., from the date of the Commission meeting at which the report was approved).
5. The Commission will forward recommendations for the termination of programs that have failed to meet degree program productivity standards (i.e., have failed to meet the standards after the four-year probationary period) to the respective institutions affected by the recommendations. Correspondence will be conducted through the office of the chief academic officer at each institution. The Commission will request that institutions respond to the agency executive director within 60 days after a recommendation for terminated status. This response should detail the institution's plan for complying with the Commission recommendation within a mutually agreed upon phase-out period.

### Degree Program Productivity Policies in Selected States

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| <p><b>Alabama</b><br/>Alabama<br/>Commission on<br/>Higher Education</p>                         | <p><b>Policy:</b> Program Viability process enacted by legislature in 1996; productivity standards developed to accompany legislation by ACHE and institutions based on annual average number of degrees conferred during a five-year period for senior inst., three-year period for two-year inst.; average graduates per year equal 7.5 for assoc. and baccl.; 3.75 for master’s; 3 for specialist; 2.25 for doctoral; 3-year exemption period for “core liberal arts programs;” “non-viable programs” (not meeting stds) may request a waiver; ACHE terminates programs that do not achieve stds or obtain waiver in 3-year phase-out process; discipline-wide inability to meet standards triggers program review process</p>   |
| <p><b>Arizona</b><br/>Arizona Board of<br/>Regents</p>   | <p><b>Policy:</b> As part of comprehensive statewide program review process, Regents identify programs that fall below the following thresholds: undergraduate—over a three year, main campus programs that award less than 24 degrees, non-main campus programs that award less than 15 degrees; graduate—over a three-year period, main campus master’s programs that award less than 9 degrees, non-main campus programs that award less than 6 degrees, and doctoral programs at all locations that award less than 6 degrees; programs considered “basic academic subjects”—defined as programs offered at 12 or more peer institutions—will be exempted; inability to meet standards triggers program review process</p>  |
| <p><b>Florida</b><br/>Florida Board of<br/>Education</p>   | <p><b>Policy:</b> Benchmarks for total number of FTE’s by degree level are set for each university campus on an annual basis; policy for applying benchmarks is currently undergoing review</p>   |
| <p><b>Georgia</b><br/>Georgia Board of<br/>Regents</p>   | <p><b>Policy:</b> Benchmarks for degrees awarded over a five-year period are 10 for baccalaureate, 5 for masters; none for doctoral programs, although all doctoral programs are reviewed as part of Board’s seven-year program review process; low productivity programs trigger program review at campus level</p>  |
| <p><b>Louisiana</b><br/>Louisiana Board<br/>Of Regents</p>                                       | <p><b>Policy:</b> Standard is set at total degrees per program averaged over five years (baccl.= 8; master’s=5; PhD=2); “low-completer programs” are subject to ongoing Regents review; Board recommendations include consolidation with other programs, “temporary maintenance (i.e., provisional approval), “maintenance” (approval), or termination</p>  |
| <p><b>Massachusetts</b><br/>Massachusetts<br/>Board of Higher<br/>Education</p>                  | <p><b>Policy:</b> Annual review of programs throughout the system as measured by the average number of program graduates over a three-year period; standards are as follows: assoc. and baccl = 5; master’s = 5; doctoral = 3; institutions may submit petitions to retain programs that fall below standards; Board may terminate, consolidate, or continue low productivity programs</p>  |
| <p><b>North Carolina</b><br/>University of<br/>North Carolina<br/>General<br/>Administration</p> | <p><b>Policy:</b> Biennial review of all academic programs in system; low productivity standards are as follows: baccl—number of degrees awarded in last 2 years is 19 or fewer, unless upper division enrollment in the most recent year exceeds 25 or degrees awarded exceeds 10; master’s, specialist, and CAS—the number of degrees awarded in the last 2 years is 15 or fewer, unless enrollment in the most recent year exceeds 9; doctoral—the number of degrees awarded in the last 2 years is 5 or fewer, unless enrollment in the most recent year exceeds 18 or the number of degrees awarded in the most recent year exceeds 2; 1<sup>st</sup> prof—the number of degrees awarded in the last 2 years is 30 or fewer, unless enrollment in the most recent year exceeds 30 or the number of degrees awarded in the most recent year exceeds 15; programs in “basic core of academic disciplines” (fine arts, humanities, mathematics, computer science, sciences, and social sciences) are excluded; institutions asked to study non-compliant programs and make recommendations to UNC-GA; UNC-GA can recommend continuation, strengthening, consolidation, or discontinuation; system-wide reviews of consistently low productivity programs also an option (e.g., foreign languages)</p> |
| <p><b>Tennessee:</b><br/>Tennessee Higher<br/>Education<br/>Commission</p>                       | <p><b>Policy:</b> THEC conducts productivity reviews every five years that use total degrees per year, averaged over five years: baccl. = 10; master’s = 5; specialist = 4; doctoral = 3; low productivity programs trigger program reviews; programs may be terminated or given an allotted time to meet established standards</p>   |

## **Timeline for CHE Biennial Program Productivity Process**

### **Year One: Enrollment and Degrees Awarded Data, Academic Years 1997-2002**

- February 2003: CHE internal data collection and review
- April 2003: Draft productivity report distributed to universities
- June 2003: Universities respond with errata, petitions for exemption
- September 2003: Committee on Academic Affairs and Licensing/full Commission review of final productivity report