



## **SOUTH CAROLINA**

### **COMMISSION ON HIGHER EDUCATION**

CHE  
06/06/2019  
Agenda Item 6.02.D.1

June 6, 2019

#### **MEMORANDUM**

**To:** Chair Wes Hayes and Members, SC Commission on Higher Education

**From:** Chair Terry Seckinger and Members, Committee on Academic Affairs and Licensing

#### **Consideration of Annual Evaluation of Associate Degree Programs** **FY 2014-2015**

#### **Background**

The *South Carolina Master Plan for Higher Education* (1979) requires the annual review of associate degrees in the State's public higher education institutions.<sup>1</sup> In 1996, the passage of Act 359 underscored the importance of program accountability by focusing on performance indicators including time to degree and graduates' first-time passing rates on professional licensure examinations.<sup>2</sup> This edition of the annual evaluation of associate degree programs provides an assessment of academic program performance across all disciplines during the 2014-2015 academic year. Enrollment and completion data and assessment are provided through a general analysis of programs of study at the University of South Carolina system and the South Carolina Technical College System. Institutions complement the data provided with information about the initiatives implemented to continue success of strong-performance academic programs, and plans initiated to increase the success of programs needing to show improvement.

The purposes of this study remain relevant as part of the focus of both state and national governments on institutional accountability. The language of Act 359 maintained the purposes of this annual review as they had been articulated in earlier legislation and Commission policy as follows:

1. to ensure that programs demonstrate responsiveness to employment trends and meet minimum standards of enrollment, graduation, and placement

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<sup>1</sup> *South Carolina Master Plan for Higher Education*. Columbia: South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, 1979. 24, 129.

<sup>2</sup> South Carolina, General Assembly. "S\*1195 (Rat #0368, Act #0359 of 1996) General Bill." 1995-96 Bill 1195. May 20, 1996. Accessed December 23, 2014. [http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess111\\_1995-1996/bills/1195.htm](http://www.scstatehouse.gov/sess111_1995-1996/bills/1195.htm).

2. to identify programs which need to be strengthened.

Given the preponderance of associate degree programs which are employment driven and thus-related to specific occupations or occupational sectors, this report has consistently sought to provide insight into specific programs which are either *exceptionally achieving* their ends or are *underperforming* in relationship to the state’s current and future economic development needs.

The procedures for this review require each program’s productivity to be evaluated in terms of enrollment, number of graduates, and percent of graduates placed in a related job or continuing their studies full-time. The following criteria apply to this review process:

<b>Enrollment</b>	<b>16</b> headcount or <b>12</b> full-time students at the most recent fall term.
<b>Completions</b>	<b>6</b> at the evaluation year or an average of <b>6</b> of the recent three-year rolling data.
<b>Employment</b>	<b>50%</b> of graduates available for job placement related to their education or continuation of education on a full-time basis.

Programs which fail to meet these criteria must be canceled, suspended, or put on probation unless their continuation is justified to the Commission. Justification for programs may take into consideration factors such as manpower requirements, funding, and employment “stop outs” of students. In addition, three programs—General Technology, Vocational Technical Education, and General Engineering Technology—historically have had different and much more flexible standards of evaluation because of the unique needs they have filled and the low enrollments which they were expected to produce. As such, they have been considered “justified” for continuation regardless of whether they met the evaluation requirements.

When a degree program is placed on probation, the institution may continue to offer it but must provide a plan for the program to meet all criteria within three years. Suspension means that the program’s inability to meet the minimum criteria is serious enough to discontinue temporarily the enrollment of new students in the program until the institution can study the need and demand for the program. A program may remain on suspension for three years.

**Distribution of Associate Degree Programs by System and Sector**

For this reporting period, associate degree programs exist in all 16 technical colleges and the four two-year regional branches of the University of South Carolina (USC). In addition, associate degrees (AA/AS) are offered by USC Columbia at Fort Jackson and by USC Beaufort at the Marine Corps Air Station. Both of these continue at the request of the military base administration and commanders.

This current assessment of associate degree programs in the state’s public institutions relies on Fall 2014 enrollment data and academic year 2014-2015 graduation and employment data. Evaluation encompasses 310 associate degree programs in the technical college system, and nine (9) associate degree programs in the USC System: seven (7) at the two-year campuses, one at USC Beaufort, and one at USC Columbia. New associate degree programs (those implemented within the past three years) are always excluded from this analysis.

## I. General Analysis of the Programs of Study in the USC System

**Table 1 Five Year Data of USC System AA/AS Program Graduates**

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15
<b>Four-Year Campus</b>					
USC Columbia (Ft. Jackson)	6	7	4	3	4
USC Beaufort (Marine Corps Air Station)	3	3	4	1	0
<b>SUB-TOTAL</b>	<b>9</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>Two-Year Campus</b>					
USC Lancaster	86	87	100	79	67
USC Salkehatchie	134	127	118	204	227
USC Sumter	88	75	84	73	111
USC Union	44	57	58	58	44
<b>SUBTOTAL</b>	<b>352</b>	<b>346</b>	<b>360</b>	<b>414</b>	<b>449</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>361</b>	<b>356</b>	<b>368</b>	<b>418</b>	<b>453</b>

Source: USC annual reports on associate degree data

As stated, all USC regional campuses designated as “two-year,” as well as USC Beaufort at the Marine Corps Air Station and USC Columbia at Fort Jackson, continue to offer Associate of Arts/Associate of Science degree programs. USC Beaufort, formerly a two-year institution, approved to become a four-year institution in June 2002, has been permitted by the Commission on Higher Education to continue to offer the Associate of Arts/Associate of Science degree program at the military bases in Beaufort. The number of graduates from the program at USC Beaufort has decreased (See **Table 1**). In 2011-2012 report, “according to USC Beaufort officials, the dramatic decline in the on-base AA program compared to previous years has been precipitated at least in part by the fact that once USC Beaufort became a four-year institution it charged tuition and fees for the two-year program at the four-year rate. Given the presence of other providers on the military base with significantly lower charges, enrollments have suffered. USC Beaufort has recently adopted a new ‘military rate’ for active military personnel; along with other resources that will be allocated to the program, USC Beaufort is working proactively to revitalize this program.” In this report year, a positive change in completion has not been observed.

In February 1998, USC Columbia requested and received approval to revise its mission statement so that its ongoing offering of the Associate of Arts degree program at Fort Jackson would be officially included as part of its institutional mission. Enrollment and graduation data show that this program is very small. (See **Table 1**.)

In the past, Commission staff reasoned that because the AA/AS at Fort Jackson is small and peripheral to the mission of the state’s comprehensive *research* university, the degree program would be more appropriately offered by a two-year institution, either USC Sumter or Midlands Technical College. The University administration has maintained historically that the program is integral to fulfilling the

University's community and humanitarian mission, and representatives of Fort Jackson have strongly supported this view, despite the program's small size.

As **Table 1** shows, over the most recent five years the numbers of graduates from the AA/AS programs in the University of South Carolina system have varied considerably. The self-reported data from the USC Columbia Institutional Research Office show that for 2014-2015, three (3) of the six (6) USC campuses offering the AA/AS program have experienced increases in graduates compared to the 2013-2014 academic year. Three (3) USC campuses experienced a decrease in graduates during the same time. The total number of AA/AS graduates in the USC System increased (418 to 453) from 2013-2014 to 2014-2015. Reviewing the most recent five years of data in **Table 1** verifies this is driven by degree completion growth at USC Salkehatchie and Sumter.

Completion of an AA/AS degree is a critical success factor for both student transfer to a four-year institution and the rate at which transfer students complete the baccalaureate degree.<sup>3</sup> These dynamics, linked with students' eligibility for the Lottery Tuition Assistance Program while working toward their AA/AS degrees, suggests that the two-year USC regional campuses should continue to review and implement the most effective strategies for promoting attainment of the AA/AS degree as a "best practice" to encourage student progression toward completion of a baccalaureate degree.

### **Applied, Occupationally-Specific Two-Year Degrees in the USC System**

The two-year campuses of the USC system present an important challenge to and opportunity for higher education institutions in South Carolina. Three of the four two-year regional campuses are located in communities without a main campus of a technical college: USC Lancaster, USC Salkehatchie, and USC Union. Of these three, only USC Lancaster offers occupationally-specific degree programs, although neither their authorizing legislation nor Act 359 prohibits the others from offering such degrees. The occupational programs at USC Lancaster are in nursing, criminal justice, and business. Graduates from the occupationally-specific two-year programs at USC Lancaster are listed below in **Table 2** for the past four academic years. While the number of graduates has increased in business and nursing, the number of graduates in criminal justice has decreased compared with the previous year. The USC Lancaster occupational associate degree programs serve a small—but vital—set of counties in the state.

**Table 2 USC Lancaster Graduates of Four-Year Occupational Associate Degree Programs of Study (Academic Years 2011-12---2014-15)**

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Nursing</b>	<b>Criminal Justice</b>	<b>Business</b>
2011-2012	14	11	19
2012-2013	7	24	29
2013-2014	2	26	25
2014-2015	9	16	38

In summary, graduation rates and student enrollment data for the current review period show that all the two-year programs in the USC system (AA/AS and occupational programs) are currently meeting productivity requirements.

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<sup>3</sup> "Affordability and Transfer: Critical to Increasing Baccalaureate Degree Completion." The National Center for Public Policy in Higher Education. June 1, 2011. Accessed December 19, 2014. [http://www.highereducation.org/reports/pa\\_at/index.shtml](http://www.highereducation.org/reports/pa_at/index.shtml).

## II. General Analysis of Associate Degree Programs in the Technical Colleges

Table 3 provides a summary of the number of programs evaluated over the past 10 years in various categories at the technical colleges.

**Table 3 Ten Year (from 2006-07 to 2014-15) Summary of Annual Associate Degree Program Evaluation in the Technical Colleges**

Year Evaluated	Good Standing	On Probation	Under Suspension	Cancelled	Total
2006	277	15	5	4	301
2007	281	15	4	4	304
2008	274	28	2	2	306
2009	275	29	5	0	306
2010	270	30	5	0	309
2011	291	22	4	0	317
2012	285	16	4	0	304
2013	283	7	2	1	293
2014	292	13	3	6	314
2015	291	16	3	0	310

In the data for the current annual report, 16 programs out of 310 (= 5.16%) analyzed at the technical colleges are on probation. By comparison, last year's report regarding academic year 2013-2014 showed a total of 13 programs out of a total of 314 (= 4.14%) were on probation; and the previous year seven (7) out of 293 programs (= 2.3%) were on probation. Half of the programs on probation fall into the disciplinary field of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM). For this reporting year, the specific programs (by degree and institution) on probation are in **Table 4**.

**Table 4 Associate Degree Programs on Probation in Fall 2015 (Total = 16)**

College	Degree	Program
Aiken Technical College	STEM	Electronics Engineering Technology
Aiken Technical College	HUS	Human Services
Aiken Technical College	LAW	Criminal Justice Technology
Denmark Technical College	BUS	Administrative Office Technology
Denmark Technical College	STEM	Electro-mechanical Engineering Technology
Greenville Technical College	STEM	Architectural Engineering Technology
Greenville Technical College	MFG	Industrial Maintenance Technology

Midlands Technical College	STEM	Civil Engineering Technology
Piedmont Technical College	HEA	Cardiovascular Technology
Piedmont Technical College	HEA	Respiratory Care
Spartanburg Technical College	MFG	Automotive Technology
Spartanburg Community College	STEM	Radiation Protection Technology
Technical College of Lowcountry	STEM	Civil Engineering Technology
Trident Technical College	STEM	Civil Engineering Technology
Trident Technical College	STEM	Mechanical Engineering Technology
Tri-County Technical College	MFG	Machine Tool Technology

## II A. Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematic (STEM) Programs

In the 2014-2015 report year, STEM programs represented the highest number (8) on probation. Manufacturing programs and Healthcare programs were the second and third highest with three (3) and two (2) programs respectively on probation.

The data showing low graduates in STEM programs is long-standing. However, five of the eight STEM programs on probation had high enrollment with more than 50 headcount enrollment. Therefore, the emerging issue is retention. As a system, the technical colleges of South Carolina have been described as a national model for preparing the state workforce. However, the System needs to continue to work on developing a long term plan to help student progress to completion in order to remove any Engineering Technology programs from the “probationary” group, and keep them off. These programs assist the state in attracting and retaining businesses which want to be in South Carolina. Such industries tend to be engines of major growth and innovation, attracting other corporations to enter into the state. BMW and Boeing are two examples of industries that have moved to South Carolina and provide extensive intangible benefits aside from jobs and income generated.

## II B. Continuing Success of the AA/AS Programs in the Technical Colleges

Associate degree programs are of unique benefit to the state and to students because they provide the equivalent of the first two years of a baccalaureate education, but at a much lower cost than the standard four-year institution. As of Fall 2009, all associate-level degrees in the Technical College System have been changed to the three nationally recognized designations: A.S., Associate in Science; A.A., Associate in Arts; and A.A.S., Associate in Applied Science.

A primary purpose of the AA/AS degree programs offered at the state’s two-year institutions is to prepare students for transfer into baccalaureate programs. In South Carolina, AA/AS programs began in the 1970s in response to the needs of persons who, for reasons of finance, geography, and/or historical under-representation in higher education (especially mature students, women, and minorities), found it much more possible to begin a baccalaureate degree program by taking the first two years of coursework at a technical college.

For this reporting year, all AA/AS programs in the Technical College System are in the *Good* category regarding the first criterion: that is, producing “at least six (6) graduates during the evaluation year or an average of at least six graduates over the most recent three-year period.”<sup>4</sup> (See **Table 5.**)

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<sup>4</sup> P.2.

As **Table 5** demonstrates, the AA/AS programs in the Technical College System produce a number of program completers, therefore availing many South Carolinians the possibility for transfer to a four-year degree program. In fact, the 2014-2015 data show that associate degree programs produced about 1.69 % more graduates compared to the previous year from 2715 to 2761. The majority of state technical colleges (11 of 16) graduated more students than in the preceding year. Five (5) graduated fewer students.

**Table 5 Graduates of AA/AS Degrees by Technical College, 2010-11 through 2014-15**

<b>Technical College</b>	<b>2011</b>	<b>2012</b>	<b>2013</b>	<b>2014</b>	<b>2015</b>
Aiken Tech	61	74	75	95	56
Central Carolina	28	37	65	60	71
Denmark	10	27	32	20	25
Florence-Darlington	68	76	61	78	68
Greenville	233	235	229	260	312
Horry-Georgetown	182	265	426	455	533
Midlands	302	426	393	321	354
Northeastern	30	28	35	46	53
Orangeburg-Calhoun	9	14	27	17	15
Piedmont	55	52	63	81	94
Spartanburg Community College	106	130	121	136	126
Lowcountry	29	37	26	53	64
Tri-County	120	90	112	454	258
Trident	368	364	611	508	565
Williamsburg	24	44	24	26	30
York	59	74	91	105	137
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1684</b>	<b>1973</b>	<b>2391</b>	<b>2715</b>	<b>2761</b>

Two institutions graduated at least 25% more students in the current report cycle, class of 2015 (Table 6) than in the previous year, class of 2014.

**Table 6 Exceptional Achievement: Technical Colleges Graduation Rates, 2014-2015**

<b>Technical College</b>	<b>Percentage Increase %</b>	<b>Increase Differential = N</b>
Denmark Technical College	25%	+5
York Technical College	30%	+32

The 2009 Higher Education Action Plan addresses the importance of institutions of higher learning creating pathways to successfully transfer students from two-year degree programs to four-year degree programs. In making South Carolina one of the most educated states in the country by the year 2030, the Action Plan recommends that the State “create incentives and requirements for seamless transitions between and among

two-year and four-year institutions, including the implementation of a statewide initiative to monitor transfer.”<sup>5</sup> The CHE has developed an online course transfer and articulation tool, *SC TRAC*, which will help transfer students identify course equivalencies and degree credit awards for transfer courses. Work is continuing with the institutions to manage course equivalencies, transfer information into the system, and to install interfaces with the system so that information related to course articulation and transfer is easily added and displayed.

## II C. Importance of the Associate Degree Nursing Programs (ADN)

For a number of years this annual report has been grounded in two basic assumptions about the program of study leading to the associate degree in nursing:

1. In South Carolina, the associate degree in nursing is accepted by employers as a legitimate credential for a Registered Nurse (RN).
2. Meeting employers’ demands for a well-educated nursing workforce to provide safe care in hospitals and other healthcare settings requires the sustained commitment of each institution to enroll and graduate increasingly larger numbers of students.

According to *South Carolina Industry Employment Projection*, employment projection increase rate in Healthcare Practitioners and Technical and Healthcare Support will be 17.41% and 24.38% respectively in 2026 (Source: South Department of Workforce and Employment). The healthcare profession is the fastest growing industry in South Carolina<sup>6</sup>.

Table 7 presents the number of graduates from the 14 two-year technical colleges over the course of ten consecutive report years. The significant growth is observed from 940 in 2005-2006 to 1413 in 2012-2013. In this reporting year 2014-2015, though the number of graduates declined -11.39% (from 1308 to 1159) compared with the previous year, the job placement rate of 95.43% remained high.

**Table 7 Ten Year Data for Total Numbers of Graduates from Technical Colleges’ Associate Degree in Nursing Programs, 2005-06 through 2014-15**

2005-2006	940
2006-2007	982
2007-2008	1156
2008-2009	1274
2009-2010	1283
2010-2011	1272
2011-2012	1264
2012-2013	1413
2013-2014	1308
2014-2015	1159

<sup>5</sup> "Leveraging Higher Education for a Stronger South Carolina." South Carolina Legislature. March 1, 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.scstatehouse.gov/archives/CommissiononHigherEd/ActionPlan\\_Fullreport\\_final\\_withcover.pdf](http://www.scstatehouse.gov/archives/CommissiononHigherEd/ActionPlan_Fullreport_final_withcover.pdf).

<sup>6</sup>South Carolina WIOA Unified State Plan. Retrieved from [https://dew.sc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final-unified-plan-rev-may-9-2016.pdf?sfvrsn=90092724\\_2](https://dew.sc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/final-unified-plan-rev-may-9-2016.pdf?sfvrsn=90092724_2)



Though the number of graduates in nine (9) out of 14 nursing programs declined, four (4) programs (Horry-Georgetown Technical College, Technical College of the Lowcountry, Tri-county Technical College, and York Technical College) demonstrated increase in graduation.

**II D. Degree Programs No Longer on Probation**

For the current reporting year, a total of four (4) programs which had been on probation in the technical colleges for last year's reporting period have been recommended by the State Technical College System for placement in *Good* standing. The degrees and institutional locales of all the programs moving from *Probation* to *Good* are in **Table 8**.

**Table 8 Degree Programs Returning to *Good* Status from *Probation* 2014-2015 (=4)**

College	Degree	Program
Aiken Technical College	MKT	Marketing
Aiken Technical College	HEA	Radiologic Technology
Orangeburg-Calhoun Technical College	FIN	Accounting
Tri-County Technical College	MFG	Manufacturing Management and Leadership

**II E. Degree Programs on Suspension**

**Table 9** shows the programs in the Technical College System for this period which are on suspension. It is noteworthy that there are only three programs in this category, which suggests that planning by the Technical College System for technical programs, based upon community and business demand for graduates in certain fields, has minimized the need to suspend and cancel programs.

**Table 9 Associate Degree Programs on Suspension in 2015  
(or Continued for 1st or 2nd Year Suspension) (=3)**

College	Degree	Program
<b>First Year:</b>		
Greenville Technical College	STEM	Biotechnology
Greenville Technical College	STEM	Geomatics Technology
Williamsburg Technical College	BUS	Administrative Office Technology

**Summary**

The associate degree programs in the USC system and the Technical College System are overwhelmingly meeting statewide productivity standards which have been reported annually since 1983. Two hundred and ninety-one (291) of the 310 technical college programs evaluated meet the *Good* status requirements for this reporting year. Additionally, seven (7) of the nine (9) associate degree programs in the University of South Carolina system meet the *Good* status requirements for this reporting year. The outliers are the associate degree programs at USC Beaufort and USC Columbia Ft. Jackson campus. As noted on pages 2 and 3, these programs need the continued implementation of proactive efforts to establish and sustain effectiveness above current productivity thresholds.

Similarly, this analysis of programs in the Technical College System also suggests that despite improvement in the four (4) degree programs that progressed to *Good* status, more efforts need to be made to retain students

and help them progress toward graduation in STEM programs, a field important to the State's economic development.

### **Recommendation**

The Committee on Academic Affairs and Licensing recommends the Commission commend this report's designation of programs for the current reporting year as shown in **Tables 1, 3, 4, 6, 8, and 9**. Because of the importance of certain associate degree programs to economic development in South Carolina, the staff further recommends that the Committee and Commission encourage the State Technical College system to continue to explore ways to increase enrollments and retention to graduation in programs in Engineering Technology and the USC system campus in Beaufort and Ft. Jackson to increase enrollment and retention to graduation in their associate degree programs.

Given the present economic situation, it is imperative that the technical colleges and the University of South Carolina regional campuses work collaboratively to increase the numbers of AA/AS degree completers and prepare them for entry into a four-year program. A learned and skilled workforce is essential for economic prosperity for any state and will promote a pervasive education culture in the state of South Carolina.