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# The Principles of Accreditation:

## Foundations for Quality Enhancement

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## **Philosophy of Accreditation**

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Self-regulation through accreditation embodies a philosophy that a free people can and ought to govern themselves through a representative, flexible, and responsive system. Decentralization of authority honors the rich diversity of educational institutions in our pluralistic society and serves to protect both institutional autonomy and the broader culture of academic freedom in our global society. The empowerment flowing from self-regulation promotes both innovation and accountability in achieving the goals of educating and training citizens in a representative democracy. Consistent with these overarching values, accreditation is best accomplished through a voluntary association of educational institutions. Both a process and a product, accreditation relies on integrity; thoughtful and principled professional judgment; rigorous application of requirements; and a context of trust. The process provides an assessment of an institution's effectiveness in the fulfillment of its self-defined mission; its compliance with the requirements of its accrediting association; and its continuing efforts to enhance the quality of student learning and its programs and services. Based upon rigorous analysis and reasoned judgment, the process stimulates evaluation and improvement, while providing a means of continuing accountability to the institutions' stakeholders and to the public.

The culmination of the accreditation process is a public statement of an institution's continuing capacity to provide effective programs and services based on agreed-upon requirements. The statement of an institution's accreditation status with SACSCOC also represents an affirmation of an institution's continuing commitment to the Commission's principles and philosophy of accreditation.

The membership expects its peers to dedicate themselves to enhancing the quality of their programs and services within the context of their respective resources and capacities and to create an environment in which teaching and learning, research, and public service occur, as appropriate to the institution's self-defined mission.

At the heart of SACSCOC's philosophy of accreditation, the concept of quality enhancement presumes each member institution is to be engaged in ongoing improvement of its programs and services and be able to demonstrate how well it fulfills its stated mission. Although evaluation of an institution's educational quality and effectiveness in achieving its mission is a difficult task requiring careful analysis and professional judgment, an institution is expected to document the quality and effectiveness of all its programs and services.

SACSCOC supports the right of an institution to pursue its own educational mission as inherent in fundamental values of institutional autonomy; the right of faculty members to teach, investigate, and publish freely; the right of students to access opportunities for learning and for the open expression and exchange of ideas. However, the exercise of these rights should not substantially interfere with the overriding obligation of an institution to offer its students a sound educational experience that optimizes student achievement outcomes.

## Section 1: The Principle of Integrity

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Institutional integrity is essential to the purpose of higher education. Integrity functions as the basic covenant defining the relationship between the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACSCOC) and its member and candidate institutions. The principle serves as the foundation of a relationship in which all parties agree to deal honestly and openly with both their constituencies and with one another.

1. **The institution operates with integrity in all matters.**

*(Integrity)* [CR]

*(Note: While this principle is not addressed by the institution in its Compliance Certification or its application for accreditation, failure to adhere to this principle will lead to the imposition of a sanction, adverse action, or denial of authorization of a candidate committee.)*

## Section 2: Mission

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A clearly defined and comprehensive mission guides the public's perception of the nature of the institution. It conveys a sense of the institution's uniqueness and identifies the qualities, characteristics and values that define the institution's role and distinctiveness within the diverse higher education community. Fundamental to the structure of an institution's effectiveness review, the mission reflects a clear understanding of the institution by its governing board, administration, faculty, students, staff and all constituents.

1. **The institution has a clearly defined, comprehensive, and published mission specific to the institution and appropriate for higher education. The mission addresses teaching and learning and, where applicable, research and public service.**

*(Institutional mission)* [CR]

## Section 3: Basic Eligibility Standard

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SACSCOC accredits degree-granting institutions in the southern region of the United States and those operating in select international locations. To gain or maintain accreditation with SACSCOC, an institution is a continuously functioning organization legally authorized to grant degrees and other academic credentials, and is able to demonstrate compliance with SACSCOC standards and policies.

1. **An institution seeking to gain or maintain accredited status**

a. **has degree-granting authority from the appropriate government agency or agencies.**

*(Degree-granting authority)* [CR]

b. **offers all course work required for at least one degree program at each level at which it awards degrees.** (For exceptions, see SACSCOC policy "Documenting an Alternative Approach.") *(Course work for degrees)*

c. **is in operation and has students enrolled in degree programs.**

*(Continuous operation)* [CR]

## Section 4: Governing Board

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The institution's governing board holds in trust the fundamental autonomy and ultimate well-being of the institution. As the corporate body, the board ensures both the presence of viable leadership and strong financial resources to fulfill the institutional mission. Integral to strong governance is the absence of undue influence from external sources.

1. **The institution has a governing board of at least five members that:**
  - (a) **is the legal body with specific authority over the institution.**
  - (b) **exercises fiduciary oversight of the institution.**
  - (c) **ensures that both the presiding officer of the board and a majority of other voting members of the board are free of any contractual, employment, personal, or familial financial interest in the institution.**
  - (d) **is not controlled by a minority of board members or by organizations or institutions separate from it.**
  - (e) **is not presided over by the chief executive officer of the institution.**

*(Governing board characteristics) [CR]*
2. The governing board
  - a. ensures the regular review of the institution's mission.  
*(Mission review)*
  - b. ensures a clear and appropriate distinction between the policy-making function of the board and the responsibility of the administration and faculty to administer and implement policy.  
*(Board/administrative distinction)*
  - c. selects and regularly evaluates the institution's chief executive officer.  
*(CEO evaluation/selection)*
  - d. defines and addresses potential conflict of interest for its members.  
*(Conflict of interest)*
  - e. has appropriate and fair processes for the dismissal of a board member.  
*(Board dismissal)*
  - f. protects the institution from undue influence by external persons or bodies.  
*(External influence)*
  - g. defines and regularly evaluates its responsibilities and expectations.  
*(Board evaluation)*
3. If an institution's governing board does not retain sole legal authority and operating control in a multiple-level governance system, then the institution clearly defines that authority and control for the following areas within its governance structure: (a) institution's mission, (b) fiscal stability of the institution, and (c) institutional policy.  
*(Multi-level governance)*

## Section 5: Administration and Organization

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The institution's chief executive officer has ultimate responsibility for priorities and initiatives that advance its board-approved mission, goals, and priorities. The chief executive officer oversees an organizational structure that includes key academic and administrative officers and decision makers with credentials appropriate to their respective responsibilities.

1. **The institution has a chief executive officer whose primary responsibility is to the institution.**  
*(Chief executive officer) [CR]*
2. The chief executive officer has ultimate responsibility for, and exercises appropriate control over the following:
  - a. the institution's educational, administrative, and fiscal programs and services.  
*(CEO control)*
  - b. the institution's intercollegiate athletics program.  
*(Control of intercollegiate athletics)*
  - c. the institution's fund-raising activities.  
*(Control of fund-raising activities)*
3. For any entity organized separately from the institution and formed primarily for the purpose of supporting the institution or its programs:
  - (a) The legal authority and operating control of the institution is clearly defined with respect to that entity.
  - (b) The relationship of that entity to the institution and the extent of any liability arising from that relationship are clearly described in a formal, written manner.
  - (c) The institution demonstrates that (1) the chief executive officer controls any fund-raising activities of that entity or (2) the fund-raising activities of that entity are defined in a formal, written manner which assures that those activities further the mission of the institution.  
*(Institution-related entities)*
4. The institution employs and regularly evaluates administrative and academic officers with appropriate experience and qualifications to lead the institution.  
*(Qualified administrative/academic officers)*
5. The institution publishes and implements policies regarding the appointment, employment, and regular evaluation of non-faculty personnel.  
*(Personnel appointment and evaluation)*

## Section 6: Faculty

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Qualified, effective faculty members are essential to carry out the mission of the institution and to ensure the quality and integrity of its academic program. The tradition of shared governance within American higher education recognizes the importance of both faculty and administrative involvement in the approval of educational programs. Because student learning is central to the institution's mission and educational degrees, the faculty has responsibility for directing the learning enterprise including overseeing and coordinating educational programs to ensure that each contains essential curricular components, has appropriate content and pedagogy, and maintains discipline currency.

Achievement of the institution's mission with respect to teaching, research, and service requires a critical mass of full-time qualified faculty to provide direction and oversight of the academic programs. Due to this significant role, it is imperative that an effective system of evaluation be in place for all faculty members that takes into account the institution's obligations to foster intellectual freedom of faculty to teach, serve, research, and publish.

1. **The institution employs an adequate number of full-time faculty members to support the mission and goals of the institution.**  
*(Full-time faculty) [CR]*
2. For each of its educational programs, the institution
  - a. justifies and documents the qualifications of its faculty members.  
*(Faculty qualifications)*
  - b. employs a sufficient number of full-time faculty members to ensure curriculum and program quality, integrity, and review.  
*(Program faculty)*
  - c. assigns appropriate responsibility for program coordination.  
*(Program coordination)*
3. The institution publishes and implements policies regarding the appointment, employment, and regular evaluation of faculty members, regardless of contract or tenure status.  
*(Faculty appointment and evaluation)*
4. The institution publishes and implements appropriate policies and procedures for preserving and protecting academic freedom.  
*(Academic freedom)*
5. The institution provides ongoing professional development opportunities for faculty members as teachers, scholars, and practitioners, consistent with the institutional mission.  
*(Faculty development)*

## Section 7: Institutional Planning and Effectiveness

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Effective institutions demonstrate a commitment to the principles of continuous improvement. These principles are based on a systematic and documented process of assessing institutional performance with respect to mission in all aspects of the institution. An institutional planning and effectiveness process involves all programs, services and constituencies; is linked to the decision-making process at all levels; and provides a sound basis for budgetary decisions and resource allocations.

The Quality Enhancement Plan (QEP) is an integral component of the reaffirmation of accreditation process and is derived from an institution's ongoing comprehensive planning and evaluation processes. It reflects and affirms a commitment to enhance overall institutional quality and effectiveness by focusing on an issue the institution considers important to improving student learning outcomes and/or student success.

1. **The institution engages in ongoing, comprehensive, and integrated research-based planning and evaluation processes that (a) focus on institutional quality and effectiveness and (b) incorporate a systematic review of institutional goals and outcomes consistent with its mission.**  
*(Institutional Planning) [CR]*
2. The institution has a Quality Enhancement Plan that (a) has a topic identified through its ongoing, comprehensive planning and evaluation processes; (b) has broad-based support of institutional constituencies; (c) focuses on improving specific student learning outcomes and/or student success; (d) commits resources to initiate, implement and complete the QEP; and (e) includes a plan to assess achievement.  
*(Quality Enhancement Plan)*
3. The institution identifies expected outcomes of its administrative support services and demonstrates the extent to which the outcomes are achieved.  
*(Administrative effectiveness)*

## Section 8: Student Achievement

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Student learning and student success are at the core of the mission of all institutions of higher learning. Effective institutions focus on the design and improvement of educational experiences to enhance student learning and support student learning outcomes for its educational programs. To meet the goals of educational programs, an institution provides appropriate academic and student services to support student success.

1. **The institution identifies, evaluates, and publishes goals and outcomes for student achievement appropriate to the institution's mission, the nature of the students it serves, and the kinds of programs offered. The institution uses multiple measures to document student success.**  
*(Student achievement) [CR]*

2. The institution identifies expected outcomes, assesses the extent to which it achieves these outcomes, and provides evidence of seeking improvement based on analysis of the results in the areas below:
  - a. student learning outcomes for each of its educational programs.  
*(Student outcomes: educational programs)*
  - b. student learning outcomes for collegiate-level general education competencies of its undergraduate degree programs.  
*(Student outcomes: general education)*
  - c. academic and student services that support student success.  
*(Student outcomes: academic and student services)*

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## Section 9: Educational Program Structure and Content

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Collegiate-level educational programs emphasize both breadth and depth of student learning. The structure and content of a program challenges students to integrate knowledge and develop skills of analysis and inquiry.

General education is an integral component of an undergraduate degree program through which students encounter the basic content and methodology of the principle areas of knowledge. Undergraduate and graduate degrees develop advanced expertise in an integrated understanding of one or more academic disciplines or concentrations.

The institution is responsible for the delivery of an appropriate portion of the academic experiences applicable to the degrees or credentials awarded.

1. **Educational programs (a) embody a coherent course of study, (b) are compatible with the stated mission and goals of the institution, and (c) are based upon fields of study appropriate to higher education.**  
*(Program content) [CR]*
2. **The institution offers one or more degree programs based on at least 60 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the associate level; at least 120 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the baccalaureate level; or at least 30 semester credit hours or the equivalent at the post-baccalaureate, graduate, or professional level. The institution provides an explanation of equivalencies when using units other than semester credit hours. The institution provides an appropriate justification for all degree programs and combined degree programs that include fewer than the required number of semester credit hours or its equivalent unit.**  
*(Program Length) [CR]*

3. **The institution requires the successful completion of a general education component at the undergraduate level that:**
  - (a) **is based on a coherent rationale.**
  - (b) **is a substantial component of each undergraduate degree program. For degree completion in associate programs, the component constitutes a minimum of 15 semester hours or the equivalent; for baccalaureate programs, a minimum of 30 semester hours or the equivalent.**
  - (c) **ensures breadth of knowledge. These credit hours include at least one course from each of the following areas: humanities/fine arts, social/behavioral sciences, and natural science/mathematics. These courses do not narrowly focus on those skills, techniques, and procedures specific to a particular occupation or profession.**

*(General education requirements [CR])*
4. At least 25 percent of the credit hours required for an undergraduate degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree.

*(Institutional credits for an undergraduate degree)*
5. At least one-third of the credit hours required for a graduate or a post-baccalaureate professional degree are earned through instruction offered by the institution awarding the degree.

*(Institutional credits for a graduate/professional degree)*
6. Post-baccalaureate professional degree programs and graduate degree programs are progressively more advanced in academic content than undergraduate programs, and are structured (a) to include knowledge of the literature of the discipline and (b) to ensure engagement in research and/or appropriate professional practice and training.

*(Post-baccalaureate rigor and curriculum)*
7. The institution publishes requirements for its undergraduate, graduate, and post-baccalaureate professional programs, as applicable. The requirements conform to commonly accepted standards and practices for degree programs.

*(Program requirements)*

## **Section 10: Educational Policies, Procedures, and Practices**

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Effective academic policies related to an institution's educational programs are developed in concert with appropriate input and participation of the constituencies affected by the policies, conform with commonly accepted practices and policies in higher education, accurately portray the institution's programs and services, and are disseminated to those benefiting from such practices. These academic policies lead to a teaching and learning environment that enhances the achievement of student outcomes and success.

To advance learning, all coursework taken for academic credit has rigor, substance, and standards connected to established learning outcomes. To protect the integrity of degrees offered, the institution is responsible for the quality of all coursework transcribed as if it were credit earned from the institution.

1. The institution publishes, implements, and disseminates academic policies that adhere to principles of good educational practice and that accurately represent the programs and services of the institution.  
*(Academic policies)*
2. The institution makes available to students and the public current academic calendars, grading policies, cost of attendance, and refund policies.  
*(Public information)*
3. The institution ensures the availability of archived official catalogs, digital or print, with relevant information for course and degree requirements sufficient to serve former and returning students.  
*(Archived information)*
4. The institution (a) publishes and implements policies on the authority of faculty in academic and governance matters, (b) demonstrates that educational programs for which academic credit is awarded are approved consistent with institutional policy, and (c) places primary responsibility for the content, quality, and effectiveness of the curriculum with its faculty.  
*(Academic governance)*
5. The institution publishes admissions policies consistent with its mission. Recruitment materials and presentations accurately represent the practices, policies, and accreditation status of the institution. The institution also ensures that independent contractors or agents used for recruiting purposes and for admission activities are governed by the same principles and policies as institutional employees.  
*(Admissions policies and practices)*
6. An institution that offers distance or correspondence education:
  - (a) ensures that the student who registers in a distance or correspondence education course or program is the same student who participates in and completes the course or program and receives the credit.
  - (b) has a written procedure for protecting the privacy of students enrolled in distance and correspondence education courses or programs.
  - (c) ensures that students are notified in writing at the time of registration or enrollment of any projected additional student charges associated with verification of student identity.*(Distance and correspondence education)*
7. The institution publishes and implements policies for determining the amount and level of credit awarded for its courses, regardless of format or mode of delivery. These policies require oversight by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments. In educational programs not based on credit hours (e.g., direct assessment programs), the institution has a sound means for determining credit equivalencies.  
*(Policies for awarding credit)*

8. The institution publishes policies for evaluating, awarding and accepting credit not originating from the institution. The institution ensures (a) the academic quality of any credit or coursework recorded on its transcript, (b) an approval process with oversight by persons academically qualified to make the necessary judgments, and (c) the credit awarded is comparable to a designated credit experience and is consistent with the institution's mission.  
*(Evaluating and awarding academic credit)*
9. The institution ensures the quality and integrity of the work recorded when an institution transcripts courses or credits as its own when offered through a cooperative academic arrangement. The institution maintains formal agreements between the parties involved, and the institution regularly evaluates such agreements.  
*(Cooperative academic arrangements)*

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## **Section 11: Library and Learning/Information Resources**

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To provide adequate support for the institution's curriculum and mission, an institution's students, faculty, and staff have access to appropriate collections, services, and other library-related resources that support all educational, research, and public service programs wherever they are offered and at the appropriate degree level. The levels and types of educational programs offered determine the nature and extent of library and learning resources needed to support the full range of the institution's academic programs. Qualified, effective staff are essential to carrying out the goals of a library/learning resource center and the mission of the institution, and to contributing to the quality and integrity of academic programs.

1. **The institution provides adequate and appropriate library and learning/information resources, services, and support for its mission.**  
*(Library and learning/information resources) [CR]*
2. The institution ensures an adequate number of professional and other staff with appropriate education or experiences in library and/or other learning/information resources to accomplish the mission of the institution.  
*(Library and learning/information staff)*
3. The institution provides (a) student and faculty access and user privileges to its library services and (b) access to regular and timely instruction in the use of the library and other learning/information resources.  
*(Library and learning/information access)*

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## **Section 12: Academic and Student Support Services**

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Student success is significantly affected by the learning environment. An effective institution provides appropriate academic and student support programs and services, consistent with the institution's mission, that enhance the educational and personal development experience(s) of students at all levels; contribute to the achievement of teaching and learning outcomes; ensure student success in meeting the goals of the educational programs; and provide an appropriate range of support services and programs to students at all locations. Qualified and effective faculty and staff are essential to implementing the institution's goals and

mission and to ensuring the quality and integrity of its academic and student support programs and services. An effective institution has policies and procedures that support a stimulating and safe learning environment.

1. **The institution provides appropriate academic and student support programs, services, and activities consistent with its mission.**  
*(Student support services)* [CR]
2. The institution ensures an adequate number of academic and student support services staff with appropriate education or experience in student support service areas to accomplish the mission of the institution.  
*(Student support services staff)*
3. The institution publishes clear and appropriate statement(s) of student rights and responsibilities and disseminates the statement(s) to the campus community.  
*(Student rights)*
4. The institution (a) publishes appropriate and clear procedures for addressing written student complaints, (b) demonstrates that it follows the procedures when resolving them, and (c) maintains a record of student complaints that can be accessed upon request by SACSCOC.  
*(Student complaints)*
5. The institution protects the security, confidentiality, and integrity of its student records and maintains security measures to protect and back up data.  
*(Student records)*
6. The institution provides information and guidance to help student borrowers understand how to manage their debt and repay their loans.  
*(Student debt)*

### **Section 13: Financial and Physical Resources**

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Although missions vary among institutions, both a sound financial base and a pattern of financial stability provide the foundation for accomplishing an institution's mission. Adequate financial resources allow for deliberate consideration of the effective use of institutional resources to fulfill that mission. Adequate physical resources are essential to the educational environment and include facilities that are safe and appropriate for the scope of the institution's programs and services. It is reasonable that the general public, governmental entities, and current and prospective students expect sufficient financial and physical resources necessary to sustain and fulfill the institution's mission.

1. **The institution has sound financial resources and a demonstrated, stable financial base to support the mission of the institution and the scope of its programs and services.**  
*(Financial resources)* [CR]

2. **The member institution provides the following financial statements:**
  - (a) **an institutional audit (or *Standard Review Report* issued in accordance with *Statements on Standards for Accounting and Review Services* issued by the AICPA for those institutions audited as part of a system wide or statewide audit) for the most recent fiscal year prepared by an independent certified public accountant and/or an appropriate governmental auditing agency employing the appropriate audit (or *Standard Review Report*) guide.**
  - (b) **a statement of financial position of unrestricted net assets, exclusive of plant assets and plant-related debt, which represents the change in unrestricted net assets attributable to operations for the most recent year.**
  - (c) **an annual budget that is preceded by sound planning, is subject to sound fiscal procedures, and is approved by the governing board.**

For applicant and candidate institutions, including an applicant seeking separate accreditation from a current SACSCOC-accredited institution, the institution provides the financial information, including audit requirements, specified in the SACSCOC's policy entitled "Accreditation Procedures for Applicant Institutions."

*(Financial documents)* [CR]

3. The institution manages its financial resources in a responsible manner.  
*(Financial responsibility)*
4. The institution exercises appropriate control over all its financial resources.  
*(Control of finances)*
5. The institution maintains financial control over externally funded or sponsored research and programs.  
*(Control of sponsored research/external funds)*
6. The institution (a) is in compliance with its program responsibilities under Title IV of the most recent Higher Education Act as amended and (b) audits financial aid programs as required by federal and state regulations. In reviewing the institution's compliance with these program responsibilities under Title IV, SACSCOC relies on documentation forwarded to it by the U. S. Department of Education.  
*(Federal and state responsibilities)*
7. The institution ensures adequate physical facilities and resources, both on and off campus, that appropriately serve the needs of the institution's educational programs, support services, and other mission-related activities.  
*(Physical resources)*
8. The institution takes reasonable steps to provide a healthy, safe, and secure environment for all members of the campus community.  
*(Institutional environment)*

## Section 14: Transparency and Institutional Representation

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An institution is responsible for representing accurately to the public its status and relationship with SACSCOC; reporting accurately to the public its status with state of the federal government if receiving funding from either or both; maintaining openness in all accreditation-related activities; ensuring the availability of institutional policies to students and the public; and publishing appropriate information with respect to student achievement. SACSCOC's philosophy of accreditation precludes removal from or denial of membership or candidacy to a degree-granting institution of higher education on any ground other than an institution's failure to meet the standards of the membership as determined by the professional judgment of peer reviewers, or failure to comply with SACSCOC's policies and procedures.

1. The institution (a) accurately represents its accreditation status and publishes the name, address, and telephone number of SACSCOC in accordance with SACSCOC's requirements and federal policy and (b) ensures all its branch campuses include the name of that institution and make it clear that their accreditation is dependent on the continued accreditation of the parent campus.  
*(Publication of accreditation status)*
2. The institution has a policy and procedure to ensure that all substantive changes are reported in accordance with SACSCOC's policy.  
*(Substantive change)*
3. The institution applies all appropriate standards and policies to its distance learning programs, branch campuses, and off-campus instructional sites.  
*(Comprehensive institutional reviews)*
4. The institution (a) represents itself accurately to all U.S. Department of Education recognized accrediting agencies with which it holds accreditation and (b) informs those agencies of any change of accreditation status, including the imposition of public sanctions. (See SACSCOC's policy "Accrediting Decisions of Other Agencies.")  
*(Representation to other agencies)*
5. The institution complies with SACSCOC's policy statements that pertain to new or additional institutional obligations that may arise that are not part of the standards in the current *Principles of Accreditation*.  
*(Policy compliance)*  
*(Note: For applicable policies, institutions should refer to the SACSCOC website [<http://www.sacscoc.org>])*