

SMU Office of the Provost

Process for Initiation and Approval of Curricular Changes

March 2009
(Updated October 2009)

A faculty member, a department, or a school might wish to initiate any number of changes that relate to curriculum. The possible changes might be small, such as renumbering a course without changing its substantive level, changing a course title, or changing a course prefix. Or the change might be a large one, such as adding a new department, or a new Ph.D. degree, etc.

This process statement describes the steps that a faculty member, department, or School should take into account when considering a curricular change, ranging from small changes to more significant ones. This process statement does not create any new policy. Rather, it is an effort to synthesize and describe current procedures, with the aim of providing guidance for faculty, departments, and Schools.

Part I sets out basic guidelines.

Part II gives specific examples of necessary steps for different types of changes.

Part III gives timelines for changes that need to be submitted to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

I. Basic Guidelines

The following basic guidelines apply to academic changes.

A. *Every change must go through the School's or Unit's approval process.*

All academic changes—minor or significant—must comply with the internal approval process of the originating School or academic unit. All the Schools of the University have their internal development, vetting, and approval process for all changes, ranging from the minor to the significant. Small changes might just require the approval of the Associate Dean for Academics of the School. New courses and other curricular changes usually require departmental approval and then approval by the School's curriculum committee.

B. *After approval by the School, most changes also should be submitted to the Office of the Provost.*

After the School approves a change, all but minor changes also should be submitted to the Office of the Provost. You may submit changes by email, and should direct them to Ellen Pryor, epryor@smu.edu.

This is necessary for several reasons.

- Some changes that could seem relatively minor or routine to a School might nonetheless require approval by the Provost or by the Board of Trustees. For instance, a change in the name of a Department needs to be approved by the Board of Trustees, which means in turn that the Provost must also approve the change.
- Even minor changes—such as the prefix to a course or major—need to be implemented through the Office of the Registrar and the University Catalog editor. Thus, the Office of the Provost needs to approve these changes before the Office of the Registrar and the University Catalog Editor may go forward with implementing them.
- More substantial changes (new majors, new Departments, new degree programs) require approval by the Provost, Board of Trustees, and, often, SMU’s accrediting entity, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).

C. *Any curricular change that involves education abroad should be submitted to the Education Abroad Council.* The Education Abroad Council (EAC) is a standing, University-wide committee reporting to the Provost. Its charge includes: “To approve all programs or proposals for education abroad that are sponsored by or approved by SMU for undergraduate credit.”

II. Specific types of changes

Minor changes, including

- Changing the title of a course (example: “A Global Perspective on Gender” to “Gender and Sex: A Global Perspective”).
- Changing the number of a course without changing the course itself or its level.
- Changes to the description of the course.

Approval and notice:

- Depending on the School, these minor changes are ordinarily approved by the Dean or an Associate Academic Dean.
- Approval by the Provost is not required.

- The School should notify the Office of the Registrar and also communicate these to the University Catalog Editor.

Changes to prefixes for courses or departments

Approval and notice:

- Approval according to the School's own process.
- Notice to the Office of the Provost by February 1 of the academic year in which the prefix is to go into effect. For instance, if the course prefix is to become effective for the Fall semester, then the Office of the Provost should receive notice no later than February 1 of that year. Unless the proposed change presents a practical or conceptual problem with respect to registration, clarity, or coordination of programs, the requested change will be approved within a month.

Minor alterations in the curriculum of an existing major or minor (including implementing or revising any prerequisites for a major)

Approval and notice:

- Approval according to the School's own process.
- Notice to the Office of the Provost by February 1 of the academic year in which the curriculum change is to go into effect. For instance, if the revision is to become effective for the Fall semester, then the Office of the Provost should receive notice no later than February 1 of that year.

A new minor

Approval and notice:

A proposal for a new minor does not need to be approved by the Board of Trustees or by SACS. But the minor does need to be submitted to the Educational Programs Committee (EPC), and then approved by the Office of the Provost.

More significant changes

More significant changes include the following, as well as changes that are not specifically set out in this list but that are of comparable significance.

- Alternating the length of an existing degree program
- Significantly changing the curriculum of an existing major

- New major
- New department
- New Master's degree
- New certificate program
- New Ph.D.
- Any “joint curricular venture”—this includes any agreement (formal or informal) to offer credit, a course, a major, or a degree in conjunction with another University or college. (If you are considering developing such a proposal, it would be useful to consult the SACS policy statement on Joint Curricular Ventures. Your proposal will need to comply with any aspects of this policy that pertain to the proposal. If you have questions, feel free to contact Ellen Pryor (epryor@smu.edu).
- Initiating off-campus sites
- Initiating distance learning

Changes of this nature require approval by the Office of the Provost after input from the Educational Programs Committee (EPC). The EPC is a standing committee whose charge is to advise the Provost on curricular and academic program issues.

In addition, the changes noted above normally require approval by the Board of Trustees at one of its four quarterly meetings: February, May, September, and December.

Finally, many of the more significant changes will be deemed a “substantive change” within the meaning of SMU’s accrediting agency, and thus will have to be submitted to SACS after approval by the Board of Trustees. To add still one more layer of complexity, some changes require only notification to SACS. But many substantive changes require approval by SACS before SMU may implement the changes. SACS states that such approval may take up to 6 months. Thus, any proposal that will require SACS preapproval will need to be submitted to the Office of the Provost about a year in advance of desired implementation.

Any of the following will require submission to the Educational Programs Committee, and approval by the Office of the Provost. Most of these also will require approval by the Board of Trustees, and notification to (and possibly pre-approval) by SACS.

III. Timelines for “Substantive Changes” within the meaning of SACS

If a proposed academic change constitutes a “substantive change” within the meaning of SMU’s accreditation entity—the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS)—then a fairly extensive timeline and process is necessary. This is because “substantive changes” require, at a minimum, notification to SACS before their implementation, and sometimes approval by SACS before implementation. For SMU to present a change to SACS, the Board of Trustees must approve it via resolution, and this in turn must follow approval by the Office of the Provost after vetting through the Educational Programs Committee.

1. Timeline when SACS must approve in advance

If SACS must approve in advance of implementing the new program, then the following steps are necessary:

Department approval → School Approval → Office of Provost Approval with input from the Educational Programs Committee → Board of Trustees approval (limited to 4 Board meetings a year) → Notice to SACS and a potential 6 month wait before approval → Department may not advertise or recruit for the program until SACS approval.

To understand the times associated the combination of these steps, an example can illustrate.

Suppose a department proposes to offer a Ph.D. program for the first time; the department has never offered a Ph.D. before. This is readily characterized as a substantive change requiring advanced approval by SACS.

- The Department wants to start the program—and enroll its first class—in the Fall Semester of Year 3. The Department may not advertise or recruit students for the program until SACS approves the program.
- SACS states that it might take 6 months between the time of notice and the time of SACS approval. Thus, to be certain, SMU must notify SACS at least 6 months before not just the start of the program, but 6 months before SMU plans to advertise, recruit, etc. for the program.
- Thus, the very earliest that SMU can wait to send a letter seeking SACS approval is February of Year 3. Even this is probably not early enough, because the Department will want to advertise, recruit, and publish catalog copy about the new program well in advance of Fall of Year 3.
- More likely, SMU will want SACS to have approved the Ph.D. by February-March of Year 3 (the last time for submission of Fall Catalog copy), and will probably want to recruit students during even earlier, in the Fall of Year 2.

- If the Department wants to recruit in the Fall of Year 2 for the Ph.D. program that starts in the Fall of Year 3, SMU must request SACS approval no later than March of Year 2.
- SMU's Board of Trustees meets 4 times a year. The last meeting at which the Board can approve this Ph.D. program in time for the sequence above is the February Board meeting in Year 2.
- Thus, the Department needs to have submitted the Ph.D. proposal for approval by its School, and by the Office of the Provost and the Educational Programs Committee, during the Fall of Year 1.

2. *Timeline when SACS must be notified but does not need to approve in advance.*

We can change the example now to a program that requires only notice to SACS, not advance approval by SACS.

Examples:

- A Department wants to offer a third M.A. degree; the Department already offers several M.A. degrees, SACS most likely does not need to approve it in advance.
- A School wants to add a new major.

If we work with the same desired implementation date—Fall of Year 3—we can see that Board of Trustees approval by May of Year 2 will be ample time for beginning recruitment and publication about the new program.