



State Council of
Higher Education for Virginia

The Degree Conferral Process in Virginia Public Higher Education

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Daniel J. LaVista
Executive Director



PURPOSE AND TOPICS

Review the key circumstances under which degrees are awarded at Virginia's public colleges and universities.

- Relevant accreditation standards, and how institutions meet these standards
- Transfer policies
- Guidelines for exceptions to degree-award standards
- Accountability measures for such exceptions
- Roles of boards of visitors
- Potential role for SCHEV and "potential accountability measures to ensure that academic quality is maintained"



CONSISTENCIES ACROSS INSTITUTIONS' PROCESSES

1. An accountability system ensuring that standards exist and are followed
2. A separation of duties & responsibilities between the governing board, the administration, and the faculty
3. A balance of striving to meet standards (internal and external) and exercising good & proper judgment in considering requests for exceptions and appeals



ACCREDITATION

Accreditation: a voluntary process of external-peer quality review and improvement.

Being accredited: (a) ensures access to federal funds; (b) engenders confidence in the public and private sectors; and (c) facilitates transfer of academic credits.

Four types of accreditors: (1) regional; (2) faith-based; (3) private career; and (4) programmatic. Most public and private nonprofit institutions are accredited by one of the six regional accreditors.

All of the Commonwealth's public institutions are accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS).



SUMMARY OF RELEVANT SACS STANDARDS

In educational programs and degree awards, institutions must demonstrate:

- involvement of faculty;
- “good” and “sound and acceptable” educational practices;
- publication & dissemination of policies;
- quantitative and qualitative thresholds for awarding credits and degrees.



BOARDS OF VISITORS STATUTORY AUTHORITIES

While the specifics of boards' authorizing statutes vary, common powers include the abilities to:

- expend appropriations, borrow money & issue bonds;
- set tuition, fees, & other charges;
- hire administrative officers, faculty & staff;
- make rules and regulations;
- direct the affairs of the institution; and
- confer degrees.



SHARED GOVERNANCE

- BOARDS - set rules and regulations at the policy level; delegate process-level responsibilities to administrators and/or faculty

- ADMINISTRATORS - “oversee” policies at the process level

- FACULTY - implement many administrative policies – and determine and enforce many academic policies – at the day-to-day level



SHARED GOVERNANCE IN AWARDING DEGREES

At commencement, presidents generally recite:

“By the authority vested in me by the Board, and upon the recommendation of the Faculty, I hereby confer/bestow ...”

Student diplomas commonly read:

“The Board of Visitors of [inst.], upon the recommendation of the Faculty, confers the degree of [xxx] to [student] ...”



TRANSFER POLICIES

Given institutions' diverse missions and curricula, institutional transfer policies are equally diverse.

Policies must conform to federal law, Virginia statute (transfer agreements) and policy (State Policy on Transfer), and accreditation standards.

Transfer of credit is more a function of the admission process than of the graduation process.



REVIEW COMMITTEES

Numerous institutional committees exist on each campus to implement and review academic policies and standards.

Committees also consider petitions and/or appeals regarding implementation of or exceptions to these policies and standards.



REGISTRARS AND DEGREE AUDITS

Registrars serve as the “keepers of the flame” in terms of student and institutional academic data. Of most relevance here, registrars conduct “degree audits.”

Degree audits are routinely conducted:

- during students’ matriculation to ensure they are progressing satisfactorily & are meeting requirements;
- prior to graduation (each student’s transcript is generally reviewed electronically and manually); and
- randomly of graduated students’ transcripts as a back-check audit.



INSTITUTIONAL SELF-REGULATION

Student eligibility for graduation is first certified at the academic level (college, school, dept.).

Then, it is certified at the administrative level (registrar and/or academic officer(s)).

Graduation-eligibility issues culminate at the administrative or executive level.

Boards are not – by policy nor in practicality – directly involved in the degree award process.



CONCLUSIONS

1. When followed, Virginia's public colleges and universities have appropriate policies and procedures in place to ensure that internal and external standards regarding the awarding of academic credits and degrees are met.
2. These policies and procedures function extremely well to ensure the academic integrity of our institutions and their degree-award processes (@60,000 degrees annually).



CONCLUSIONS

3. Mechanisms are also in place to address the potential for violations of institutions' policies and procedures.
4. Such quality-control mechanisms are best situated within the institutions, particularly with the boards of visitors.
5. External quality-control mechanisms such as accreditation standards are also in place.



CONCLUSIONS

6. Given the diversity of institutional policies and the short time between final exams and commencement, an attempt to insert an external review of graduation eligibility would be fraught with challenges.

7. SCHEV staff foresees no additional state-level accountability measures that would better ensure academic quality or integrity. Nonetheless, the State Council and its staff stand ready to assist the state and its public institutions in any standards- and/or policy-reviews that are deemed appropriate by the legislature or by boards of visitors.