



## **AOP 12.08: REQUIREMENTS FOR ACADEMIC PROGRAMS AND ACADEMIC CONSORTIAL/CONTRACTUAL AGREEMENTS**

### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this Academic Operating Policy (AOP) is to establish requirements for degrees, majors, concentrations, minors, endorsements, and certificates. This policy describes the approval and modification process for these credentials. It also provides requirements for consortial and contractual agreements.

### **POLICY**

An academic program is a program of study with progressive credit-bearing coursework that has been approved by the appropriate faculty curriculum committees. The completion of academic programs results in an official Mississippi State University credential in the form of a degree or a certificate. All other combinations of credit-bearing coursework are described in this policy as degree characteristics.

This policy goes into effect for all newly proposed programs, and existing academic programs will need to be compliant by fall 2025.

### **Degree Programs**

A degree program is defined by the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning as a course of study with a prescribed set of requirements which a student must complete. It is identified by a specific degree type and a specific major subject matter area. Mississippi State University (MSU) offers baccalaureate, master's, educational specialist, and doctoral programs. Major programs of study progressively build to become more rigorous the farther the student advances. Degree programs are also progressively more advanced than the previous level.

**Undergraduate degrees.** All baccalaureate degrees offered by MSU must comply with the guidelines established by the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Institutions of Higher Learning. All baccalaureate degrees must have a minimum of 120 semester hours and typically no more than 124 hours. Exceptions for exceeding the 124 can be requested based on discipline-specific accreditation and licensing standards and other standards in certain disciplines. Baccalaureate programs must comprise a minimum of 30 hours of general education requirements plus 90 hours in the major.

- a. General Education Core Curriculum – minimum of 30 hours in general education courses that build intellectual skills that all postsecondary students should have. These hours must be comprised of courses satisfying the following:
  1. 6 hours of English Composition
  2. 3 hours of Quantitative Reasoning
  3. 3 hours of Creative Discovery

4. 18 hours in domain areas
  - a. 6 hours in Humanities
  - b. 6 hours of Social Sciences
  - c. 6 hours of Natural Sciences, with at least one laboratory-based class

Students whose major falls within one of the domain courses may count 6 credit hours from their Major Core courses toward the General Education Core. Otherwise, General Education Core courses should not serve as pre-requisites to the major.

- b. Major – minimum of 90 hours that may include foundational, discipline, elective, and other coursework designed to complete a bachelor’s degree
  1. Foundational courses provide a scope of the field, introduce terminology, and practice tools and technology needed for the major. Course content in foundational courses focuses on knowledge and comprehension. These courses typically round out college-core requirements beyond the university requirements.
  2. Discipline and other advanced courses must be 60 hours of study beyond the level of an associate’s degree. A program of study must represent intentional groupings of coursework to enhance the breadth or depth in a focused area of study that are progressively more rigorous as the student matriculates through the major. At least 30 hours must be at the 3000 or 4000 course level.
  3. High-achieving undergraduate students may complete up to 15 credit hours of graduate-level coursework before completing a baccalaureate. Students may enroll in an approved accelerated program and may count a maximum of 9 credit hours toward both a bachelor’s and a master’s degree.

**Professional Degrees.** Professional degrees provide the knowledge and skills for the recognition, credential, or license required for professional practice.

- a. Professional master’s requires a minimum of 30 credit hours, typically with one year of didactic coursework and one year of clinical experience.
- b. Professional doctorate requires a minimum of the equivalent of four calendar years, including two years of hands-on clinical education.

**Graduate Degrees.** Graduate degree programs provide coursework and experiential opportunities intended to develop analysis, judgment, and the creation of new knowledge within a major discipline within a coherent program of study with increasing rigor beyond the baccalaureate:

- a. All master’s degrees at MSU must have a minimum of 30 semester hours. The master’s degree with a thesis option requires 24 hours of graduate coursework and 6 hours of earned research hours. Any non-thesis master’s option must contain a minimum of 30 hours of graduate coursework.
- b. The educational specialist degree requires 30 semester hours of graduate credit above the master’s degree. The educational specialist degree with a thesis option requires 24 hours of graduate coursework and 6 hours of earned research hours. Any non-thesis educational specialist option must contain a minimum of 30 hours of graduate course work.

- c. Doctoral degrees requires at least 54 hours of coursework beyond the bachelor's degree. Coursework from a master's and specialist degree may be applied toward the doctorate so long as the doctoral program requires additional coursework beyond these degrees. Doctoral degrees also require a research component. For a Doctor of Philosophy, the research component requires a dissertation and a minimum of 20 semester hours of research for the dissertation.

## **Degree Characteristics**

Degree characteristics are intentionally designed groupings of coursework to enhance a major that students complete while enrolled in a degree program.

**Concentration.** A concentration is a subdivision of a major that allows a student to study a specialty area. It is a formal and coherent grouping of credit hours that focus on a discipline. New concentrations must have 18 credit hours or more.

**Minors.** An academic minor is a designation of a group of courses that do not reach the level of a major. Minors are optional at the undergraduate level but may be required in certain graduate degree programs. Minors can only be granted concurrently and in conjunction with the granting of a degree from Mississippi State University. A department or academic unit granting a minor may specify majors for which students cannot earn that minor. Otherwise, students are free to pursue any approved minor. A minimum of 15 credit hours is required for an undergraduate minor, a minimum of 9 credit hours for a minor at the master's level, and 12 credit hours at the doctoral level. All minors must identify a program coordinator (who may be the same person serving as the degree program coordinator) so that students may officially declare a minor prior to applying for graduation.

**Endorsements.** An endorsement is a thematic grouping of courses that students collect while completing a major to recognize competency in a particular skill area. A major may choose to disaggregate its Major Core into skill-based components so long as these components progress toward a coherent program of study. An endorsement may also be a collection of related courses across multiple disciplines that do not rise to the level of a minor in any one discipline. Endorsements may be recognized in the notes on a student's transcript, communicated to the Registrar's Office from the unit offering the endorsement (e.g., department, college, etc.). Endorsements may be earned at the undergraduate or graduate levels (see AOP 12.11 for Undergraduate Degree Requirements).

## **Non-Degree Academic Programs**

A certificate (or alternative credential) is a stand-alone credential outside of a degree program. The establishment of all certificate programs must be approved by the University Committee on Courses and Curricula, the Provost and Executive Vice President, and the Assistant Commissioner of the Institutions of Higher Learning for Academics and Student Affairs. Students enroll into these programs directly and are typically considered non-degree seeking. The completion of certificate programs results in a formal award from the institution, as opposed to a note on the transcript. Students cannot be enrolled in an undergraduate degree and a certificate program concurrently unless part of an approved accelerated program.

Mississippi State University is approved to offer two types of certificate programs:

- a. Post-baccalaureate certificates require graduate-level coursework beyond the bachelor's that does not reach the level of a master's degree (nor could they stack to a level of a master's degree without being admitted to a master's degree). Students must have completed a bachelor's degree to enroll unless part of an approved accelerated program. Upon completion of the certificate, students may be able to apply these credits toward a master's degree. At least 50% of the required coursework must be completed at Mississippi State University.
- b. Post-master's certificates require graduate-level coursework beyond the master's that does not reach the level of a doctorate. Students must have completed a master's degree to enroll. Upon completion of the certificate, students may be able to apply these credits toward a doctoral degree. At least 50% of the required coursework must be completed at Mississippi State University.

### **Review and Approval of Courses and Curricula**

The faculty ensure the quality and effectiveness of its curricula. Any addition, modification, suspension, or deletion of a course, degree program, degree name, degree characteristics, or any non-degree academic programs should be initiated from the faculty in departments holding those programs and is subject to the review and approval of the University Committee on Courses and Curricula (UCCC) and the Academic Deans Council. These changes are subject to the review of the Graduate Council when offered at the graduate level. The *Guide & Format* through the UCCC defines the level of rigor intended for course numbering at Mississippi State University. The UCCC will also verify whether the programs of study are coherent and progressively rigorous in accordance with conventional standards of practice and the major discipline(s).

### **Academic Consortial/Contractual Agreements**

These agreements allow students to obtain academic credit which broadens their educational experience, while aligning with the mission of Mississippi State University.

- Consortial relationship—formal arrangement between Mississippi State University and one or more institutions of higher learning to share the responsibility for delivery of courses/programs meeting mutually agreed upon academic quality standards.
- Contractual agreement—formal arrangement between Mississippi State University and another institution(s) of higher learning for receipt of courses, programs, or other academic credit delivered by the other institution(s).
- All academic consortial/contractual agreements must be approved by the Provost and Executive Vice President and may be subject of substantive change (refer to AOP 10.15). The agreements will be on file in the Office of the Provost and Executive Vice President.
- The Executive Vice Provost for Academic Affairs will be responsible for a periodic review of the academic consortial/contractual agreements to ensure compliance and alignment with the university's mission.

- Agreements which specify an evaluation date will be reviewed accordingly.
- Agreements which do not specify a review cycle will be evaluated biennially.

### **REVIEW**

This AOP will be reviewed every four years or whenever circumstances require an earlier review by the Executive Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Graduate School with recommendations for revision to the Provost and Executive Vice President.

**REVIEWED:**

/s/ Peter Ryan 12/14/2022  
Executive Vice Provost for Academic Affairs and  
Dean of the Graduate School Date

/s/ David Shaw 08/14/2023  
Provost and Executive Vice President Date

/s/ Robert Banik 10/06/2023  
President, Robert Holland Faculty Senate Date

/s/ Tracey N. Baham 10/11/2023  
Associate Vice President, Institutional Strategy & Effectiveness Date

/s/ Joan Lucas 11/02/2023  
General Counsel Date

**APPROVED:**

/s/ Mark E. Keenum 11/27/2023  
President Date