4.4 Program Length

4.4 Program length is appropriate for each of the institution’s educational programs.

Judgment of Compliance

In Compliance

Narrative of Compliance

The University of Alabama since 2000 has identified 120 semester hours as the minimum requirement for all undergraduate degree programs. At that time, the provost also directed the colleges, schools, and departments to evaluate all programs to determine how best to keep the total number of required undergraduate hours at or near 120, unless a professional accrediting agency required a greater number. The vast majority of programs were able to achieve the 120-hour requirement.

A few undergraduate programs exceed 120 hours because of requirements of their external accrediting agencies. For example, the B.M. degree in Music Therapy and the B.S.M.E. in Mechanical Engineering require more than 120 hours because of the requirements of their respective discipline accrediting agencies. A complete list of undergraduate programs is provided in a table of Undergraduate Programs with Required Hours.

For graduate programs, the minimum number of semester hours required varies by degree level. Masters degrees require 30 hours. Educational specialist degrees require 30 hours beyond the masters. Ed.D. and Ph.D. degrees require 72 hours beyond the baccalaureate. An example of a doctoral program requiring more than 72 hours is the Doctor of Musical Arts, which requires 46 or more hours beyond the Master of Music degree. A complete list of graduate programs is provided in a table of Graduate Programs with Required Hours.

Time limits for degrees are related to program length and are especially important at the graduate level. The Graduate Council has longstanding policies regarding time limits for graduate degrees. All requirements for the master's degree and the educational specialist degree must be completed during the six years immediately preceding the date on which the degree is to be awarded. All requirements for the doctoral degree must be completed within seven years following admission to the doctoral program, with the following specific exceptions approved by the Graduate Council: psychology, modern languages and classics, English and political science (eight years if entering the doctoral program with a baccalaureate, not master's, degree), and eight years from the time of first registration in PhD courses for students dually enrolled in the PhD program in political science and the JD program. Information on time limits for graduate degrees appears in the Degree Requirements section of the Graduate Catalog and in the Graduate School’s A-Z website index under the following headings: Time Limits, Masters; Time Limits, Educational Specialist; and Time Limits, Doctoral.

A proposal for a new undergraduate degree program is developed by faculty within the academic discipline guided by assistance from the program coordinator. The proposal is reviewed and approved by the department chair. The college curriculum committee then evaluates the proposal and makes its recommendation regarding the proposal to the college dean. Upon review by the dean of the undergraduate college, the proposal is forwarded to the Office for Academic Affairs for evaluation and approval. Minimum program length always is one of the factors that curriculum committees consider.
The Office for Academic Affairs receives proposals and initiates a review of the materials in collaboration with the undergraduate college for additional information and clarification purposes.

Proposals follow the format of the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) documents, Notification of Intent to Submit a Proposal (NISP) for a New Program of Instruction and Proposal for a New Baccalaureate Degree Program. Proposals for new undergraduate programs are subject to compliance with Board of Trustees of The University of Alabama Board Manual-Rule 502-Establishing New Programs (Rule 502).

Upon final approval by the Office for Academic Affairs, the NISP is completed, attached to the proposal, and recommended to the Chancellor for review and recommendation to the Board of Trustees. Once submitted to the Chancellor, the approval process moves as outlined in the Board of Trustees of The University of Alabama’s “Board Manual-Rule 502.”

The Graduate School and Graduate Council have well-established Procedures for Approval of New Graduate Degree Programs. Once the graduate dean, college dean and provost have had initial discussions and support the development of a proposal, the Graduate School works with the department chair and graduate program director to prepare a proposal to present to the Graduate Council’s Committee on Research and New Programs. The Committee ensures that all basic requirements for University of Alabama graduate programs, including program length and time limits, are consistent with published policies for graduate programs. A program cannot be approved unless it meets guidelines for program length for the degree level being proposed.

Once the Research and New Programs Committee has completed its evaluation of the new program proposal, it recommends the proposal to the Graduate Council at one its regular meetings. When the Council approves, the graduate dean forwards the proposal to the provost for transmission to The University of Alabama’s Board of Trustees and the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE). As with proposals for new undergraduate degree programs, graduate program proposals must follow the forms and procedures within the ACHE Notification of Intent to Submit a Proposal (NISP) for a New Program of Instruction.

For new graduate programs, there is an additional approval process, when compared with the process for undergraduate program approval. This process involves a required, multi-step approval by the Alabama Council of Graduate Deans (ACGD), working in concert with the ACHE. Only when the ACGD membership evaluates and approves a NISP will the proposing institution then be given the go-ahead to develop a full proposal following the format in the ACHE document titled, Proposal for a New Graduate Degree Program. The ACGD must recommend approval of the proposal for the ACHE staff then present it to the Commission for evaluation and final approval.

The University of Alabama's Academic Program Review process has been in place for more than 25 years. It has two sets of procedures: one for units without external accreditation and the other for units that do have external accreditation. Whether or not a unit has an external agency, the unit leadership must demonstrate that it meets all requirements, including program length. Program length has not been an issue in program reviews conducted in the last 20 years, however, because each program must have acceptable length to receive initial approval, and then each degree candidate must be verified as having met minimum hours and other requirements in order to be cleared for an undergraduate degree by the University Registrar or a graduate degree by the Graduate Registrar.