

**THE HIGHER LEARNING COMMISSION**  
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**INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS REGARDING APPROVAL  
OF CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS**

Commission policy requires that institutions seek separate approval for certain Certificate programs through the Commission's change process. In 2008 the Commission clarified its approach with regard to approval of Certificate programs to ensure that it was meeting its accrediting responsibilities as outlined in federal regulations.

Certificates requiring approval have the following characteristics:

- the Certificates are free-standing and do not require enrollment in a concurrent degree program;
- the courses are credit-bearing;
- the courses may be at any degree level or at the pre-associate's level;
- 50% or more of the courses supporting the Certificate program have been developed for the Certificate program and are not drawn from those courses supporting an existing degree or previously-approved Certificate program; and
- the Certificate program is Title IV eligible.\*

\* Check with the institution's Financial Aid Office to determine whether such Certificates are Title IV Eligible.

*Certificates not having the above characteristics do not require separate approval from the Commission and are included in an institution's accreditation from The Higher Learning Commission.*

This new policy for Certificate programs does not affect the Commission's current policy regarding institutions offering courses outside their curriculum. The Commission continues to require that institutions seek approval to offer courses regularly that are not currently included within institutions' affiliated status, particularly when those courses are offered at higher degree level than that at which the institution is accredited and even though such courses are not included in a Title IV eligible Certificate.

(See Commission Policy 3.2(d)2., CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL OFFERINGS and Provisional Amendment to CHANGES IN EDUCATIONAL OFFERINGS.)

Here are some examples to clarify the application of this policy:

**Example 1:**

*A college with undergraduate degrees in business, management and finance adds a Title IV Eligible Certificate in “not-for-profit management”. This Certificate includes more than 50% of courses drawn from courses supporting the undergraduate business degree; therefore, the Certificate does not need separate approval and is included in the institution’s accreditation.*

**Example 2:**

*A college with undergraduate degrees in business, education and liberal arts disciplines adds an undergraduate Title IV Eligible Certificate in nursing. While the college may draw on some science courses it already offers, a substantial number of courses (more than 50% of the coursework) necessary for the Certificate are courses in a discipline not currently offered by the institution (i.e., nursing) and have been developed for the Certificate. This Certificate requires separate approval from the Commission.*

**Example 3:**

*A college with undergraduate degrees in business and liberal arts decides to add five graduate level courses leading to a certificate in “homeland security” with an interest in developing a Master’s program in this area at some future date. Institutions must seek separate approval of these courses because they are beyond the degree level at which the institution is currently approved to operate.*

## **PROCESS FOR SEEKING APPROVAL FOR CERTIFICATE PROGRAMS**

**During the 2009 Annual Update period:** Report all Title IV Certificates requiring separate approval and that are currently being offered on the Annual Update. The Commission will contact you regarding additional information it may need to complete an approval review and generate an approval letter.

The Commission will also require that institutions make sure that the Off-Campus Activities Report include any sites offering Title IV Eligible Certificates. If the Report does not list those sites, please contact the institution’s Staff Liaison at the Commission for more information about seeking approval for those sites.

**Between the 2009 Annual Update period and August 31, 2009: After the Update closes,** to seek approval from the Commission to offer a Title IV Eligible Certificate program, institutions need to file a written request that identifies the following:

- 1) the nature of the Certificate,
- 2) the courses being extracted from the existing curriculum and the courses being developed for the Certificate;
- 3) the qualifications of any additional faculty members necessary to provide the Certificate; and
- 4) mechanisms in place to monitor the quality of the Certificate program and the learning of students.

In addition, institutions planning on initiating new Sites offering Title IV Eligible Certificate programs must seek approval for the Site from the Commission prior to advertising or matriculating students at the Site. (See **INFORMATION FOR INSTITUTIONS REGARDING OFF-CAMPUS INSTRUCTION: COMMISSION DEFINITIONS AND APPROVAL PROTOCOLS** available on the Commission's website.)

Institutions should file written requests for permission for Certificate and/or Certificate-only sites with the Commission office at least 90 days before marketing the program or matriculating students into the program.

The Commission staff will review the information and may request additional material; such action could affect the timeline needed to establish approval of the Certificate. The Commission staff may then forward a recommendation for approval to the Institutional Actions Council (IAC). The IAC will review the recommendation and determine whether to approve it. All approvals will be forwarded to the Commission's Board of Trustees for validation. The Commission will issue an action letter once the validation process is completed.

*The Commission is planning an on-line interface through which institutions may file requests for approval of Certificate programs. Look for additional information about this development or contact your staff liaison.*

Institutions seeking to add courses not currently included in the institution's accredited status should review Chapter 7 of the **Handbook of Accreditation** for instructions on preparing and filing an appropriate change request related to this information.

Institutions will continue to be asked to update information about Certificate programs and Certificate sites at the time of the Commission's Annual Institutional Data Update (AIDU) released to institutions in the first quarter of each calendar year.

For more information about seeking approval for Certificate programs, contact Mike Kane at ext. 139 or an appropriate institutional staff liaison.

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