

# Commission On Higher Education (CHE)

## GUIDELINES FOR GRADUATE COURSES OFFERED FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT OF SCHOOL PERSONNEL

**Rationale:** Professional development takes many forms, including such activities as workshops, courses, conferences, study groups, networks, and mentoring relationships. A major portion of higher education's involvement in the professional development of teachers and other school personnel occurs through the offering of graduate courses to inservice teachers and administrators. Depending on the course and on the institution, these courses may or may not constitute part of a program leading to a specific degree. Regardless of whether the course is taught by college or K- 12 personnel or both, regardless of whether the course is offered on a college campus, in a school building or over the Web, and regardless of whether full tuition, discounted tuition, or no tuition is charged, these graduate courses need to meet certain standards appropriate to their status as graduate courses at regionally accredited NCATE-approved institutions which have at their center the compelling State interest in enhancing student achievement in partnership and collaboration with the K-12 community.

**Graduate. Courses:** All graduate courses, whether part of a degree program or for the more narrow purposes of professional development, are subject to the following realities:

- a. The higher the quality of the graduate course experience, the more significant the effect is on improving teaching and learning and raising student achievement.
- b. Credit hours generated by graduate courses are reported by the institution and factored into the calculation made for requested State appropriations for that institution. The calculation made for courses at the graduate level is significantly higher than for courses offered at the undergraduate level.
- c. Demand for graduate credit courses is high since salary increases for SC teachers under the system currently in place are linked to accumulation of graduate credits (e.g., Bachelor's plus 18; Master's plus 30); and higher education cannot meet the demand using only its own full-time faculty.
- d. Graduate education is different from undergraduate education and other in-service experiences because it:
  - involves a greater depth of learning than would be found in undergraduate education;
  - involves an increased specialization or focus that would not be found in undergraduate education;
  - involves a more advanced level of instruction than in undergraduate education;
  - emphasizes student self-direction; and
  - emphasizes dynamic interaction with the subject matter, the instructor, and other students, and focuses on the generation of knowledge through research and/or the application of new knowledge.

## Ensuring Best Practices in the Delivery of Professional Development Courses

While it is important to recognize that courses offered specifically for purposes of professional development must represent learning experiences of high quality, it is also important to recognize that such courses serve a different though not lesser purpose than courses traditionally offered for purposes of fulfilling graduate degree requirements. Courses offered traditionally to satisfy graduate degree requirements do, in fact, assist individuals in their development as professionals. However, their purpose generally is three-fold: 1) to fulfill graduate degree requirements; 2) to address subject matter and/or skill development of a broader scope in terms of the knowledge base represented; and 3) to foster long term career development of the professional educator.

Professional development courses may or may not fulfill degree requirements of a graduate program, and they do focus on specific knowledge or skill development needed by the teaching professional. Both degree and professional development types of courses are important to professional educators, and their relevance and usefulness is best determined by the individual purposes that each is designed to accomplish.

Institutions offering coursework for graduate credit specifically for purposes of teacher or administrator professional development should consider the following questions for each course offered:

1. In what ways is the professional development course aligned with the school district's mission and/or strategic plan?
2. How does the professional development course answer the important question of time factor involved in terms of participants' developing an understanding of new concepts and/or acquiring new **skills**, having opportunities to apply these concepts and skills, and assessing the effectiveness of these applications?
3. In what way does the professional development course delivery represent a collaboration of learners within the course itself for the . course participants?  
  
In what way does the professional development course represent a collaboration between the institution offering the course and the school district receiving the course?
5. What follow-up feature has been developed as a part of the professional development course to ensure that the learning that took place within the framework of the course will have a long term impact on both the course participants but also the school districts where the participants are employed?

6. How do professional development course requirements or expectations for participants ensure that there is appropriate rigor for and intellectual demand of the course participants?
7. How is the professional development course evaluated in terms of meeting its specific intent regarding the content to be studied and/or skill(s) to, be developed? How is it evaluated in terms of meeting the needs of the requesting institution?
8. In what way or ways is the individual teaching the professional development course especially qualified for the teaching assignment?
9. What is the relationship between the professional development course instructor and the institution offering the course in terms of the instructor's knowledge of the institution and its mission and the philosophy and/or conceptual framework of the institution's department, school or college of education?
10. How does offering the professional development course relate to the mission of the institution and the institution's department, school or college of education? How are course evaluations used to strengthen the course and ensure that offering the course is helping to fulfill the mission of the institution and that of its department, school or college, of education?
11. What changes in knowledge, skills and dispositions should be expected as a result of the professional development course? How will these changes be documented? What are the expected participant outcomes?

### **Criteria for Professional Development Courses Offered at the Graduate Level**

If graduate credit is to be awarded for professional development course experiences, and, more importantly, if professional development course experiences are to have a significant effect on improving teaching, learning, and student achievement, then all professional development coursework must meet the following **ten criteria**:

1. The course must build upon an undergraduate **knowledge base**; the knowledge base that the course presupposes and how the course goes beyond that base must be specified.
2. The course must involve a **dynamic interaction** with the subject matter, the instructor, and other students. The learning that will take place both during and outside classroom sessions, the types of critical interchanges that will take place between the instructor and other students, and how the work required will exceed,

both qualitatively and quantitatively, the work typically expected at the undergraduate level must all be specified.

3. The course must have a **research base** and assist students in generating new knowledge and/or in applying extant knowledge to improve teaching and learning.
4. Faculty teaching graduate courses must conform to the requirements for **faculty** as stipulated in the *Criteria for Accreditation* of the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) which states that each faculty member teaching courses at the master's and specialist degree level "must hold the terminal degree, usually the earned doctorate, in the teaching discipline or a related discipline." The *Criteria* further note "in unusual cases' institutions may appropriately include as graduate faculty members those who have demonstrated exceptional scholarly or creative activity, or professional experience, but who may not possess the required academic credentials." The degree and experience qualifications of the faculty member who will be teaching the course must be specified. The institution must, in accordance with SACS *Criteria*, keep on file for all on- and off-campus full-time and part-time faculty members the required documentation of academic preparation, professional and work experience, and technical and performance competency, among other documentation of qualifications.
5. Faculty teaching graduate courses must provide **documentation of contributing to the knowledge base** of the discipline they teach through scholarship, application, or publications; how the proposed faculty member has contributed to the discipline must be specified.
6. The **duration** of the activity, including the total number of contact hours that participants are expected to spend in the activity, as well as the span of time over which the activity takes place, must be significant and sustained. The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools requires that "courses offered in nontraditional formats, e.g., concentrated or abbreviated time periods, must be designed to ensure an opportunity for preparation, reflection and analysis concerning the subject matter. At least one calendar week of reflection and analysis must be provided to students for each semester hour of graduate credit awarded." For example, if fewer than three weeks of coursework are proposed for a three-credit hour course, other means must be planned to ensure continuous and sustained instruction, reflection, and analysis over the remaining week(s) or beyond, through such means as scheduled on-line discussion groups; specific, required postings to a Web site for critique and commentary by the instructor and/or students enrolled in the class; instructor visits to student classrooms for observation and conferencing; and regular scheduled feedback on student projects.
7. The professional development course must encourage **collective participation** of groups of teachers (e.g., from the same school, specialty area, department, and/or

grade level), which has generally been found to result in enhanced learning and teaching beyond that of individual teachers participating from many schools.

8. The professional development course must have a **content focus** in that the degree to which the activity is focused on improving and deepening teachers' content knowledge in the teaching field and their knowledge of how students learn particular content is positively correlated to enhanced teaching and learning.
9. The professional development course must contain opportunities for **active learning** through opportunities for teachers to become actively engaged in the meaningful analysis of teaching and learning, for example, by reviewing student work or obtaining feedback on their teachings; and
10. The professional development course must actively promote **coherence** in teachers' professional development by encouraging continuing professional communication among teachers and by incorporating experiences that are consistent with teachers' goals and aligned with state standards and assessments.

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