Texas A&M-Corpus Christi
SACS: Self-Study Report

3.6.1 The institution's post-baccalaureate professional degree programs, master's and doctoral degree programs, are progressively more advanced in academic content than its undergraduate programs. (Post-baccalaureate program rigor)

Compliance Status: Compliance

Narrative

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi offers masters, doctoral, and professional degree programs that are progressively more advanced in academic content than its undergraduate programs. The institution ensures this through rigorous processes for new program and course approval as well as for program reviews. These processes are predicated on the guidelines espoused by the Council of Graduate Schools in the Organization and Administration of Graduate Education [1] and grounded in state and institutional regulations, rules and procedures.

All aspects of graduate education involving students and faculty, from admissions to graduation to program/course approval and review, are the responsibility of the Graduate Dean and the Office of Graduate Studies [2]. A Graduate Council, comprised of 19 members, serves in an advisory capacity to the Dean of Graduate Studies. The Council includes three graduate level faculty elected from each of the five colleges and two ex-officio members representing the library and the Faculty Senate as well as the Dean of Graduate Studies and the Associate Dean of Graduate Studies [3] [4] [5]. The Graduate Council members serve on various subcommittees and include the Curriculum Committee, the Graduate Faculty Committee, the Recruitment and Retention Committee, and three additional committees to assist with the annual review of the various sections of the graduate catalog. The curriculum committee is responsible for reviewing new courses. All subcommittees are responsible for making the initial recommendation to the Graduate Council as a whole [6] [7] [8] [9] [10].

Graduate Program Approval Process

Requests for new programs undergo a multistep process to ensure viability and rigor and must be approved by the appropriate University groups, The Texas A&M University System, and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) [11]. The development of new academic degree programs at A&M-Corpus Christi is guided by University Rule 03.02.02.C1, Development of New Academic Degree Programs [12] and Texas A&M University System Regulation 03.02.02, Approval Procedures for Degree Programs, Administrative Changes, etc. [13].

All new requests are developed within the academic unit and must adhere to the rules of the THECB. Once Preliminary Authority from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [14] is received, a more extensive document [15] is prepared which includes the courses to be offered and the corresponding course syllabi [16]. Upon completion, the request must receive departmental level approval and college curriculum committee approval.

The college curriculum committee consists of elected representatives from the various departments...
that make up the college and their primary responsibility is to review proposed programs, courses, and catalog copy to ensure alignment and adherence to the mission of the college, as well as rigor and coherence [17] [18] [19]. The college curriculum committee then forwards its recommendation to the college dean who signs his approval of the program before forwarding the document to the Dean of Graduate Studies. While this process may appear linear, the college dean and the graduate dean work with the program faculty throughout the process. The Office of Graduate Studies functions as a resource to the colleges during the developmental stages of program development, assisting with the needs assessment, program development, and budget development. This ensures that the institutional and state requirements are addressed in the program request. The routing of the catalog copy related to the program through the appropriate review bodies is tracked through a catalog routing slip [20]. The dean of graduate studies then forwards the program request to the appropriate subcommittee of the Graduate Council for its review and initial recommendation. The program request is placed on the Graduate Council agenda for discussion and recommendation [21]. The Graduate Council recommendation is forwarded to the Provost who, in turn, forwards it to the Faculty Senate. The Academic Affairs subcommittee of the Faculty Senate reviews the program request and makes a recommendation to the Faculty Senate as a whole [22]. The Faculty Senate recommendation is forwarded to the Provost who then forwards the request to the Provost's Council for approval. Following University approval, the President submits the proposal request to The Texas A&M University System. The System approved items are then forwarded by the System to the THECB along with a letter certifying adequacy of funding for the board's approval.

As part of the approval process, attention is given to ensure that the program addresses the Closing the Gaps [23] mission of the state of Texas, that appropriate recruitment initiatives are being considered with targeted populations and that the appropriately credentialed faculty are in place to offer the program. Additionally, the programs are reviewed for how they measure student learning outcomes.

**Master Level Programs**

Graduates of master level programs demonstrate competency in one of three ways - comprehensive exams, a capstone course, or a traditional thesis [24] [25]. Faculty members have the option to determine the most appropriate measure for their program. In some cases, programs have a two track option in which students may complete an exam and a capstone plan or a thesis plan as demonstrated in the English master's program [24].

Irrespective of the plans selected, common criteria are used to determine success. Comprehensive exams are prepared and scored by core faculty teaching in the program such as in the Master's of History program [25] [26]. The comprehensive exams have a rubric component that guides the scoring [27]. Capstone courses require a project which may be evaluated by the course professor and/or a team of faculty members, as in the case of the Master and Certification Program in the College of Education [28]. The culminating research project is scored by the course professor using an analytical rubric [29] and the project presentation is evaluated by a team of three faculty members who teach in the program including the capstone instructor of record [30].

Master's level theses are currently handled at the college level [31]; Students identify a thesis committee that advises them throughout the process. The process for publishing their theses is handled through the library. Each program offers courses on developing and directing a thesis.
Another lens on outcomes is at the course syllabi level. New syllabi are submitted as part of the new program request and are examined by a Graduate Council subcommittee for transparency and explicitness following guidelines for syllabi approval established by the Graduate Council as detailed in the section on New Course Approval below.

**Doctoral Level Program**

Doctoral level programs follow essentially the same process using the guidelines set forth by The Texas A&M University System [13] and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board [32]. The Marine Biology program is unique in that it is interdisciplinary and interinstitutional in cooperation with Texas A&M University in College Station and Texas A&M University - Galveston [33][34]. External reviewers review the program for quality [35]. Upon approval from the THECB, the program is entered into the Table of Programs at Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi [36].

The marine biology program also offers a master’s degree and the difference in credit hours required reflect the differences in expectations and rigor as shown in requirements [33].

The dissertation expectations are detailed both in the Marine Biology Program Handbook, which includes program specific criteria, and the Graduate Office Handbook, which includes general procedural information [37]. Additionally, a series of forms have been developed to correspond to the expectations detailed in the catalog to ensure implementation of the requirements, such as consistent degree plan forms, to be submitted early in the program to ensure program rigor [38], requests for committee formation to ensure status of faculty serving on committees [39], and a Quality Assurance Integrity Form to ensure that the rigors and the due process of obtaining a doctoral degree have been followed. A more detailed listing of the forms can be found on the graduate web site [40].

**Course Approval Process**

The new course approval process, in contrast to the new program approval process, is an internal one that is outlined in A&M-Corpus Christi University Procedure 03.02.02.C2.01, Development of New Courses and Catalog Revisions [41]. Approval for graduate courses, however, requires approval from the Graduate Council and the Provost [42].

New courses are generated at the program level and are channeled through the department and the College Curriculum Committee to the College Dean, prior to being forwarded to the Office of Graduate Studies [43]. The Associate Dean of Graduate studies together with the Curriculum Committee of the Graduate Council review the forms using the criteria in the Course Approval Form [44]. These guidelines, available to the faculty in advance, are used to evaluate the quality and level of student learning outcomes according to Bloom's Taxonomy and the alignment between the purpose of the course, the student learning outcomes, the assignments, and the assessment activities. Recommendations are then made to the Graduate Council for its approval [45].

Issues raised by the subcommittee or the Graduate Council are addressed by the Associate Graduate Dean in collaboration with the appropriate college's associate dean. Upon approval, a master course approved matrix and the Course Addition Form(s) are forwarded to the Registrar's Office, which in collaboration with the Associate Vice President for Planning and Institutional
Effectiveness assign the appropriate Classification of Instructional Program (CIP) codes and make the necessary additions to the University's course inventory [36].

Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi follows the numbering process known as the Texas Common Course Numbering System, which originated as a grass roots initiative in the Coastal Bend area in the mid 1970s and resulted in changes to the Texas Education Code (78th Legislature) that required the formal adoption of a common numbering system for higher education institutions in Texas. Pursuant to the legislative change, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board adopted a new rule in May, 2004 [46].

While TCCNS applies to undergraduate courses, Texas A&M-Corpus Christi follows the historical practice of using 5000 level courses to signify masters' level courses as addressed in the Graduate Catalog [47]. Lower level courses, those ending in 01 or 02, were used for seminars, professional skills courses, and others of a more general nature. These are not necessarily introductory courses; they may be capstone seminars to present research. Courses ending in 96 were so designated because it was the protocol for undergraduate Directed Independent Study courses, therefore these were adopted for graduate course numbering as well. Courses ending in 90 were designated Selected Topics because that was the protocol for undergraduate courses. As capstone experiences, theses and professional projects are numbered ending in 91-99, except 96 which is explained above. If cross-listed with an undergraduate course, graduate courses are often numbered to have the same last three digits as the undergraduate course (e.g. ESCI 4370/ESCI 5370).

For courses that do not adhere to the above numbering protocols, the last two digits may roughly reflect the increasing complexity of topic exploration - i.e. a 5315 course may be more of a general exploration of a subject, while a 5385 course may be more narrowly focused, and may have lower numbered courses as prerequisites, suggesting they be taken in an expected sequence.

As evidence for the above, one can see the parallel numbering of similar undergraduate and graduate courses [47]. The increasing complexity of topic exploration inherent in higher numbers is evidenced by comparing the syllabi and course prerequisites of courses with lower and higher course numbers (e.g. MATH 5315 Statistical Methods in Research; versus MATH 5344 Spatial Statistics which has MATH 5315 as a prerequisite) [47].

As doctoral courses were developed, they were given 6000 numbers but the last three digits generally follow the numbering protocol described above.

**Stacked courses**

On occasion, stacked courses are offered to meet student needs and minimum student enrollment requirements [48]. To ensure the appropriate rigor between the level of students enrolled in stacked courses, a new review process was implemented in 2009. The Dean of Graduate Studies is responsible for reviewing stacked courses. The syllabi are electronically submitted by the department chair or program coordinator prior to the semester offered and the Dean of Graduate Studies examines the differences in three main categories using the Course Approval Form [44] adopted by Graduate Council. The three areas are the student learning outcomes, the course assignments, and the course assessment methods. The results are entered into a matrix indicating the session offered, the department, the course name and number and comments in each of the
three categories. A final column indicates the approval status of the review. Feedback is then provided back to the chairs. The chairs are responsible for sharing the feedback with their respective faculty members. Courses needing adjustments must be resubmitted. Examples of stacked courses illustrating the increased rigor are provided in the supporting documentation. Differences are reflected in greater expectations as demonstrated in different grading requirements on the examinations [49]: more challenging learning outcomes and lengthier written assignments, e.g., 300-500 words for Undergraduates and 600-1000 for graduate students [50]; or additional learning outcomes and additional assignments [51].

Program Review Self-Study Process
To ensure that programs maintain the rigor and cohesiveness initially proposed, all programs engage in a self-study process following guidelines suggested by the Council of Graduate Schools [52] on a rotating cycle of approximately 5 years facilitated by the Office of Graduate Studies [53]. Three programs, e.g., Counseling, Business, and Nursing, also engage in a self-study process required by their external accrediting bodies, Council for Accreditation of Counseling Related Educational Programs (CACREP) [54], The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) [55], and Commission on Collegiate Nursing Education (CCNE) [56], respectively.

The Graduate Dean /Associate Dean of Graduate Studies is responsible for notifying the program faculty, providing them with the guidelines for the self-study [57], the guidelines for the external reviewers [58], and the student and credit hour data [59]. The guidelines for the self-study ask for a cover sheet, discussion/analysis/and programmatic impact of the mission statement; faculty data regarding teaching, scholarship and service; student academic and profile data; program profile data including course offerings, enrollments, degrees awarded, student faculty interactions and advisement opportunities; institutional support data regarding facilities, space, and resources, e.g., library, funding, budget; and an overall summary detailing an analysis of perceived strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations. The guidelines sent to the external reviewers ask that their report include a title page and address their observations from the self-study report and the campus visit regarding the mission statement, faculty, students, program, facilities and resources, and outcomes assessment practices. A summary of strengths, weaknesses and recommendations is also requested.

The student and credit hour data is generated by the System Support Specialist in the Office of Graduate Studies and provides enrollment and annual degree data (disaggregated by gender and race/ethnicity), annual student credit hour load data, and time to degree data. Additional data is also available on the Office of Planning and Institutional Effectiveness web site regarding degrees awarded by ethnicity and gender, and faculty load and compensation [60] and from the Director of Library Services regarding holdings for the various disciplines and the availability of the library and its services [61].

The procedure for conducting the self-study begins with sending a notification memo to the department chair with a copy to the dean, at the beginning of the academic year in which the program review is to be completed [62]. The Provost, Associate VicePresident for Institutional Effectiveness, and the Director of Library Services are notified of all the programs, collectively, that will be under review [63]. The department chair identifies the faculty member(s) who will take the lead in preparing the report due in the spring. External program reviewers are identified by the
Graduate Dean/Associate Graduate Dean from peer and aspiration institutions and selected on the basis of their own academic record as well as recommendations from colleagues in other institutions. External reviewers are provided a detailed explanation of their role and are compensated with a nominal stipend as well as for their travel expenses. Prior to their visit they are provided with a copy of the self-study, faculty resumes, and the student data. A detailed itinerary is prepared to allow them an opportunity to engage in conversations with administrators, faculty, and students/alumni and to examine student work and campus facilities. Time is also provided to prepare the final report and share their findings with administrators and faculty. The external reviewers' recommendations are incorporated into an Implementation Plan which serves as the basis for the follow-up conversation involving the department faculty, the department chair, the college dean, the graduate dean and associate dean, the president, and the provost and/or associate vice provost for academic affairs. The Implementation Plan is modified and annual meetings are subsequently held to review accomplishments and next steps.

Dissemination of Information
Information regarding graduate program offerings and expectations are available in traditional published formats, e.g., catalog copy and brochures; electronic formats, e.g., university, college, and program websites; and through orientations.

Catalog Copy
The graduate catalog is a primary source of information for expectations and requirements of graduate programs from admissions to graduation. All catalog copy originates at the program/department level following clearly defined guidelines. The explicit guidelines detail the process to be followed from the time the most current electronic versions are received from the Provost' office to the submission deadline. It includes factors to consider in developing catalog copy such as audience, institutional changes, legislative changes, higher education coordinating board changes, accreditation changes and catalog processing changes and provides the respective websites as references. Formatting guidelines and examples, submission criteria, and review and approval processes are also detailed. A routing slip is attached to the guidelines to ensure that all of the appropriate review bodies have approved the catalog copy prior to printing.

The catalog copy review process begins at the program and/or department level. The respective curriculum committee in each college reviews its recommendations which are then approved by the college dean. Graduate catalog copy is then forwarded to the Graduate Dean who reviews the copy and assigns it to a subcommittee of the Graduate Council for further review. Issues raised are forwarded to the Graduate Dean to address with the appropriate college faculty. The subcommittee then makes recommendations to the Graduate Council. The Council’s recommendations are forwarded to the Provost who may either return to the sender or approve and forward to the Faculty Senate where the Catalog Copy undergoes a second review by the Academic Affairs subcommittee and makes a recommendation to the Faculty Senate as a whole. The Faculty Senate recommendations are forwarded to the Provost who may approve or return to the academic unit for modification or rejection. Final proofs are sent to each academic unit for review prior to printing.

Brochures
The Graduate Office has developed a flyer that is stapled to the hardcopy of the application form listing all of the graduate programs available at A&M-Corpus Christi. In addition, several
programs have developed brochures, some with funding from the Graduate Office, to advertise their graduate programs. These brochures are disseminated widely at the university graduate orientation in the fall and the open house in the spring, as well as at graduate fairs in surrounding communities and job fairs on campus.

Graduate orientation is a day-long activity with five components: meet and greet, general graduate requirements, specific program requirements, graduate information fair (including academic and health services), and campus tour. In fall 2008, a sixth component was added to the annual orientation event - a separate orientation for doctoral students to familiarize them with doctoral program expectations and processes. The event includes useful information on university resources and provides helpful tips on how to enjoy the benefits of a graduate education. Orientation provides an opportunity for incoming graduate students to meet with university administrators, graduate advisors, faculty, support staff and returning graduate students [72].

At the annual open house, program faculty are invited to set up booths and be available to interact with area high school teachers and hospital staff, undergraduate students and nonenrollees from previous semesters targeted for the event [73]. Information is also disseminated at graduate fairs hosted in key areas, such as San Antonio, Kingsville, and the Rio Grande Valley.

The Graduate Office also maintains a current web page. Automated processes have been implemented to facilitate inquiries through gradweb.com [74]. Additionally, every college has a Graduate Studies component on its web page, as do programs within the colleges including the colleges of Business, Education, Liberal Arts, Nursing and Health Sciences, and Science and Technology.

**Conclusion**

Through the use of multiple approval bodies and Bloom's Taxonomy, Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi ensures that the master's, doctoral, and professional degree programs at the University are progressively more advanced in academic content and rigor than its undergraduate programs.