

DATE: July 23, 2020**SUBJECT:** New Academic Policy: A1.6
Expedited Academic Programs: Approval Process**ACTION RECOMMENDED:** Approval

BACKGROUND INFORMATION: The passage of the Focus on College and University Success (FOCUS) Act during the 2016 legislative session provided the impetus for a thorough evaluation of academic policies by THEC staff in 2017 including THEC policy A1.0 – New Academic Programs: Approval Process. THEC is empowered to provide statewide leadership for the development, coordination, and monitoring of academic planning. Since 2017, universities have utilized the policy in the development and approval of new academic programs and as a result it became apparent that an expedited approval process is warranted to respond to workforce needs.

The primary goal of an expedited approval process is to decrease the time of approval for new academic programs which meet workforce, economic, or other state needs while still assuring quality, student demand, uniqueness, and institutional capacity to deliver the proposed program. THEC recognizes that the review and approval process is lengthy and dependent on the schedule of institutional board and Commission meetings. The proposed A1.6 Expedited Academic Programs Policy will allow institutions flexibility during the approval process when institutional governing board approval must be submitted for proposed high demand programs. This flexibility will allow the campus to respond more quickly to workforce needs of the State.

THEC staff worked in consultation with the Chief Academic Officers at each university as well as the University of Tennessee System in drafting the Policy A1.6 – Expedited Academic Programs: Approval Process. This policy will not affect the current process followed by The Tennessee Board of Regents relative to final approval of academic programs at the community colleges.

Overall, most of the requirements, submissions and approval process between the A1.0 policy and the proposed A1.6 policy are very similar. The major differences between the policies are provided below:

	Policy A1.0 New Academic Programs: Approval Process	Policy A1.6 Expedited Academic Programs: Approval Process
Types of programs	All programs greater than 24 credit hours	Only high demand programs as defined by THEC or in response to workforce needs.
Programs excluded	None	Doctoral programs and any programs that require SACSCOC substantive change
Public Comment Period	15 days	10 days
Approval Period for Letter of Notification	2 years	1 year
Governing Board Approval	Before submission of Letter of Notification and after submission of revised Academic Program Proposal based on external judgment	Flexibility with governing board approval with requirement needed prior to Commission approval

Section Title: Academic Policies

Policy Title: Expedited Academic Programs: Approval Process

Policy Number: A 1.6

1.6.1A **Purpose.** The primary goal of an expedited approval process is to decrease the time of approval for new academic programs which meet workforce, economic, or other state needs while still assuring quality, student demand, uniqueness, and institutional capacity to deliver the proposed program.

1.6.2A **Programs Subject to Approval.** Academic programs considered in high demand will be eligible for an Expedited Academic Program Approval Process. Examples of high demand programs could include:

- Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) programs as identified via CIP classification in the Expedited Academic Programs Checklist available on the THEC website
- High demand programs as established in the THEC Academic Supply and Occupational Demand Report
- Programs created in response to demonstrated workforce needs

Doctoral programs and programs which require notification of substantive change to the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) will not be eligible for expedited approval.

1.6.3A **Expedited Approval Process.** The process to develop a new academic program once approved as a high demand program is as follows:

- (1) Expedited Letter of Notification
- (2) Expedited New Academic Program Proposal
- (3) External Judgment
- (4) Post-External Judgment
- (5) Commission Action

1.6.4A

Expedited Letter of Notification (ELON). A formal request must be submitted to the THEC Executive Director by the President/Chancellor of the institution or system office for a new academic program to be considered for the Expedited Academic Approval Process and should include justification as to why the program should be considered for expedited academic program approval. A response will be provided to approve, disapprove, or require additional information.

If approved, the proposed program will be posted on the THEC website for a 10 calendar day period for comment by interested parties. At the close of the 10 calendar day comment period, THEC will review all comments and documents in order to identify issues relative to criteria identified in Sections 1.0.2A1 “Criteria for Review” and 1.0.2A2 “No Unnecessary Duplication” in accordance with THEC Academic Policy A 1.0: New Academic Programs: Approval Process. The 10 calendar day public comment period may be extended to a maximum of 20 calendar days per the discretion of THEC staff.

All approved Expedited Letters of Notification are valid for a one year and will be posted on the THEC website. If the Commission has not approved the academic program for implementation within one year, the ELON is no longer valid.

1.6.5A

Expedited New Academic Program Proposal (ENAPP).

In accordance with THEC Academic Policy A 1.0: New Academic Programs: Approval Process, institutions are responsible for quality academic program development. The ENAPP is to be submitted in its entirety to THEC at the time the campus seeks to request an external review and should follow guidelines as outlined on the checklist for Expedited Academic Programs posted on the THEC website. Once the ENAPP is submitted to THEC, the institution may initiate the site visit for the proposed program.

1.6.6A

External Reviewers. External reviewers will be required to serve as expert evaluators for all proposed academic programs. THEC will select reviewers from the proposed institutional external reviewer list. Individuals used in the development stage

as external consultants may not serve as external reviewers. In keeping with the SACSCOC's Ethical Obligations of Evaluators policy statement, external reviewers should ideally:

- be a subject matter expert in the proposed field;
- be a tenured faculty member with associate or higher academic rank, teaching and a record of research experience;
- have no prior relationship with either the institution or close personal or familial relationship with the potential faculty involved in the proposed academic program;
- not be employed within the state of Tennessee;
- not have been a consultant or a board member at the institution within the last ten years;
- not have been a candidate for employment at the institution within the last seven years;
- not be a graduate of the institution; and
- not have any other relationship that could serve as an impediment to rendering an impartial, objective professional judgment regarding the merits of the proposed academic program.

In the event no external reviewers proposed by the institution are available or acceptable, THEC staff reserve the right to approve an exception or propose alternative external reviewers and may opt, when appropriate, to authorize a paper review of the proposed academic program rather than a visit to the campus by the external reviewer(s).

1.6.7A

External Judgment. The institution or governing board will be notified of the selected reviewers, the review modality, dates of availability of THEC staff (if relevant) and provided a list of questions for the external reviewer to address during the course of the review. Institutions may add questions to the THEC review questions. The external reviewer must provide a written report in response to the questions concurrently to the institution/governing board and THEC within 30 calendar days of the conclusion of the external reviewer's visit.

The institution will be responsible for inviting the external reviewer(s), all scheduling, expenses and contracting with the

external reviewers. THEC staff will provide a summary of the required agenda sessions for the external reviewer's visit.

1.6.8A

Post-External Judgment. Within 30 calendar days of receipt of the external reviewer's report, the institution must propose to THEC solutions in keeping with best practices for all issues identified by the reviewer. Based upon the proposed revisions, THEC may opt to take one of three determinations:

- Support - The THEC Executive Director supports the proposed program and notifies the president/chancellor of the institution in writing.
- Not Support - The rationale not to support will be provided in writing to the institution within 15 calendar days. The institution may appeal the determination by responding to all identified issues within 15 calendar days of receiving notification of THEC's determination for denying support. THEC will make a final determination within 15 calendar days of the receipt of any institutional appeal and notify the institution whether the proposed changes are sufficient for a support determination. If the institution does not respond within 15 calendar days, the determination not to support the proposed academic program for implementation is final.
- Defer Support - The rationale to defer support will be provided in writing to the institution within 15 calendar days of receipt of the institution's response to the external report. The institution may choose to submit a revision of the proposed academic program within 60 calendar days and seek further external review or rescind the proposed academic program.

1.6.9A

Commission Action. Proposed academic programs supported by THEC staff and approved by the institutional governing board will be presented to the Commission for action at the earliest possible scheduled meeting. Approval from the institutional governing board can be attained at anytime during the expedited approval process but documentation must be provided prior to Commission action.

Programs may not be advertised by any public institution prior to approval by the Commission unless exceptional circumstances require special consideration. Requests for special consideration shall be submitted in writing and will only be accepted after a determination of support has been made following post-external judgment as described in paragraph 1.6.8A above. Requests for special consideration must be approved by the THEC Executive Director. Students may not be admitted to any program prior to final approval by the Commission.

1.6.10A **Post-Approval Monitoring.** Performance of new academic programs, based on goals established in documentation submitted at the time of approval, will be evaluated by THEC annually. Post-approval monitoring is initiated when a new expedited program receives approval by THEC Executive Director or the Commission. The monitoring period will be three years for pre-baccalaureate programs, five years for baccalaureate and Master's programs, and seven years for doctoral programs. Upon completion of post-approval monitoring, academic programs will be evaluated via Quality Assurance Funding – a statewide supplemental funding incentive to encourage continuous improvement of programs. THEC staff may choose to extend the monitoring period if additional time is needed for the program to demonstrate success on program benchmarks. Annually, the Commission will review post-approval reports on academic programs that are currently being monitored. If an academic program is deemed deficient, the Commission may recommend to the President/Chancellor that the program be terminated. Copies of such recommendations will be forwarded to the Education Committees of the General Assembly.

1.6.11A Policy will be reviewed every five years unless changes in the evaluation process are warranted.

Source: THEC Meeting: July 23, 2020