

AACC Position Statement on the Associate Degree

7/31/1998



Community colleges are comprehensive institutions, providing a full array of educational programs. The associate degree program is affirmed as central to the mission of the community college. The associate degree reflects the aims of educational attainment the institution holds for its students. It is a means through which the institution develops and maintains integrity in its educational programs. Appropriately defined, the associate degree becomes an integrating force for the institution, sets academic standards and goals for achievement for students, and establishes the relationship between the institution and others at community college and baccalaureate college levels.

The associate degree program establishes the community college vision of what it means to be an educated person for faculty, administrators, students, and society, and affirms the college's commitment to program coherence, continuity and student completion. Awarding the associate degree is a way by which an institution indicates that the student has completed a program of academic development and has achieved a level of performance reflected in student learning outcomes sufficient to move on to upper division collegiate work or to enter directly into specific occupations in the workplace. The associate degree maintains a tradition of excellence and ensures that students receiving the degree have attained learning outcomes reflecting an institution's academic programs and perspective.

The associate degree is recognized by baccalaureate degree-granting institutions and by employers as a critical indicator that a student has demonstrated proficiencies at levels deemed appropriate to enter upper-division college programs or to enter a field of work. The institution offering an associate degree assumes a responsibility to students and the public to establish and maintain excellence in all educational programs. Community colleges demand substantial commitments of resources, which, in turn, provide great dividends to students, the community, our nation, and the world. Because of the investment required to build and maintain academic quality, institutions have a professional obligation to develop programs with resources which are sufficient to ensure quality, including the appropriate use and application of new technologies. In addition, institutions, in partnership with the communities served, must provide straightforward information to appropriate decision-makers about the resources required to maintain quality programs. Further, institutions are strongly urged to provide communities with quantitative and qualitative reports of their achievements.

Organization of the Curriculum

The curriculum is the foundation of associate degree programs. College administrators, faculty and staff who frame associate degree requirements must consider continuity in learning and the proficiency outcomes required for students to transfer to senior institutions and/or achieve career goals. Community college leaders are encouraged to maintain a continuing dialogue with high school administrators and faculty, college and university decision-makers, community leaders, business leaders, and other stakeholders with regard to program scope and sequence. Community colleges should serve diverse populations and provide appropriate educational and programmatic opportunities for students. The associate degree curriculums must be consistent with institutional outcomes that are identified through an institution-wide process acknowledging the importance of all sectors of the college community. Students should experience little or no loss of continuity, or loss of credits, when moving from one educational level to another.

The resulting associate degree program should consist of a coherent and sequenced set of courses, including an evaluation procedure that assesses the outcomes of the learning process. All degree programs must include the opportunity for the student to demonstrate proficiency in the use of communication and computation skills for transfer and/or for career goals. In addition, all associate degree programs should include a full complement of general education requirements that define what constitutes an educated person. A strong foundation general education curriculum (that is, courses in the arts; the humanities which include literature, history, philosophy, foreign languages; mathematics; the natural sciences, and the social sciences) includes courses that enable the student (1) to understand and appreciate culture, one's own and others, society, and nature; (2) to develop personal values based on accepted ethics that lead to civic and social responsibility; and (3) to attain necessary competencies in analysis, communication, qualitative and quantitative methods, synthesis, and teamwork for further growth as a productive member of society and to develop the individual's and the public's good.

Associate in Arts and Associate in Science Degrees

These degrees prepare the student to transfer to an upper division baccalaureate degree program. The associate in arts (AA) degree gives emphasis to those majoring in the arts, humanities, social sciences, and similar areas. It is recommended that a substantial component of the associate in arts degrees, three-quarters of the work required, shall be in general education.

The associate in science (AS) degree gives emphasis to those majoring in agriculture, engineering and technology, and the sciences with substantial undergraduate requirements in mathematics and the natural sciences. It is

recommended that a large component of the associate in science degree, one-half of the work required, shall be in general education.

Students awarded associate in arts or associate in science degrees should be accepted as junior level transfers in baccalaureate degree granting institutions.

Associate in Applied Science Degree

The associate in applied science (AAS) degree program is designed to lead the individual directly to employment in a specific career. It is strongly suggested that one-third of the work for the associate in applied science degree shall be in general education. While the titles given these degrees vary considerably among community colleges, the most common title is associate in applied science. Although the objective of the associate in applied science degree is to enhance employment opportunities, some baccalaureate degree granting institutions have developed upper division programs to recognize this degree for transfer of credits. The associate in applied science degree programs must be designed to recognize this dual possibility and to encourage students to recognize the long-term career possibilities that continued academic study will create.

Associate Degree Titles

In recent years there has been a problem of titles for associate degrees. In certain states and in certain institutions, different degree titles are used due to tradition or local circumstances. But institutions should avoid degree title proliferation and the confusion which results, especially since students move from institution to institution and, upon graduation, to different areas of the nation. The use of multiple degree titles has been especially prevalent in occupational areas where some institutions offer many different degrees in specific technologies. In an attempt to reduce the number of these degrees and to avoid confusion as to the level of academic achievement attained, it is highly recommended:

- a. The titles associate in **(not "of")** arts and associate in **(not "of")** science degrees be used.
- b. The associate in **(not "of")** applied science degree may have a limited number of designations to denote special fields of study such as nursing, computer technology, or law enforcement (e.g. associate in applied science in nursing, associate in applied science in computer technology, etc.)
- c. For all associate degrees the transcript of a student should state the name of the program/curriculum completed.
- d. That although institutions may use other degree titles, efforts will be made to limit the number of titles.

Institutions are encouraged to use nationally standardized nomenclature to ensure transferability and a common understanding of the associate degree.

Guidelines for the Evaluation of Programs

Public demand for quality in postsecondary education obligates community colleges to establish comprehensive systems and processes for outcomes assessment. Citizens and funding agents have the right to insist on clear qualitative and quantitative reports that the time and money they invest in college education is well-spent. Criteria for excellence are essential for maintaining the quality of associate degrees.

Many factors may enter into the evaluation of associate degree programs. The most basic and important elements relate to the objectives the institution has set for the degree programs. Does the program, for example, provide the foundation in general education that will properly prepare the student for transfer? Does the program ensure that degree programs will prepare students for life-long learning? Does the program provide students with the competencies required to compete successfully in a career role, including appropriate preparation in using the new technologies? The evaluation of degree programs should create a continuing dialogue within the institution concerning associate degree quality and the relative success of the college's graduates. Creative faculties will find many effective ways of assessing their degree programs. The systematic follow-up of community college graduates must not be overlooked as a necessary evaluation tool.

The evaluation of associate degree programs in community colleges should be accomplished by the institutions themselves and not by state or federal agencies. Regional accrediting associations serve as self-regulatory bodies to help institutions monitor and evaluate the quality of their associate degree programs. In order that accountability for such evaluations may be clearly understood, institutions should designate institution-wide oversight bodies to assess the continuing balance and quality of associate degree programs.

Looking Ahead

This policy statement is limited to the associate degree, thus leaving unexamined a host of other important components of the community college mission. Community colleges are attended by many individuals for valid reasons other than obtaining a degree. Non-degree seeking students require an array of certificate and enrichment programs, as well as continuing education and non-credit courses that are also affirmed as important to the mission of community colleges. Nothing in this policy statement should be interpreted as discouraging colleges from admitting students who do not have degree objectives to all courses for which they are qualified and from which they will benefit. Looking ahead, community colleges will continue to

serve the full range of educational and academic needs of students and communities.

Adopted by the Board of Directors August 1998

Note: This statement replaces the AACCC Policy Statement on the Associate Degree adopted July 1984, and the AACCC Policy Statement on the Associate of Applied Science Degree adopted April 1986.

<http://www.aacc.nche.edu/About/Positions/Pages/ps08011998.aspx>