

UNDERGRADUATE COURSE SUBSTITUTIONS GUIDELINES

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SOAR navigation instructions for substitution/exception forms: <https://www.usm.edu/advisement-center/dps-workflow.php>

A. INTRODUCTION

To earn a degree or minor, students are required to complete all requirements in the degree/program plan published in the Bulletin for their catalog year. SACSCOC accreditation requires accurate and truthful representation of the requirements to complete a program of study. These requirements are presented in the University Bulletins. It is prohibited to apply requirements differently across students by granting individual exceptions to publicized requirements.

Substitutions are very rare for non-transfer students who have been properly advised and are using well-administered degree plans. Generally, substitutions should only be used for students who completed coursework for their program while at a previous institution or in a former major.

Proposals for degree plan modifications that change particular required courses must include a teach-out plan that specifies how students under older catalogs will complete changed requirements. The proposal should also specify any standing substitution requests related to the modification to ensure uniform application to all students and reduction of unnecessary individual requests for substitution.

The following applies to both GEC and non-GEC substitutions, as well as both transfer and USM courses.

B. DEADLINES

All course substitution requests must be received at the Office of Degree Progress by the deadlines below; schools must allow sufficient time for substitution requests to be reviewed at the college dean's office.

TRANSFER COURSES

- Transfer course substitutions for transfer students: Within the **first semester of declaring a major**
- Transfer course substitutions for USM students: Within the **semester when course is transferred to USM**

USM COURSES

- USM course substitutions: Within the **semester when the student is completing the course**

COURSES FOR GRADUATING STUDENTS

- All substitutions must be submitted and processed prior to the graduation application deadlines:
 - Spring degree applicants: **November 1**
 - Summer degree applicants: **April 1**
 - Fall degree applicants: **July 1**
- When graduation applications are submitted, ideally, the DPRs will indicate that all courses are satisfied based on courses being completed, in progress (enrolled, marked "IP" on the DPR), or exception approved and processed.
- Do not delay graduation applications waiting for late substitutions, resulting in both being late.

C. GENERAL

1. Follow the deadlines for substitutions.

Late substitution requests can result in: (1) students taking unnecessary classes or delaying graduation, (2) additional tuition and fees for the students, (3) incorrect degree audits at graduation time, (4) heavy workloads for reviewers and DPSs during critical periods, which impact their ability to effectively provide other important services.

For transfer students, advisors must review the [Transfer Credit Evaluation Report](#) immediately upon their enrollment at USM. If transfer courses have not yet been posted to SOAR, advisors may [submit a request for transfer posting](#) from Admissions or request a copy of the students' transfer transcripts.

It is the advisor and program's responsibility to ensure students have a clear understanding of which courses and how many hours remain to complete requirements by their proposed graduation date. Good advising includes reviewing all completed coursework listed on students' DPRs and Transfer Credit Evaluation report, monitoring their progress on a semesterly basis, and submitting substitution requests in a timely manner.

2. Students must follow prescribed degree plans for their Bulletin year.

Substitutions may not be used in a manner that effectively circumvents Academic Council or accreditation standards. The degree plan, which has been approved by School faculty, College Council, and Academic Council and published in the Bulletin, must be followed by *all* students in that program according to their Bulletin year. Students may not mix requirements of degree plans from multiple Bulletin years.

If a program regularly wishes to accept a course as a substitute, the program must modify its degree requirements to add that course to the degree plan unless there are legitimate reasons not to do so (e.g., situation will be resolved imminently without curriculum revisions). If a program wishes to accept more than one of the Speaking Intensive designated courses for GEC 08, it needs to modify its degree plan through Academic Council to add all Speaking Intensive courses they will accept.

3. Reviewers must be different for Director and Dean's level.

Having the same person review/approve multiple levels of approval authority does not provide appropriate checks and balances or oversight in the process. All three people (i.e., advisor, director, dean) on a substitution form or an UGRD Exception must never be the same. While it is acceptable for the Advisor and Director or the Advisor and Dean signature to be the same, the Director and Dean signatures cannot be the same. (In the rare case where a Dean has taken on the Director role in a receivership situation, an exception may be made to this rule).

4. Avoid waivers.

Waivers are only approved in rare and extraordinary circumstances. A substitution indicates the required content or subject matter has been covered elsewhere; a waiver simply dismisses the requirement. Note: For GEC, transfer students with an Associate's (AA or AS) degree from a MS junior or community college will be considered to have met USM's GEC 01-06 requirement.

5. Include both USM's transfer course number and transfer institution's original course number.

Only naming the original course number/title from the transfer institution does not allow reviewers to match it to the specific USM course number that listed on the DPR. Consult the USM [Transfer Credit Evaluation Report](#) to determine the USM transfer course prefix and number and the corresponding original transfer institution's course number and title.

- ✓ Required Course Prefix and Number BSC 103 Required Course Title Biology and Society
Substitute Course Prefix and Number on DPR BSC 701AAA Substitute Course Title on DPR TFR BSC Elective
- Transfer course from accredited institution Course taken at USM
Name of transfer institution University of Nevada, Las Vegas
Transfer subject BIOL Transfer course number 100 Title General Biology for Non-Majors

6. Pick a specific substitute course for the request rather than a range of substitute courses.

When a student has completed many courses that overlap with a course requirement (e.g., "student was a theatre major at transfer institution and has 20 hours of theatre but has not taken 'theatre appreciation' for GEC 04"), choose the single most appropriate course to request as a substitution (which can be pulled into the DPR category) rather than multiple courses. The breadth of their related coursework may be mentioned in the equivalency to further strengthen the overall justification.

- ✓ Required Course Prefix and Number THE 100 Required Course Title Theatrical Expressions
Substitute Course Prefix and Number on DPR THE 103 Substitute Course Title on DPR Introduction to Theatre
- ✗ Required Course Prefix and Number THE 100 Required Course Title Theatrical Expressions
Substitute Course Prefix and Number on DPR (see list below) Substitute Course Title on DPR _____

7. Specify the category as required course if equivalency is to the electives category rather than a specific course.

The USM *required course* may be stated in terms of a category (e.g., “ANT 300/400 electives) if the degree plan allows elective options for a category. In this case, the equivalency statement should be made in relation to the general course content captured by the category group rather than a specific course:

- ✓ Required Course Prefix and Number ANT 300/400 elective Required Course Title (ANT 300/400-level elective)
Substitute Course Prefix and Number on DPR ANT 703AAA Substitute Course Title on DPR Andean Archeology

D. JUSTIFICATIONS

Substitutions must be justified on the basis of both the level of *equivalency* between the two courses and a *rationale* for making an exception to the degree plan requirement that was approved by Academic Council.

Equivalency

1. Explain how required and substitute courses overlap in content.

The equivalency statement must explain how the required course and the proposed substitute course sufficiently overlap in content or learning outcomes to justify a substitution beyond having a rationale for a substitution:

- How is the content of the substitute and required courses similar?
- How do they cover the same relevant learning outcomes for a particular category on the degree plan?
- How does the content of the substitute course make it an appropriate replacement for the required course?¹

The equivalency statement should not be the same as the rationale statement. Equivalency alone is not a sufficient justification for a substitution.

APPROPRIATE EQUIVALENCY STATEMENTS

- ✓ “Transfer course Y satisfies the GEC lab-science category at the transfer institution (documentation attached).”
Note: GEC category at the transfer institution must be the same as the USM GEC category to claim equivalency.
- ✓ “Transfer course ‘Intro to Environmental Science’ covered topics A, B, and C. It is a 4-hour science + lab course (see attached) and meets the overall objectives of the GEC 02 category although USM doesn’t offer this specific course.
- ✓ “Both required course X and substitute course Y cover topics A, B, and C.”
- ✓ “Both required course X and substitute course Y train students in basic research methods in the discipline and require application for the completion of a research project, which is the main objective of the required course.”

INSUFFICIENT EQUIVALENCIES

- ✗ “Substitute course X for course Y because they have similar content.”
Note: This needs a brief explanation of *how content is equivalent/similar*—especially if course titles are dissimilar. Simply listing content of each course separately is often insufficient to demonstrate similarity of content.
- ✗ “Course X covers A, B, C, and D. Course Y covers D, E, F, and G.”
Note: This does not necessarily indicate that the content is equivalent or similar. If only part of the coverage is similar, the equivalent statement must make a case for why they are sufficiently similar.
- ✗ “400-level Course X covers the same material as 100-level Course Y but at a higher level.”
Note: Do not use course prefix as a justification for a substitution when a specific course is required. Courses with the same prefix but a higher number typically do *not* indicate equivalency at a more advanced

¹ If other courses are in fact highly equivalent and/or fulfill the same purpose as the required course, the program should consider modifying the degree plan to accept these alternative options. This will enhance flexibility, increase frequency of offering courses that fulfill the requirement, and eliminate the need for substitutions.

level. More advanced courses in a discipline are often more specialized and narrower in scope and may not cover the breadth or range of topics in a 100/200 level course. For example, ENG 470 (Studies in Antebellum Literature) is not a higher level of ENG 203 (World Literature).

2. For GEC, indicate whether the course fulfilled the GEC/core curriculum requirements at the transfer institution.

If the substitute course did fulfill the GEC requirement at the transfer institution, provide supporting documentation from the transfer institution. Note that the substitute course must satisfy the *same* GEC category at the transfer institution as required at USM (e.g., if the course satisfied the social science GEC requirement at the transfer institution, it will be considered equivalent to USM's GEC 05 social science requirement).

3. "Meets the objectives of the requirement" versus "meets the requirement"

If "course X meets the requirement," it indicates that course X is the actual required course from the degree plan for the student's catalog year, but it is not pulling correctly in the DPR to show the requirement has been satisfied. If this is the case, email your school's DPS partner and request a correction to the DPR setup in SOAR; a substitution request is not necessary to fix technical issues.

If a course "meets the objectives of the requirement," it suggests some equivalency between the substitute and required course in the degree plan.

If a course meets the requirement of the degree plan for more recent catalogs but not the student's older catalog year, state which calendar year the new requirement became effective and the rationale for following the newer requirement rather than the older one.

Rationale

For non-transfer students, exceptions to degree requirements are very rare if the program well-administers its degree plans and properly advises students.

4. Explain why an exception needs to be made for the student.

The rationale statement must explain why the request to make an exception from the Bulletin's degree requirements for this particular student:

- Why was the student unable to take the course required by the degree plan?
- Why is the request being made?
- What is the problem that has caused the student to be unable to take the required course?

The rationale statement should not be the same as the equivalency statement. Rationale alone is not a sufficient justification for a substitution.

APPROPRIATE RATIONALES

DPR not pulling correct course – Substitution not required

- ✓ "Course X is the required course in degree plan for student's catalog year, but it is not correctly pulling into the right section on the DPR as it should."

Note: If this is the correct required course according to the degree plan, this is a DPR glitch and doesn't need a substitution form. You may email the DPS about the problem, so they can address the coding problem, and have it pull correctly.

Transfer courses

- ✓ "Transfer course taken before enrollment at USM"

Note: If this box is checked on form, the rationale is already apparent: rationale statement needs minimal explanation.

USM courses

- ✓ “Due to under-enrollment, Course X was cancelled in fall. Course X is required without other options on the degree plan, it is only offered in the fall, and student is scheduled to graduate in the spring.”

Note: While this may be a rationale for an individual student, it suggests a larger issue with the course-rotation schedule, or the number of sections offered based on demand. Programs need to schedule required courses, so they can be offered predictably.

- ✓ “Course X is no longer offered since Course Y has replaced this requirement effective since the 2018-2019. Bulletin. Teach-out plan (attached) specifies that students under older bulletins who cannot change their Bulletin year will substitute Course Y for Course X.”

Note: If many students will be affected by this degree plan modification and the substitution is clearly specified on the teach-out plan, the program should request a standing substitution from the Director, through the Dean, to the Associate Provost for Institutional Effectiveness.

INSUFFICIENT RATIONALES

- ✗ “This substitution is necessary for the student to graduate on time.”

Note: Students must complete the degree plan requirements on time to “graduate on time.” Helping a student to graduate by a certain semester in and of itself is not an appropriate rationale.

- ✗ “Substitute Course X for Course Y.”/ “Move course X from general electives to major elective.”

Note: These are only directives that address neither equivalency nor rationale.

- ✗ “Program accepts this course as a substitute.”/ “Course X is an acceptable substitute for course Y.”

Note: These neither address equivalency nor rationale. Statements must explain *why* the program considers the substitution to be acceptable, both in terms of equivalency and rationale.

- ✗ “Course Y is a designated WI at USM [although it is not the WI course required by the student’s degree plan]”

Note: Being WI-designated (or SI-designated) demonstrates only equivalency for the GEC WI (or SI) category. A rationale must be provided for deviating from the course requirements of the student’s degree plan. Programs should endeavor to allow more flexible degree requirements where possible by completing a degree plan modification through Academic Council.

5. Write the rationale in a manner understandable to potential external reviewers.

For both the equivalency and rationale statements, avoid program-specific abbreviations. Do not assume the reviewer is familiar with the course content or knows the degree plan for each catalog year. If justifications cite degree plan changes, the effective Bulletin year should be mentioned.

- ✓ “Course X is no longer offered since Course Y has replaced this requirement *effective since the 2018-2019. Bulletin.* Teach-out plan (see attached) specifies that students under older bulletins who cannot change their Bulletin year will substitute Course Y for Course X.”

6. Keep justification brief and clear.

Avoid redundant and superfluous explanations in the equivalency and rationale boxes and limit attachments and supplemental information to what is relevant for the justification. For example, when the box is checked for “Transfer course from an accredited institution,” that is a sufficient rationale and extra explanation is generally undesirable.

7. Take responsibility for misadvisement.

Substitution requests based on misadvisement may be considered with evidence. In the rare case that a student has been misadvised that the wrong course would satisfy the requirement in the student’s degree plan, the substitution request should note this. For GEC courses, the request should also include evidence of how the student was misadvised. Advisors and schools need to take steps to ensure that such misadvisement is not repeated. Directors are responsible to correct systemic issues that contribute to advising errors.

E. DOCUMENTATION

1. Attach a current DPR.

A button is available to download the student's DPR in the form.

2. Attach the *USM Transfer Credit Evaluation* from SOAR (if applicable).

A printout of the USM [Transfer Credit Evaluation report](#) is necessary for substitution requests for transferred courses that have not been assigned a specific USM course number and title (that is, courses transferred in as "TFR Program Elective," e.g., MAT 701AAA, ART 701BBB). The USM Transfer Credit Evaluation report lists all of the original course numbers and titles from the transfer institution and the corresponding USM transfer equivalent course number for each, which is printed on the DPR. It is necessary to have *both* of these course numbers on the form in order to match courses to their appropriate documentation and course listing on the DPR.

3. Include the approved *Permission to Transfer Course Equivalent Credit* (if applicable).

University policy states that "[w]hile enrolled at The University of Southern Mississippi, a student is required to obtain written approval from his or her department to enroll in a course(s) at another institution. Without this approval, the course(s) may not apply toward his or her degree." Per the Associate Provost, "1) Native students should be taking as much coursework as possible from us, 2) advisors should indicate to students that we offer many courses online during the summer that they could take from home, 3) Students are not to be given permission to take courses outside of USM in order to circumvent our GEC or degree requirements. GEC courses taken outside of USM by native students will require a solid justification based on course equivalency."

4. Attach evidence to evaluate equivalency for transfer courses from institutions without an articulation agreement.

Equivalency may be demonstrated with evidence such as syllabus, course description, or letter describing content from the department chair in the transfer institution where the course was taught.

Indicate whether the course fulfills the GEC/core curriculum requirements at the transfer institution. If it does, attach supporting documentation from the transfer institution; if it does not, note on the form that it does not. If a course meets the GEC requirements at the transfer institution (regardless of which state), this is the easiest justification for the request to be approved, and it does not require further rationale.

Look up the core curriculum requirements of the transfer institution on its website. If it satisfies the GEC/core curriculum requirement at the transfer institution, attach a screenshot from the transfer institution's website (or statement on the syllabus) that shows it counts towards the GEC at that institution.

5. Highlight or underline the relevant information/sections/courses on all attachments.

Highlight or underline relevant information on attached documents. For example, if you screenshot a webpage from the transfer institution, highlight the relevant course on its list of core courses, and on the student's DPR, highlight the transfer course requested for substitution.