

Course Substitutions Checklist

To earn a degree or minor, students are required to complete all requirements listed in that degree/program plan published in the Bulletin for their catalog year. Substitutions are exceptions to the degree requirements and are very rare for non-transfer students who have been properly advised and are using well-administered degree plans. Substitutions should only be used in extraordinary circumstances or for students who completed coursework while at a previous institution or in a former major.

Departments and schools should adhere to the following guidelines regarding requests for undergraduate course substitutions.¹

General

1. Submit all substitutions as soon as possible; never wait until a student is ready to apply for graduation.

By University policy, advisors must complete course substitutions for transfer students before the end of the student's second semester at USM. As well, the graduation application form clearly states that all substitutions must be completed prior to applying for graduation.

Late substitution requests can result in students taking unnecessary classes or delaying graduation with additional tuition and fees for the students. They also negatively impact the workload of degree auditors during critical periods and their ability to provide other services to students. If transfer courses have not yet been posted to SOAR, we can 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 by their proposed graduation date. Good advising includes reviewing all completed coursework listed on students' DPRs, monitoring their progress on a semesterly basis, and submitting substitution requests in a timely manner.

2. Do not use substitutions in a manner that effectively circumvents Academic Council or accreditation standards.

If a program regularly wishes to accept a course as a substitute, the department needs to 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). For example, USM has approved several courses for GEC 08 Speaking Intensive. If a program wishes to accept more than one of those courses for GEC 08, it needs to modify its degree plan through Academic Council to add those other Speaking Intensive courses as options.

3. Director and Dean approval signatures must be different.

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

Justifications

4. Provide a justification for the substitution in the box that addresses both the level of *equivalency* between the two courses and a *rationale* for making an exception to the requirement:

¹ For more information on the GEC and substitutions, consult the Academic Council Info Center website: <https://info.usm.edu/group/849/page/gec>

Equivalency: How is the content of the substitute and required courses similar? / How do they cover the same relevant learning outcomes? / How is the substitute course an appropriate replacement for the required course?²

Example

- ✓ “Both required course X and substitute course Y cover various research methods in the discipline and requires them to apply them in the completion of a research project.”

Rationale: Why did the student not take the course required by the degree plan? / Why is the request being made?

Examples

- ✓ “Transfer course taken before enrollment at USM” (*Note: When box for this is checked on form, rationale window can be left blank.*)
- ✓ “This course fulfills the GEC requirement for the science and lab category at the transfer institution. (documentation attached)”
- ✓ “Due to under-enrollment, course X was cancelled in fall. Course X is only offered in fall, and student was already scheduled to graduate in the spring.”
- ✓ “Course X is the required course for this student’s catalog year, but it is not correctly pulling into the right section on the DPR as it should.
- ✓ “Course X, required by the student’s catalog, is no longer offered. Course Y has replaced this requirement since the 2016-2017 catalog.”

5. Write the justification 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.

6. Fit the entire justification in the spaces provided on the form and keep it brief and clear.

All requests must provide a justification on the actual form; that is, the form should not instruct the reviewer to simply “see attached.”

Avoid redundant and superfluous explanations in the equivalency and rationale boxes and try to limit attachments and supplemental information to what is relevant for the justification. Excessive explanations and documents slow the review process. For example, when the box is checked for “This is a transfer course from an accredited institution,” that serves as sufficient rationale, so the rationale box *can be left blank* if the transfer and USM courses are equivalent.

Also, if the substitute course counts towards the same GEC category at the transfer institution, that is sufficient to justify its approval, so additional explanations, such as how it has the same learning outcomes as the USM GEC course, are generally unnecessary.

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

Substituting a GEC course for a range of courses has rarely been approved (e.g., student was a music major and has many music classes that should substitute for GEC 04). It is better to choose the single most appropriate course to request as a substitution than to try to argue that multiple courses taken as a whole satisfy the GEC requirement.

² 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.

- 8. For GEC substitutions, indicate whether the course fulfills the GEC/core curriculum requirements for the same subject category at the transfer institution in the check box provided. This shows an equivalency between the courses.**

If it does, supporting documentation from the transfer institution must be provided. Note that the substitute course must satisfy the *same* GEC category at the transfer institution as is requested to be satisfied at USM with the course (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).

- 9. Do not use course prefix as a justification for a substitution. Course with same prefix but higher number typically do not indicate equivalency at a more advanced level.**

Higher number courses do not indicate the same material but at a "higher level." More advanced courses in a discipline are often more specialized and narrower in scope and thus do not expose the student to the breadth of material required to fulfill GEC or other required coursework at the 100/200 level. For example, ENG 470 (Studies in Antebellum Literature) is not the equivalent of ENG 203 (World Literature); SOC 426 (Sociology of Education) is not equivalent to SOC 101 (Understanding Society).

- 10. Do not interchangeably use the phrases "course Y meets the objectives of the requirement" and "course Y meets the requirement." These indicate different issues.**

"Course Y meets the objectives of the requirement" suggests there is some equivalency between course Y, which is proposed as a substitute, and the required course in the degree plan. In contrast, "course X meets the requirement" 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. In the latter case, we need to request that the DPR setup in SOAR be corrected for that degree plan rather than doing a substitution for an individual student. 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.

- 11. Take responsibility for misadvisement. Substitution requests based on misadvisement rationale may be considered with evidence.**

In the rare case that a student has been misadvised that a non-GEC course would count toward GEC requirement or that a course not in the student's degree/program plan would count toward their major/minor requirements, 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 ensure that such misadvisement is not repeated; directors are responsible to correct systemic issues that contribute to advising errors.

- 12. 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.

Documentation

- 13. Attach a current DPR.**

- 14. Type both the USM transfer course number and transfer institution's original course number on the request form.**

Naming only the original course number/title from the transfer institution does not allow reviewers to match it to the specific course that actually transferred to USM. Consult the USM Transfer Credit Evaluation Report (see above) to determine the USM transfer course prefix and number that matches the original transfer institution's course number and title.

15. Attach the *USM Transfer Credit Evaluation* from SOAR if the course transferred in with the title “TFR [Program] Elective.”

A printout of the USM Transfer Credit Evaluation report is necessary for substitution requests for transferred courses without a specific USM course number and title (that is, courses that transfer in as “TFR [Program] Elective,” e.g., MAT 701AAA, ART 701BBB). The USM Transfer Credit Evaluation report lists a student’s transferred courses, including the original course number and title from the transfer institution and its USM Transfer Equivalent Course number, 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. (See instructions for running a USM Transfer Credit Evaluation report in SOAR.)

16. Include the approved *Permission to Transfer Credit* form if a transfer course was taken after the student enrolled at USM.

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.”

17. Attach evidence (e.g., syllabi) 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. Therefore, 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 print-out from transfer institution’s website (or statement on the syllabus) that shows it counts towards the GEC at that institution.

18. Highlight or underline the relevant information/sections/courses on all attachments, including *Transfer Credit Evaluation* and *DPR Course History*.

Highlight or underline relevant information on attached documents. For example, if you print out 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.