



# South Carolina Commission on Higher Education

Academic Affairs, Postsecondary Institution Licensing

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## EXPLANATION OF EXEMPTION FOR INSTITUTIONS WHOSE SOLE PURPOSE IS RELIGIOUS OR THEOLOGICAL TRAINING

(Updated 2/26/2016)

- 1. CITATION FOR EXEMPTION.** The South Carolina Commission on Higher Education is the licensing authority for private postsecondary education under the provisions of the Nonpublic Postsecondary Institution License Act, Chapter 58 of Title 59, South Carolina Code of Laws, 1976, as amended. Section 59-58-30 of the law states that the definition of a “nonpublic educational institution” does not include “(4) Institutions whose sole purpose is religious or theological training.”
- 2. CITATION FOR DEFINITION OF “RELIGIOUS OR THEOLOGICAL.”** Section 59-58-20(18) defines “religious or theological training” as “...the awarding of nonacademic degrees, diplomas, or certificates with a specific theological, biblical, divinity, or other religious designation.”
- 3. TYPE OF DEGREES EXEMPT INSTITUTIONS MAY AWARD.** Bible colleges and theological seminaries are exempt from licensure requirements if they limit their South Carolina offerings to courses for Bible or theological credentials. Credentials must be titled clearly to label them as professional, such as “Associate of Biblical Studies” or “Bachelor of General Ministry,” or “Master of Divinity.” An exempt institution may offer programs that prepare graduates for service in ministry. In addition to religious terms in the degree title, the curriculum must support religious or theological content and objectives. An exempt institution may not award Ph.D. degrees, or associate’s, bachelor’s, or master’s degrees in arts or sciences.
- 4. APPROPRIATE ADVISING.** Institutions must take care that students are not misled about the purposes and uses of credentials it awards. Publications and advising should clearly state that use of credentials issued by unlicensed or unaccredited institutions is limited; that this type of credential may not be accepted by employers for jobs; and it is unlikely that institutions that hold recognized accreditation will accept the credit for transfer. The description of each program where the major is in a specific field (such as Christian Education or Pastoral/Ministerial/Christian Counseling) should include a specific disclaimer that the program does not meet requirements for professional licensure or certification.
- 5. PROHIBITION OF CLAIMS.** As stated in South Carolina Commission on Higher Education Regulation 62-25.K., “An institution exempt from the Commission’s oversight may not claim that it is under authority of the Nonpublic Postsecondary Institution License Act or the Commission. It may not claim that the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education recognizes it, grants it authority to operate, offer, or award a credential, or use any other misleading language referring to approval, recognition, authority, licensure, accreditation, certification, registration, or oversight.” Regulation 62-26 states that “Reference in advertising to accreditation shall name the agency and shall be limited to accreditation currently held by the institution through nationally recognized accrediting agencies as defined and listed by the United States Department of Education.”
- 6. CLAIMS OF ACCREDITATION.** The Commission encourages institutions that do not hold recognized accreditation to use a statement such as, “The *institution* is not accredited by a recognized accrediting agency.” However, institutions accredited by an agency that is not recognized must include a disclosure that, “The *accrediting body name* is not recognized by the U. S. Department of Education or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.” Information about accreditation (or lack thereof) must be restricted so that it does not confuse students about the meaning of accreditation.

7. **FURTHER REVIEW; AUTHORIZATION TO INVESTIGATE.** The Commission reserves the right to examine the status of any exempt institution based on information available in the future to the Commission or based on changes in authority the General Assembly grants to the Commission. The Commission may review information, web sites, and publications and inform institutions to make additions, deletions, and corrections. Regulation 62-27 gives the Commission the authority to intervene on the behalf of a person filing a complaint against an institution that is exempt from the oversight of the Commission.
8. **INFORMING THE COMMISSION.** So that the staff might better be able to respond to inquiries from the public, please inform the Commission of activities of exempt institutions.
9. **LETTER OF EXEMPTION.** An institution whose sole purpose is religious or theological training is by nature exempt from the Commission's oversight. If the institution wishes to have a letter from the Commission specifically acknowledging exemption, it should make the request in writing (email is acceptable), including the name of the institution, officials of the institution, a list of the programs to be offered, and a copy of publications.
10. **RECOGNIZED ACCREDITING AGENCIES.** The Commission recommends that officials at exempt institutions contact a recognized accrediting agency and carefully consider complying with the requirements for recognized accreditation, especially in the areas of faculty credentials, curricula structure, and credit awards.

Three recognized accrediting agencies that accredit theological institutions are:

Association for Biblical Higher Education Commission on Accreditation  
5820 T G Lee Blvd, Suite 130  
Orlando, FL 32822  
Phone: 407-207-0808  
Website: [www.abhe.org](http://www.abhe.org)  
Email: [info@abhe.org](mailto:info@abhe.org)

*ABHE accredits colleges that offer certificates, diplomas, associate and/or baccalaureate degrees aimed at preparing students for Christian ministries through biblical, church/vocational, and general studies.*

Association of Theological Schools in the United State and Canada (ATS)  
The Commission on Accrediting  
10 Summit Park Drive  
Pittsburgh, PA 15275-1110  
Phone: 412-788-6505  
Fax: 412-788-6510  
Website: [www.ats.edu](http://www.ats.edu)

*ATS accredits graduate professional schools of theology, theological seminaries, and graduate programs in theology.*

Transnational Association of Christian Colleges and Schools (TRACS)  
15935 Forest Road  
Forest, Virginia 24551  
Phone: 434-525-9539  
Fax: 434-525-9538  
Website: [www.tracs.org](http://www.tracs.org)  
Email: [info@tracs.org](mailto:info@tracs.org)

*TRACS accredits Christian postsecondary institutions offering certificates, diplomas, and/or degrees in Christian education.*