

NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE		POLICY # HR 8
Title: Academic Assistant		
Effective Date: October, 1996	Administering Authority: Human Resources Dir.	
Revisions:		
Statutory Authority (if applicable):		

Purpose:

Academic assistance provides a tool for managers and employees to support academic activities that directly relate to the organization’s identified knowledge, skills, and behaviors (organizational competencies), and which support the mission, vision, and values of the agency. **The academic assistance program is not an employee benefit, right or entitlement. It is a management program for workforce development.**

Policy:

Utilization of the academic assistance program shall be identified, described, and documented in the employee’s development plan within his/her work plan. This provides a measurable link between the employee’s increased competency and the agency’s workforce planning efforts. Denial of participation in the academic assistance program is not grievable, except on grounds of discrimination.

The academic assistance program provides reimbursement of tuition costs, if funds are available at the agency level, and time off the job for educational purposes when deemed appropriate by management. The assistance is provided to encourage employees to develop and improve skills or qualifications **directly related to their present job or field of work** in State service.

Eligible Employees

Full-time or part-time (half-time or more) who have gained permanent status are eligible for the program. Trainees may be determined by management as eligible for educational assistance after satisfactory performance for a period of not less than nine months. Probationary employees with at least three months of service in permanent positions may only be approved for academic assistance if the course is taken at the agency’s request, with written justification from the Commission/Division Head stating why the coursework is needed.

Ineligible Employees

Probationary employees with less than three months service and employees in temporary status are not eligible for academic assistance.

Eligible Sources

Academic courses are defined as a course/degree provided by an accredited community college/college/university. The course must provide academic credit (as opposed to CEUs), be listed in the college/university course catalog and charge tuition in the traditional meaning of tuition (as opposed to only registration fees). Accreditation must be via an accrediting agency authorized by the US Department of Education. Academic courses/degrees from accredited community colleges/colleges/ universities via traditional classroom, video-based, distance learning, web-based, e-learning and certain accredited correspondence courses are eligible for approval.

Ineligible Sources

Under this policy, correspondence courses that are **not** accredited by either the US Department of Education or the American Council on Education/CREDIT for academic credit are not eligible.

Approved Courses

Management, when making the determination whether to provide academic assistance to take a specific course, must consider the basic principle: “deemed beneficial to both the agency and the employee.”

Completion of the course should have a direct benefit to the organization. The improved knowledge, skills and abilities gained by the employee should benefit the individual in completion of his/her current and/or potential job duties. Management considerations in approving employees to receive academic assistance include workforce planning, succession planning and career development.

Guidelines to consider in course selection are:

- Courses which provide knowledge and skills directly related to maintaining or improving current job skills; and also courses mandated by law or regulation as a job requirement for continued employment.
- Courses directly related to the employee’s current job or a documented workforce need.

Academic assistance shall not be approved for courses where management has determined that neither the course nor degree is of benefit to the agency. The agency head or designee may approve exceptions to the approved course policy.

Certification/Licensing (Post-Employment)

Incumbent employees who meet minimum educational requirements for employment and, for whom certification or licensing is required after employment or is deemed desirable by management and approved by the agency head or designee, are eligible for academic assistance under the following conditions:

- Certification/licensing is mandated or
- Certification/licensing is a policy requirement of the employing agency.

Academic assistance is authorized for certification or licensing only if the certification or license is attained via academic course work.

Academic Costs - Eligible employees approved for academic assistance may be reimbursed academic costs charged by the academic source at which the employee is enrolled. Academic costs are defined as charges assessed by an academic source to every person enrolling for the course. These charges are required of everyone and are neither negotiable nor discretionary for the individual enrolling in the course. Academic costs include in-state tuition, academic fees and course/lab fees. Course/lab fees must always be itemized. Reimbursement of course/lab fees may require a written statement from the academic source justifying the fee as a required fee in addition to other fees. Total reimbursement for tuition cannot exceed 20 credit hours or 32 quarter hours per fiscal year.

Amount of Reimbursement

Eligible employees may be reimbursed academic costs charged by the academic source where enrolled. The employee may be reimbursed all academic costs as specified in the paragraph “Academic Costs,” namely tuition and other academic-related fees, but not fees unrelated to

registering for a course or a degree program, such as dorm, student union construction, athletic fees, student health service, cultural event fees, etc.

With a *bona fide* business justification, the agency may reduce the amount of reimbursement per employee to a set amount less than the tuition and fees and/or limit the number of courses for which any one employee may be reimbursed in an academic term.

Non-reimbursable Expenses - Reimbursement shall **NOT** be made for:

- Charges specifically related to processing or receiving continuing education units (CEUs)
- Application, examination, and graduation fees
- Transportation costs
- Textbooks and supplies

Other Financial Assistance - Financial assistance from any other financial aid program shall not be duplicated under this program. However, the difference, if any, between such aid and the allowable costs under the Academic Assistance program may be reimbursed.

Requirement for Reimbursement - Management may consider any current disciplinary action for job performance or personal conduct prior to approval of the application for reimbursement. If funds are available, the applicant shall receive reimbursement of approved academic costs upon submitting evidence of satisfactory completion of a preapproved course. Completion is defined as "Satisfactory," "Pass," or a grade of "C" or better for undergraduate courses, and a "B" or better for graduate courses. **An "Incomplete" shall not be reimbursed until a final grade is issued.**

Requests for reimbursement should be submitted within 30 days of completion of the course or receipt of grade.

Commerce Policy HR-9, Employee Training and Development Policy addresses guidelines for other types of training courses that are not covered in the agency's academic assistance policy.

Employee Transfers and Separations - The policies of the employing agency at the time of completion will determine whether or not the employee is eligible for reimbursement. If an employee transfers from Commerce to another State agency, and subsequently completes an approved course, the employee should submit a request for reimbursement to the receiving agency. Courses approved by sending agencies but completed after the employee transfer to Commerce that are deemed of value to the agency will be considered for reimbursement by Commerce only if the course meets conditions outlined in this policy for approval and reimbursement, pending availability of funds. Employees who separate from State service, except by reduction in force are not eligible for reimbursement.

Courses Taken at Agency Request

Because of specific high priority skill needs of the agency, employees may be requested by management to take specific courses or degree programs. Under these circumstances, all limitations under the provisions of this policy are waived. Employees are still responsible for requirements for withholding taxes and FICA.

The designation, "At Agency Request," can only be determined with the approval of the agency/commission head or his/her designee. Courses specified as part of an employee's improvement/development plan are not considered to be at agency request unless approved by the department head or designee.

Procedures for Requesting Academic Assistance

To request academic assistance, an employee will complete the application (PD-136) and forward it to the immediate supervisor.

The application must include:

- The course title(s), institution and location, class schedule, and whether the course is for academic credit, audit or certification/licensing.
- A description of the course(s) and how the course(s) meets the criteria under the approved courses section of this policy.
- The amount of academic cost reimbursement, specifying tuition and/or fees, and any course/lab fees requested.
- Beginning and ending dates of class(s)
- A specification of requested time off from work for academic leave including travel time.
- If time off from work is requested, a statement demonstrating unavailability of the course except during work hours.

The PD-136 can be found at <http://www.nccommerce.com/intranet/forms/> or <http://www.osp.state.nc.us/forms/AcademicAssistForm.pdf> and all fields should be completed. The supervisor will review the request and refer the form to the Agency Training Coordinator in the Human Resources office for final approvals from Human Resources and Fiscal. To be eligible for reimbursement upon completion, all approvals should be secured prior to the beginning of class.

Employees applying for academic assistance will receive a written response from management regarding approval/disapproval of academic assistance requests, which notes any changes in the application or conditions of approval. The response will also indicate whether reimbursement for the course is subject to withholding taxes or budgetary restraints. Management may consider overall job performance or any current disciplinary action prior to approval of the application.

A minimum of two weeks from time of submission should be allowed for review, approval and notification to the employee. The employee should retain a copy of the approved application until completion of the course. Upon completion, the employee is responsible for submission of original copies of grade report and receipts for tuition and academic fees, which should be attached to the PD-136 form and forwarded to the Agency Training Coordinator for payment processing. Requests for reimbursement should be submitted within 30 days of completion of the course or receipt of grade.