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ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
WESTERN ASSOCIATION OF SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES

Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality in the Accreditation Process

June 2022

Background

The ACCJC and its member institutions provide information about the results of institutional accreditation reviews to students, the public, employers, government agencies and other accrediting bodies. These interested stakeholders rely on accreditation status as an indicator of educational quality. At a time of growing public interest in accreditation processes and its outcomes, sharing essential information with the public sustains confidence in accreditation.

The purpose of this policy is to enhance public confidence in the integrity of the accreditation process. The policy goals are:

1. To make meaningful information about institutional quality available to students and prospective students, the public, employers and government agencies;
2. To provide institutions with guidelines for communicating about their accredited status and their response to ACCJC's actions and recommendations; and
3. To protect the integrity and validity of the accreditation process by maintaining appropriate levels of confidentiality about aspects of the process.
4. To ensure the accreditation process occurs within a context of trust and confidentiality and results in an accurate appraisal of institutional quality.

Policy

Both the Commission and the institution have responsibilities to provide information about institutional quality and the accreditation process to the public. Public confidence in higher education is enhanced by disclosure of information about the outcomes of accreditation reviews. Institutional reports prepared for the accreditation process, peer review team reports, and the Commission's action letter stating the outcome of an accreditation review and the institution's resulting accreditation status, shall be made available to campus constituencies, students, and the public after the Commission takes action on the institution's accreditation.

Part A: The Commission's Responsibilities for Public Disclosure

I. Public Disclosure of Information about Accreditation Policies and Processes[1]

In accordance with the requirements of the Higher Education Act, the ACCJC discloses in its appropriate publications the procedures for applying for eligibility, candidacy, or initial accreditation, and the criteria and procedures used by the Commission in determining whether to grant, reaffirm, deny, withdraw accreditation or take any other action related to the accredited status of institutions. All commission policy documents and procedural guides and manuals, as well as related publications are available on the ACCJC website. ACCJC

[1] § 602.23(a)

maintains a website, which informs members and the public about the Commission and its practices (www.accjc.org). The agency discloses through its website the names, academic and professional qualifications, and relevant employment and organizational affiliations of the Commissioners and its principal staff.

The Commission provides regular updates to its website to provide timely information about accreditation and related activities. These include a list of Commission actions, the list of institutions scheduled for comprehensive review, and updates of Commission policies.

The Commission conducts a regular review of its policies by the Commission Policy Committee. After being approved for first reading by the Commission, institutional policies are sent to the field for review and comment, followed by submission to the Commission for second reading and adoption. The Commission announces all new or revised policies after adoption.

II. Public Disclosure of Information about Institutions Accredited by ACCJC

ACCJC maintains on its website a Directory of Member Institutions currently accredited, in candidacy status, or formerly accredited by ACCJC. The Directory includes the name of the institution, its legal address and the addresses of major additional campus sites, the name of the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the form of control, the type of accreditation or pre-accreditation (candidacy) status held by the institution, copy of the institution's most recent action letter, the date of initial accreditation, and the date when the Commission will next review the accreditation or candidacy of each institution.[2] The Commission also posts a Public Disclosure Notice when it takes an adverse action, and includes a link to the Institution's response, if any.

The Directory of Member Institutions also lists the names of institutions that were formerly accredited by the ACCJC and withdrew from accreditation or were subject to withdrawal or denial of accreditation or candidacy, and the date on which the Commission took adverse action on such institutions.

A Statement of Accredited Status is made available to each member institution and any member of the public upon request. The Statement includes information about the nature of the institution and the degrees and certificates it awards to students, its accredited status, the most recent Commission action on the accredited status of the institution, a definition of the meaning of the accredited status, a description of any follow-up reports or visits that may be required, and the institution's next comprehensive evaluation date.

If an institution misrepresents a Commission action, or uses a public forum to take issue with an action of the Commission relating to that institution, the Commission President retains the prerogative to inform the public, including through the press, about the action taken and the basis for that action.[3]

III. Public Disclosure of Information about Commission Actions on the Accredited Status of Institutions[4]

[2] § 602.23(a)(4)
[3] § 602.23 (d)(e)
[4] § 602.26(a-f)

The Commission discloses information to the public about all actions it takes on the accredited status of institutions. The Commission also notifies the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies, and other accrediting bodies of these actions within 30 days of action. It also posts this information on its website within 30 days of the action.

In cases where the Commission has taken final action to withdraw, deny or accept the withdrawal of accreditation or candidacy, or to place an institution on Probation or Show Cause, the Commission will:

a) provide the written notification to the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies at the same time as notification is provided to the college but no later than 30 days after action;

b) provide the notification to the public within one business day following the notification of Commission action to the institution; and

c) require the institution to disclose the action to all current and prospective students within seven business days of receipt of the Commission's action letter.

When the Commission takes a final adverse action, the Commission will:

a) supplement the institution's entry in the Directory of Accredited Institutions by a Public Disclosure Notice with a brief statement summarizing the reasons for the action taken. Institutions are permitted to provide a response to a Public Disclosure Notice.

b) post the Public Disclosure Notice and an electronic link to the institution's response no later than 60 days after the Commission's action.

c) provide written notification of the Public Disclosure Notice and the institution's response to the U.S. Secretary of Education no later than 60 days after the Commission's action.

In cases where an accredited or preaccredited institution decides to withdraw voluntarily from accreditation or preaccreditation, or if the institution lets its accreditation or preaccreditation lapse, the Commission provides written notification to the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies. The Commission will provide the notification within 10 business days of receiving notice from the institution of the date that it is withdrawing voluntarily or of the date on which accreditation or preaccreditation lapses.

IV. Public Disclosure of Information about How to File Complaints[5]

Federal regulations require accreditors to receive complaints against accredited institutions and to investigate complaints alleging that an institution has violated Accreditation Standards. Information about its procedures for filing complaints is posted on its website. ACCJC also requires member institutions to post information about how to file a complaint with ACCJC in the institution's information for students.

Part B: Member Institutions' Responsibilities for Public Disclosure

[5] § 602.16(a)(1)(ix); § 602.23(c); § 668.43(b)

I. Disclosure of Candidacy or Accredited Status

A member institution is required to describe its accredited status using the language prescribed in the Commission's *Policy on Representation of Accredited Status*. When the institution refers to its accredited status during a period in which its accreditation status includes a sanction of Warning, Probation or Show Cause, the institution must disclose that information.

II. Disclosure of the Results of an Accreditation Review

The CEO of the institution is responsible for informing the campus community of the accreditation action taken by the Commission and the reasons for the action. If the accreditation action includes a sanction of Warning, Probation or Show Cause, or if the institution's accreditation has been withdrawn, the institution is obligated to provide that information to its students within seven business days following receipt of the Commission's action letter informing the institution of its accreditation status.

The Commission requires each accredited institution to make public the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report, the peer review team report, and the Commission action letter by placing the documents on the institution's website. Further, if an institution is required to maintain a teach-out plan and/or teach-out agreement, the institution is required to make the approved teach-out plan and/or teach-out agreement and reasons for it publicly available by posting it to the institution's website.[6]

III. Information about the Institution's Accreditors, Including the ACCJC and any other Specialized or Programmatic Accrediting Bodies, and State, Tribal or other Authorizing Bodies

The institution must post to its website and include in its catalog clear and accurate information about the agencies that have accredited it. Under federal regulations, an institution must make readily available to enrolled and prospective students the names of associations, agencies or governmental bodies that accredit, approve or license the institution and its programs and the procedures by which documents describing an institution's accreditation, tribal approval or licensing will be made available to students and prospective students.[7]

IV. Information about Contact Information for Filing Complaints with the ACCJC and with the Institution's State Approval or Licensing Agency[8]

The institution must make readily available to enrolled and prospective students the contact information for filing complaints against the institution with the agencies that accredit and that provide state licensing or approval, or tribal approval, to the institution. Enrolled and prospective students are to be referred to the Complaint Process and Complaint Policy on the ACCJC's website at www.accjc.org.

V. Information about Evaluation Visits to the Institution

[6] § 668.43(a)(19)
[7] § 668.43(a)(6)
[8] § 668.43(b)

The Commission requires that the CEO notify the campus community of the date and purpose of each comprehensive review and any Follow-Up Reports or other peer review team visits requested by the Commission. Key elements in that notification to the campus community shall include the following, as appropriate:

- Notice of the opportunity for submission of third-party comments by the public and the process for doing so;
- Information regarding where and how the Accreditation Standards may be accessed;
- Information regarding the implementation of the institutional self-evaluation process, the development of the Institutional Self-Evaluation Report, and a call for widespread participation; and
- Information regarding the peer review visit, team composition, dates of the visit, and team schedule and activities. Institutions are expected to publicize times and locations during the visit when, during comprehensive reviews, peer review team members have scheduled open meetings to discuss with any member of the campus community any issue related to the institution's accreditation.

The Commission's Responsibility for Confidentiality

I. Should the institution fail to make its Institutional Self-Evaluation Report, the peer review team report, or Commission action letter available to the public, or if it misrepresents the contents of the reports, the Commission retains the prerogative to release the reports to the public and provide accurate statements about the institution's accreditation status.

II. Information about actions under review or appeal (denial of candidacy or initial accreditation, or withdrawal of accreditation) will not be disclosed until a final decision is rendered, unless required by federal regulation. Review and appeal procedures are found in the "Policy on Institutional Appeals."

III. The institutional file retained in the Commission office is part of the private relationship with the institution and is therefore not available to the public.

IV. The Commission does not release contact information of its peer reviewers to the public.

V. In order to assure the accuracy and appropriateness of institutional information which is made public, the Commission expects peer review team members to keep confidential all institutional information read or heard before, during, and after the visit. Except in the context of Commission work, team members are expected to refrain from discussing information obtained in the course of service. Personal notes and working documents are included in the scope of confidential information.

Member Institution's Responsibilities for Confidentiality

I. The institutional CEO is sent a draft of each peer review team report for purposes of correcting errors of fact. The CEO is expected to keep the draft report confidential.

II. The institution is expected to refrain from releasing personal contact information about peer review team members to the public.

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