ACCREDITING COMMISSION FOR COMMUNITY AND JUNIOR COLLEGES
Western Association of Schools and Colleges

Policy on the Rights and Responsibilities of the Commission and Member Institutions

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Background

Students, the public, higher education bodies, and various levels of government need assurance that an accredited institution is of high quality and possesses integrity. American higher education has chosen to use a voluntary, non-governmental, self-regulatory process to provide this assurance. Such a process must balance institutional autonomy, independence, and freedom with an institution's responsibilities to its various constituencies. Therefore, the process must carefully delineate the rights and responsibilities of both the accrediting bodies and the institutions they accredit. Mutual understanding and respect for the rights and responsibilities of each party will assure that higher education remains fundamentally sound, responsible, responsive, and effective, so that the public may have confidence in the integrity and quality of educational institutions with a minimum need for government regulations.

Policy

The Commission is committed to partnering with a member institution in a voluntary non-governmental accreditation process that results in a mutual commitment to self-regulation, quality assurance to the public, and continuous institutional improvement. The Commission and its member institutions share rights and responsibilities to develop and promulgate Accreditation Standards and an agreed-upon accrediting process for comprehensive institutional evaluations. The institutional Chief Executive Officer is the chief representative of the institution to the Commission. The Commission communicates to the institution primarily through the Chief Executive Officer.

Policy Elements

A. Development and Promulgation of Commission Standards

The Commission has the responsibility to develop standards[1] which are consistent with the purposes of accreditation, which are sufficiently flexible to allow diversity and effective program development, and which allow and encourage institutional/programmatic freedom and autonomy, and allow the institution to exercise its rights within a reasonable set of parameters relevant to the quality of education.

The Commission has the responsibility to provide opportunities for broad participation of affected constituencies in the development and acceptance of the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies, and to permit institutional input on new or revised policies by providing for an opportunity for review at public meetings of the Commission and to consider such input from a member institution when making changes to the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

[1] The Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies together represent the Commission standards. Implementing procedures can be found in the ACCJC Guides and Manuals.

A member institution has the responsibility to participate in development of the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies and in the Commission's periodic reviews. The Commission has the responsibility to develop and promulgate Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies that meet the requirements of the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) regarding a member institution's eligibility for Title IV. The institutional Chief Executive Officer and the Accreditation Liaison Officer have the responsibility to communicate and promulgate information to their institutional constituencies about the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies, any changes to them, and the institution's plans for changes needed to comply with them. A member institution has the responsibility to communicate directly to the Commission any comments on or concerns about the Commission's Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and policies.

B. Institutional Records of Accreditation

The Commission has the responsibility to provide, when requested, copies of correspondence pertaining to that institution to the Chief Executive Officer and, when appropriate, to the Accreditation Liaison Officer.

A member institution has the responsibility to develop an effective mechanism to ensure the internal coordination of accreditation activities. A member institution has the responsibility to maintain all correspondence and records on the accreditation history of the institution, and on substantive change applications and the outcomes of the application.

A member institution has the responsibility to share records of the institution's accreditation history, as appropriate, within the campus community.

C. Information Collection

The Commission has the responsibility to specify items to be addressed in all reports to the Commission, require only information that is relevant to the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies, and respect the confidentiality of information required and evaluated in the accreditation process. The Commission also collects information required by USDE regulations.

A member institution has the responsibility to: determine how to design and conduct the institutional self evaluation process, involve broad and appropriate constituent groups in the preparation and process of the Self Evaluation Report of Educational Quality and Institutional Effectiveness, disclose to the Commission all information which is required to carry out the Commission evaluation and accreditation functions and respect the confidentiality of information required and evaluated in the accreditation process.

A member institution has the responsibility to maintain records of formal student complaints and grievances between each review cycle, and make them available to the Commission and evaluation team upon request, in accord with federal regulations. A member institution must submit substantive change proposals for approval by the Commission before such substantive changes are implemented.

D. Site Visits and Reviews

The Commission has the right to: conduct site visits as required under the Commission's adopted accreditation processes; exercise its discretion whether or not to conduct joint, concurrent, coordinated, consolidated, or phased visits when requested by an institution; and note in its accreditation documents any attempt by professional organizations, collective bargaining groups, or special interest groups to impede or interfere with participation in the educational quality and institutional effectiveness review process and visit. The Commission has the right to monitor and report as required by USDE regulations for recognized accrediting agencies.

A member institution has the right to request the Commission to hold joint, concurrent, coordinated, consolidated, or phased visits; and review the list of proposed evaluation team members in order to avoid potential conflicts of interest.

The Commission has the responsibility to select evaluation team members, who are competent by virtue of experience, training, and orientation, and are sensitive to the unique mission of the institution. Teams will include both academic and administrative representatives. Faculty members will be included among the academic representatives on comprehensive evaluation teams. Prior to the selection of the evaluation team, the Commission will consult with the institution to determine any special needs or concerns. The Commission has the responsibility to assure that evaluation team members are impartial, objective, and without conflict of interest and that the evaluation team is of an appropriate size and composition for the purposes of the site visit. The institution has the right and responsibility to review the evaluation team members and report any conflicts of interest or concerns to the Commission before the team composition is finalized. The Commission has the responsibility to assure that evaluation team members keep confidential all institutional information examined or heard before, during, and after the site visit. The Commission has the responsibility to set the length of a site visit, ordinarily three days for a review and one or more days, as needed, for a follow-up or any other special visit. The Commission has the responsibility to set the dates of the site visit in consultation with the institution.

The Commission also has the responsibility to communicate its findings derived from the site visit to the institution; ensure that the Evaluation Team Report identifies and distinguishes clearly between findings, conclusions and recommendations related to deficiencies in meeting the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and Commission policies, and those recommendations representing suggestions for quality improvement; provide the Chief Executive Officer of the institution with an opportunity to correct all factual errors in the draft External Evaluation Report; and provide supplemental materials pertinent to the facts and conclusions in the External Evaluation Report before it takes action on the Institutional Self Evaluation and External Evaluation Report.

A member institution has the responsibility to provide maximum opportunity for communication between all relevant constituencies and the evaluation team, and ensure that professional organizations, collective bargaining groups, or special interest groups not impede or interfere with reports, visits, and reviews. A member institution also has the responsibility to make the External Evaluation Report available to the public. A member institution has the responsibility to acknowledge that specialized accrediting agency recognition, local governmental requirements and/or collective bargaining agreements, in and of themselves, do not abrogate or substitute for institutional and employee

obligations to comply with the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies.

E. Accreditation Decisions

A member institution has the right to withdraw a request for any status of accreditation at any time prior to the decision on that request. A member institution also has the right to appeal an accreditation decision to deny accreditation or to terminate accreditation in accordance with the policies of the Commission and to maintain accredited status during the appeal. A member institution has the right to withdraw from Commission membership by sending a written notice to the Commission of the intent to withdraw as of the end of the institutional semester or term. Ordinarily, the notice must be sent with adequate time for the Commission to approve the request at its next scheduled meeting[2] prior to the anticipated date of withdrawal of accreditation.

The Commission has the responsibility to: permit the withdrawal of a request for any status of accreditation at any time prior to the decision on that request; require an institution voluntarily withdrawing from Commission membership to take appropriate steps to notify its student body, the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state/governmental licensing and authorizing agencies, and the public, and where appropriate to follow the Commission's "Policy on Closing an Institution"; make decisions solely on the basis of published standards, policies, and procedures using information available and made known to the institution; avoid conflicts of interest in the decision-making process; and ensure the confidentiality of the deliberations in which accreditation decisions are made, and observe due process in all deliberations.

The Commission also has the responsibility to: notify institutions promptly in writing of accreditation decisions and give reasons for the actions; ensure that the communication of the final accreditation decision identifies and clearly distinguishes between recommendations related to deficiencies in meeting the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and Commission policies and recommendations representing suggestions for quality improvement; publish accrediting decisions, both affirmative and negative, except for initial denial of candidacy or eligibility (which are not made public); and maintain the confidentiality of the External Evaluation Report until after the Commission has acted on it. The Commission may require that corrective action be taken if an institution releases information misrepresenting or distorting any accreditation action taken by the Commission or the status of its affiliation with the Commission. If the institution is not prompt in taking corrective action, the Commission may release a public statement providing the correct information.

A member institution has the responsibility to accept the Commission's action after availing itself of its due process rights afforded in Commission policy, and to make public the Commission's action letter and the External Evaluation Report as well as the Institutional Self Evaluation Report. A member institution has the responsibility to uphold the credibility and integrity of the accreditation process by accurately portraying the Commission's actions and helping institutional constituencies to understand the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and Commission policies pertinent to an accreditation action taken on an institution. A member institution has a responsibility to respond to evaluation team or Commission recommendations within the time parameters set by the Commission.

[2] The Commission meets in January and June of each calendar year to take actions on institutions.

F. Third Party Comment for Candidacy, Accreditation, or Reaffirmation of Accreditation

A third-party comment assists the Commission as it considers applications for candidacy, accreditation, or reaffirmation of accreditation. When an institution is undergoing a review, the Commission requires the institution's chief executive officer to notify the campus community and public of the opportunity for submission of third-party comments and the process for doing so. Such comments must be submitted in writing, signed, and accompanied by the affiliation, return address and telephone number of the correspondent. Commission staff will review all third-party comments to assess its applicability to Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, or Commission policies. In order to ensure evaluation by the external evaluation team, third-party comments should be received by the Commission no later than five weeks before the evaluation team visit. The team evaluation of third party comment will become part of the Commission review of the college at the scheduled Commission meeting. Institutions will be provided an opportunity to review applicable third-party comments.[3] All applicable third-party comments will be provided to the Commission for consideration.

G. Follow-Up

The Commission has the right to take action to assure that a member institution meets its responsibilities and to request periodic reports, special reports, annual reports, additional visits, and consultative activities relevant to the institution's accreditation status. The Commission has the right to request the reevaluation of an institution at any time as a means for monitoring specific developments within an institution between comprehensive evaluations.

If a member institution fails to make complete, accurate and honest disclosure of information required by the Commission, or if the institution does not comply with Commission requests, directives, decisions and policies, and make complete, accurate, and honest disclosure, then the Commission may act to impose a sanction, or to deny or revoke candidacy or accreditation.[4]

H. Special Report and Visit

The Commission requests a special report when it receives information that raises significant concerns about the institution's compliance with Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards, and/or Commission policies. The institution may be required to provide a narrative report, evidentiary documents, and/or documents prepared by

[3] If it is determined, in the review of the third party comment, there is the need to hold the contact confidential for legal, investigative or other purposes, then the institution will not be notified of the report made. Also, if the U.S. Department of Education requests certain reported information remain confidential, then there will be no notification to the institution. 34 C.F.R. § 602.27(b).

[4] Eligibility Requirement 21. See also the Policy on Public Disclosure and Confidentiality, § II: "If an institution conducts its affairs so that it becomes a matter of public concern, misrepresents a Commission action, or uses the public forum to take issue with an action of the Commission relating to that institution, the Commission President may announce to the public, including the press, the action taken and the basis for that action, making public any pertinent information available to the Commission."

external third parties, such as external audits. The Commission may require a team visit, which will be scheduled after the due date for the special report. The Commission's letter requesting a special report will identify all specific requirements to be addressed by the institution.

The Commission has the responsibility to provide written notice to the institution of the action taken in relation to a special report or visit, support improvement of the educational effectiveness of an institution, and work with the institution to identify appropriate assistance.