
Policy on Student and Public Complaints Against Institutions

June 2019

Accreditation by the Accrediting Commission of Community and Junior Colleges, Western Association of Schools and Colleges (the Commission) is an expression of confidence that an institution is satisfactorily achieving its mission, and that it meets or exceeds the Commission's Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and abides by Commission policies. The Commission is concerned with institutional integrity and with performance consistent with Accreditation Standards and policies. While it cannot intervene in the internal procedures of institutions or act as a regulatory body, the Commission can and does respond to complaints regarding allegations of conditions at affiliated institutions that raise significant questions about the institution's compliance with the Accreditation Standards expected of an accredited institution.

The Commission does not consider allegations concerning the personal lives of individuals connected with its affiliated institutions. It assumes no responsibility for adjudicating isolated individual grievances between students, faculty, or members of the public and individual institutions. The Commission will not act as a court of appeal in matters of admission, granting or transfer of academic credit, grades, fees, student financial aid, student discipline, collective bargaining, faculty appointments, promotion, tenure and dismissals or similar matters.

The Commission requires that each accredited institution have in place student grievance and public complaint policies and procedures that are reasonable, fairly administered, and well publicized. A complainant filing a complaint with the Commission should demonstrate that a serious effort has been made to pursue all review procedures provided by the institution.

Complaints are considered only when made in writing, when the complainant is clearly identified, and the complainant's address is included. Complaints must be submitted to the Commission within 18 months from the date of the alleged occurrence. Substantial evidence should be included in support of the allegation that the institution is in significant violation of the Eligibility Requirements, Accreditation Standards and Commission policies (together Commission's Standards). Such evidence should state relevant and provable facts.

When the Commission receives a complaint about a candidate or accredited institution, it reviews that information to determine if it is relevant to the compliance of that institution with the Commission's Standards. If appropriate, such information may be referred to the institution and/or to the visiting team next scheduled to evaluate the institution. The Commission at all times reserves the right to request information of an affiliated institution and to visit that institution for purposes of fact-finding, consistent with Commission policy. If Commission investigation yields credible evidence that indicates a systemic problem that calls into question the institution's ability to meet the Commission's Standards, the Commission may invoke the sanctions provided for in policy.

Procedures

1. It is the complainant's responsibility to do the following:
 - a. State the complaint in the clearest possible terms.
 - b. Provide, in writing, a clear description of the evidence upon which the allegation is based.
 - c. Demonstrate that all remedies available at the institution (grievance procedures, appeals, hearings, etc.) have been exhausted. The complainant should describe what has been done in this regard.
 - d. Acknowledge awareness that Commission staff may send a copy of the complaint to the Chief Executive Officer of the institution.
 - e. Include name and address.
 - f. Sign the complaint.
2. Within ten working days of the receipt of a complaint it will be acknowledged in writing and initially reviewed by the staff of the Commission. Individual complaints, whether acted upon or not by the Commission, will be retained in Commission files.
3. If the Commission staff finds the complaint to be not within the scope of Commission policies and jurisdiction, the complainant will be so notified.
4. If the complaint appears to be within the scope of Commission policies and jurisdiction, and is substantially documented, a copy of the complaint will be forwarded to the institution's Chief Executive Officer (and copied to the institution's Accreditation Liaison Officer), who will be asked to respond to the complaint by addressing a letter and any supporting evidence to the appropriate Vice President of the Commission within thirty working days.
5. The Commission's Vice President will review the complaint, the response, and evidence submitted by the institution's president, and will determine one of the following:
 - a. That the complaint will not be processed further. The complainant will be so notified within ten working days.
 - b. That the complaint has sufficient substance to warrant further investigation. If the Commission decides to investigate a complaint, it will inform the complainant of its decision to investigate at the same time it informs the institution of its intent to investigate.
6. As part of its investigation, the Commission may request information of the institution and may send representatives to visit that institution for purposes of fact-finding. The Commission may also request information of other agencies that accredit the institution or authorize it to operate, and of the U.S. Department of Education. If further investigation is warranted, the time to conduct the investigation may vary considerably depending on the circumstances and the nature of the complaint. Applicable complaints may be provided to the comprehensive review team chair for investigation during the external evaluation site visit.

7. The Commission will prepare a Report of the Findings of the Complaint Investigation. Prior to the Commission's disposition of the complaint, the institution will have an opportunity to respond in writing within thirty working days to the findings of the investigation.
8. The Commission will consider the Complaint, the Report of the Findings of the Complaint Investigation, and any institutional response to the findings of the investigation in reaching a disposition on the Complaint. Although every effort will be made to expedite a decision, it is not possible to guarantee a specific time frame in which the process will be completed.
9. If the Commission's deliberations conclude that there is credible evidence that the institution is not meeting Accreditation Standards or complying with Commission policies, the Commission may (a) provide directives to the institution to take immediate corrective actions, or (b) invoke any of the sanctions provided for in policy. The Commission will also schedule appropriate monitoring of the institution's subsequent response, including calling for Special Reports and visits by Commission representatives.
10. The decision is final and will be communicated by the Vice President of the Commission to the institution and the complainant. If the complaint was referred to the ACCJC by another agency, the Commission will provide that agency with copies of correspondence that state the outcome of the complaint within ten working days of the Commission decision on the disposition of the complaint. The Commission will also provide the U.S. Department of Education notice of the disposition of any complaint that directly or indirectly affects an institution's eligibility for Title IV funds.
11. The Commission will keep a record of student and public complaints against member institutions. Commission staff will report to the Commission annually regarding the status and resolution of student and public complaints against member institutions.

Adopted June 1972; Revised January 1984, January 1993; Edited October 1997; Revised June 2001; Edited August 2007; Revised January 2013; Edited April 2013; Revised June 2019

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