Policy on Public Disclosure


Background

The Commission Bylaws believe that define the two major responsibilities of institutional accreditation: are (1) quality assurance to the public that education provided by accredited institutions meets acceptable levels of quality and (2) promotion of continuous improvement of member institutions. Accreditation systematically accomplishes these purposes through standards of good practice, educational quality and institutional effectiveness review, institutional self evaluation study (formerly self study), external evaluation through peer review and recommendations, Commission actions, and institutional follow-up. The purpose of this policy is to strengthen the ability of institutions and the Commission to fulfill mutual obligations to inform, to educate, and to enhance the level of public confidence in higher education institutions in voluntary, non-governmental accreditation, within the region and across regions. Specifically, the policy goals are:

1. to make a meaningful contribution to the body of information available to consumers of higher education services and to facilitate easier access to such information;

2. to provide institutions with a way to communicate with their multiple publics regarding accreditation matters; and,

3. to enhance public understanding of accreditation, and thereby to enhance public confidence in institutions of higher education through peer review, self regulation, and institutional improvement.

Policy

The Commission adheres to certain policy principles. These are:

1. both the Commission and the institution have responsibilities to provide information about institutional quality to the public;

2. the Commission and the institution should maintain appropriate levels of confidentiality during the various stages of the accreditation process that lead to the Commission’s decision. The accreditation process must occur within a context of trust and confidentiality if it is to result in an accurate appraisal of institutional quality. The efficacy of the accreditation process requires that institutions provide accurate information, candid self-analysis, and evidence of the degree to which they meet Accreditation Standards. It also requires that the External Evaluation Report (formerly Team report) provide candid and targeted analysis and recommendations for improvement;

3. institutions themselves should regularly disclose information about their effectiveness, thereby taking responsibility for major elements of public disclosure;
4. the Commission should utilize consistent disclosure approaches for all member institutions;

5. the Commission accredits institutions rather than programs. The information it supplies to the public is limited to matters of institutional quality as defined in the Standards of accreditation. The Commission does not provide information about the quality of specific programs within an institution;

6. the Commission recognizes and promotes the diversity of institutions as a strength of our society. Consistent with the principle that the Commission evaluates each institution on the basis of its own mission, the Commission refrains from making public comparisons of institutions; and,

7. the accreditation process uses standards of quality in higher education to evaluate institutional processes and outcomes. Public disclosure of accreditation information about an institution by the Commission is limited to matters addressed in the Eligibility Requirements, Standards of accreditation, Commission policies, and related actions on institutions.

Policy Elements

ACCJC The Commission has the responsibility to provide:

I. Information for the General Public about the Accredited Status of Individual Institutions

A. Commission Actions

Institutions applying for candidacy or initial accreditation and accredited institutions undergoing periodic evaluation will be reviewed by the Accrediting Commission. The Commission will examine institutional documents, the Institutional Self Evaluation Report, the External Evaluation team Report, and documents from previous evaluations. The Commission makes a determination about the accredited status of the institution, using its Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions.

In accordance with the requirements of the Higher Education Act (HEA) §602.27(c), the Commission also discloses in its Accreditation Reference Handbook, the Eligibility, Candidacy and Initial Accreditation Manual, or other appropriate publications, each type of accreditation and candidacy granted by the Commission, the procedures for applying for eligibility, candidacy, or initial accreditation, the criteria and procedures used by the Commission in determining whether to grant, reaffirm, deny, or take any other action related to the accredited status of institutions; the names, academic and professional qualifications, and relevant employment and organizational affiliations of the Commission and principal staff; the institutions the Commission currently accredits or recognizes in candidacy status; and the date when the Commission will next review or consider the accreditation or candidacy of each institution. Other matters of public interest are the domain of the institution.
Under the provisions of the U.S. Secretary’s Procedures and Criteria for the Recognition of Accrediting Agencies (§602.2), only denial, or termination of accreditation or candidacy are defined as adverse actions by the Commission. Appeals of denial or termination are governed by the provisions of the WASC Constitution.

**B. ACCJC Commission Institutional Information**

Membership information is published on the ACCJC Commission website and includes the name of the institution and location, the chief executive officer, the form of control, each type of accreditation or pre-accreditation (candidacy) held by the institution, and the date of initial accreditation, if applicable. and the date of the next comprehensive review.

**DC. Commission Responsibilities to the Institution**

The Commission will prepare information for the institution which outlines the reasons for the action, the follow-up and the monitoring activities which will be required, and the time frame within which the institution must remedy the conditions which led to the action.

If an institution cannot document that it is in compliance with the Eligibility Requirements, Standards, and Commission policies within a maximum of two years after the initial action, the Commission will take an adverse action. In keeping with the provisions of the Higher Education Act of 1965, as amended (HEA), the Commission defines adverse action as only denial, or termination of accreditation or candidacy. If the Commission determines that there is good cause, the Commission may extend the time allowed for the institution to demonstrate that it meets or exceeds the Eligibility Requirements, Standards, and Commission policies.

**ED. Disclosure of Commission Actions on the Accredited Status of Institutions**

Actions of the Commission regarding the accredited status of institutions as described in the Policy on Commission Actions on Institutions are public actions. The Commission publishes the status of each institution in appropriate publications such as Commission Newsletters, and on the ACCJC Commission website. The Commission also provides written notification to the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies, and the public no later than 30 days after it makes a decision on the accreditation status of an institution, as required by the Higher Education Act HEA. In cases where the Commission has taken final action to terminate, deny or accept the withdrawal of accreditation or to terminate, deny or accept the withdrawal of candidacy or to place an institution on warning, probation or show cause, the Commission provides written notification to the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies and the public at the same time within 24 hours of the notification of the institution is notified of such a final action. In cases where the Commission has taken final action to terminate, deny or accept the withdrawal of accreditation or to terminate, deny or accept the withdrawal of candidacy or to place an institution on probation or show cause such notification will be supplemented by a brief statement summarizing the reasons for the action taken. Affected
institutions can make official comments to the statement summarizing the reasons for the action taken. The statements and links to the institutional comments will be posted on the Commission website no later than 60 days after the Commission’s action.

The Commission also provides written notification to the U.S. Secretary of Education, appropriate state licensing or authorizing agencies and accrediting bodies, and upon request the public if an accredited or preaccredited institution decides to withdraw voluntarily from accreditation or preaccreditation or if the institution lets its accreditation or preaccreditation lapse. The notification will be provided within 30 days of receiving notification from the institution that it is withdrawing voluntarily or of the date on which accreditation or preaccreditation lapses.

If a specific inquiry is made about an institution which has been warned, placed on probation, or issued a show cause order, the college president, institutional chief executive officer shall inform the inquirer that such action has been taken and the reasons therefore.

If an institution so conducts its affairs 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 may announce, through its President, the action taken and the basis for that action, making public any pertinent information available to it.

E. Statement of Accredited Status
A Statement of Accredited Status will be prepared for each member institution. A Statement of Accredited Status will also be available to the institution and the public upon request. The Statement includes information about the nature of the institution and its scope, its accredited status, the nature of Commission actions regarding the institution, a definition of the meaning of the accredited status, and a discussion of any terms that might require explanation. The Commission has adopted a set of basic information elements that will be made available in Commission publications, or on request, about the accredited status of individual institutions. This information will be recorded and disseminated in a common format.

II. Information about the Application of the Accreditation Processes at a Particular Institution

A. The Commission publishes the names of institutions scheduled for an comprehensive educational quality and institutional effectiveness review annually in the Commission newsletter. This notice also includes an invitation for third-party comment and information regarding how, and to whom, that comment should be delivered. The institutional evaluation schedule is available to the public upon request.

B. The Commission provides each institution under review with a roster of the evaluation team members, including their positions and institutional affiliations. Institutions may object to a proposed team member for cause. These rosters are updated regularly as evaluation team membership is adjusted.
C. The Commission requires the college institution to make public the Institutional Self Evaluation Report, the External Evaluation team Report, and the Commission action letter. The Commission itself neither does not makes public Institutional Self Evaluation Reports, the External Evaluation team Reports or the Commission action letters public, unless the institution has misrepresented the findings of the External Evaluation team Report, or failed to make the Institutional Self study Evaluation Report, the External Evaluation team Report, or Commission action letter public. Should the institution or others issue selective and biased releases or use the public forum to take issue with Commission actions, the Commission and its staff will be free to make all the documents public. In the event of such misrepresentation, or failure to disclose, the Commission is free to disclose the reports and provide accurate statements about the institution’s accredited status.

D. The Commission does not generally disclose information about an institution’s potential accredited status before a Commission action is taken. Information about actions under review or appeal (denial of candidacy or initial accreditation, or termination 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 Review of Commission Actions and in the Western Association Schools and Colleges (WASC) Constitution.

E. The institutional file in the Commission office is part of the private relationship with the institution and is therefore not available to the public. Upon request, the Commission will disclose the number of complaints received about the institution since the last comprehensive evaluation, educational quality and institutional effectiveness review, the general nature of those complaints, and their resolution or status. In accordance with its policy on Student and Public Complaints against Institutions (Accreditation Reference Handbook), the Commission will only include in that disclosure formal, signed complaints that are within the Commission’s jurisdiction and which have been referred to the institution. Multiple complaints about a single issue will be assessed to determine how those complaints should be recorded. The Commission informs the institution when such an inquiry is received.

F. In order to assure the accuracy and appropriateness of institutional information which is made public, the Commission expects evaluation team members to keep confidential all institutional information read or heard before, during, and after the team site visit. Except in the context of Commission work, evaluation team members are limited in their discussion to information contained in the public reports. Sources of information that should remain confidential include the current Institutional Self study Evaluation Report; previous college and External Evaluation team Reports; interviews and written communication with campus personnel, students, trustees, and community members; and evaluation team discussions.

III. Information about the Commission and its Processes

A. The Commission maintains a website which informs members and the public about the Commission and its activities (www.accjc.org);
A. The Commission newsletter is published at least twice yearly annually to provide timely information about accreditation. The newsletter includes a review of major accreditation issues in the region, a list of Commission actions, and the list of colleges institutions scheduled for comprehensive visits educational quality and institutional effectiveness review, and updates of Commission policies. The newsletter is distributed to all member institutions, other accreditors, and appropriate higher education and government associations and agencies. The newsletter is available to the public on request; on the Commission website;

B. The Commission publishes handbooks, manuals, and other materials which describe the Commission and its processes; these are distributed available to all member institutions and to the public on request; on the Commission website. These materials are free to members and other accreditors and are available for a nominal charge to others;

D. The Commission and Commission staff make presentations before organizations within higher education, government, and the public at large. The Commission and its staff participate in regional and national forums on subjects related to quality assurance and institutional improvement; and

E. The Commission regularly renews its commitment to the principles expressed in its policies through a process of review by the Commission. When new issues in the field of higher education or changes in the United States U.S. Department of Education emerge, policies may be created, revised or eliminated. First reading Commission policies are sent to the field for review and comment, followed by submission to the Commission for second reading and adoption.

Member Institution’s Responsibilities

Institutions, as well as accrediting agencies, are accountable for honest and open communication with the public on institution-related issues in which there is a legitimate public interest. Honesty, openness, and concern for its constituents are indicators of the integrity with which the institution conducts its interactions and communications with its public. Ultimately, this institutional integrity is one indicator of institutional quality and effectiveness, and the Commission includes these matters in its evaluation of institutions. The Commission relies on member institutions to conduct themselves in accordance with these principles of institutional responsibility.

I. Institutional Self Evaluation Study and other Accreditation External Evaluation Reports:

A. Self Evaluation Studies. The Commission relies on the strong sense of collegiality, mutual respect, and trust in its relations with member institutions. The privilege of self-regulation requires openness with the public as well;

The Institutional Self Evaluation study Report is the property of the institution which developed it, but the Institutional Self Evaluation study Report should receive wide distribution within the institution. The Commission recognizes that some institutions may be governed by public disclosure statutes and expects that institutions will conduct themselves in accord with those laws and regulations.
B. **External Evaluation Reports.** The Commission requires that institutions share widely throughout the institution the findings and recommendations that result from the team site visit and accreditation process, especially with those that contributed to the institutional self evaluation process study. Once an on-site evaluation is complete, institutions are required to make the report public and readily available through a wide distribution. The institution is required to publicize the location of the team reports.

II. **On-Site Visit Evaluation**

The Commission requires that the chief executive officer notify the campus community of the date and purpose of each comprehensive evaluation educational quality and institutional effectiveness review and any follow-up activity or reports requested by the Commission. Key elements in that notification to the campus community should include the following:

1. Notice of the opportunity for submission of third-party comments by the public and the process for doing so;

2. Information regarding where and how the Commission’s Accreditation Standards may be accessed at the institution;

3. Information regarding the implementation of the institutional self evaluation process study, the development of the Institutional Self Evaluation study Report, and a call for widespread participation; and,

4. Information regarding the site team visit, evaluation team composition, dates of the visit, and team schedule and activities. Institutions are expected to publicize times and locations during the visit when evaluation team members will be available to meet informally with any member of the campus community on any accreditation issue.

III. **Dissemination of information within by individual institutions regarding Commission Actions**

The Commission delegates the primary responsibility for communicating information about its accreditation status to the institution. However, the Commission action letter to the chief executive officer requires that there be broad and timely dissemination of the Institutional Self Evaluation Report, the External Evaluation Report, and the Commission action letter within the institution, especially to those who were signatories to the Institutional Self study Evaluation Report, and to the public via the institution’s website. Any excerpting of External Evaluation team Reports for use by those outside the institution must be accompanied by explanatory information which discusses the complete context of accreditation. Any use of the External Evaluation team Reports which misquotes, misleads, or misrepresents findings or recommendations is grounds for Commission release of the complete External Evaluation team Report. The Chair of the institutional Governing Board and system or district Chancellor chief executive officer (where applicable) also receive a copy of the action letter and the External Evaluation team Report.
IV. Representation of Eligibility, Candidacy, or Accredited Status

A. The institution is required to describe its accredited status using the language prescribed in the Commission Policy on Representation of Accredited Status and to avoid expanding that representation to include other matters such as transfer of credit. The address and telephone number of the Commission office should be included when the institution references its accredited status, including catalogs and recruiting materials. Institutions must send a copy of the institutional catalog to the Commission office as each iteration is published;

B. The chief executive officer of the institution is responsible for informing the campus community of the accreditation action taken by the Commission and the reasons for the action. This communication should be coordinated with district or system officers as appropriate. If the accreditation action includes any special status, the institution is obligated to provide that information to all current and prospective students and staff in a timely manner; and,

C. When the institution refers to its accredited status in any publications or advertisements during a period in which its accreditation may be subject to special scrutiny, the institution must disclose that information.