



Accreditation Policy

Communication in the Accreditation Process

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Contents

- I. Purpose
- II. Statement of Policy
- III. Confidentiality and Appropriate Distribution of Accreditation Materials
- IV. Public Disclosure of Accreditation Information by the Commission
- V. Notification of Accreditation Decisions
- VI. Accurate Representation of Accredited Status by the Institution
- VII. Communication and Information Sharing with State Agencies and Others
- VIII. Communication between the Commission and Accredited or Candidate Institutions
- IX. Commission Reporting to the U.S. Department of Education

I. Purpose

The purpose of this policy is to outline the Middle States Commission on Higher Education's (the Commission) expectations regarding transparent communication about the accreditation process, the appropriate distribution of accreditation materials, and the accurate representation of the accreditation status of member institutions.

II. Statement of Policy

The Commission values transparency in the accreditation process and is committed to sharing essential information with the public about its standards, procedures, and the status of its member institutions. The Commission also recognizes that certain aspects of the accreditation process require confidentiality to promote open and honest self-reflection and evaluation.

Member institutions must hold themselves accountable for open and honest communication, which the Commission considers to be a matter of institutional integrity. As a Requirement of Affiliation, every accredited and candidate institutions makes freely available to the Commission accurate, fair, and complete information on all aspects of the institution and its operations. In addition, every accredited and candidate institution is expected to provide the Commission with any information deemed pertinent to a determination of its accreditation status. If an institution conducts its affairs in ways which generate serious public concern, the Commission may request additional information in accordance with its monitoring procedures.

III. Confidentiality and Appropriate Distribution of Accreditation Materials

The Commission maintains confidentiality throughout the accreditation process to allow for open and honest self-reflection by the institution and open and honest evaluation by the Commission and its representatives. Unless explicitly permitted by the institution or required by Commission policies or applicable law, the Commission does not share accreditation materials (documents used in any accreditation process) with any of an institution's constituencies, with governmental or any other public or private agency, or with individuals. Discussion during meetings of the

Commission and its committees is confidential. Any proposal for action made throughout the accreditation decision-making process is confidential until a formal action is taken by the Commission.

As part of the accreditation decision-making process, confidential copies of accreditation materials are provided to the members of the team (but not to Evaluation Team Associates), members of committees, and members of the Commission. Accreditation materials may include institutional and team reports, institutional responses, the chair's brief, or any correspondence with the Commission.

Accreditation materials (with the exception of the chair's brief) become the property of the institution following Commission review, and the institution may release such materials to any audience, including the Commission action, *after* the formal Commission action has been taken. Thus, the ultimate responsibility for distributing or providing public access to these documents rests with the institution. The Commission expects the institution to make the materials readily available or distribute them as widely as possible to all constituencies.

The Commission's multi-layered review process may result in a Commission action other than the one proposed by the team or the reviewers. Therefore, when distributing a specific document, the institution should indicate that the document is only one piece of a much larger whole. An institution may use excerpts from a document, provided that the excerpts do not misrepresent the original findings. Copies of the entire report should be readily available upon request.

Correspondence between the Commission and an institution should be treated confidentially by both parties. The Commission may, however, be required to share such correspondence on a confidential basis with other recognized accrediting bodies, with the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), or with the U.S. Department of Education (USDE). The institution also may share correspondence with the USDE in conjunction with its application to participate in Title IV programs.

IV. Public Disclosure of Accreditation Information by the Commission

The Commission discloses information about accreditation requirements as well as accreditation activities and actions on its web site (www.msche.org).

Accreditation Actions

The Commission provides information about the status of its member institutions (accredited and candidate institutions) on its web site (www.msche.org). The Commission notifies its member institutions, the U.S. Department of Education, the appropriate State or other licensing or authorizing agencies, and the appropriate accrediting agencies, and the public of accreditation actions taken in accordance with *34 CFR §602.26 Notification of Accreditation Decisions*, which is described in section V of this policy.

Institution Directory

The Commission publishes an online directory of accredited and candidate institutions which includes institutional information such as the date of initial accreditation and the most recent reaccreditation action, in accordance with *34 CFR §602.23(a)(4)*.

Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS)

The Commission publishes an official public statement of each institution's accreditation history, called the Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS). The SAS provides a brief history of the institution's relationship with the Commission and lists the actions taken by Commission. The Commission's actions are described in the policy *Accreditation Actions*.

Public Disclosure Statement (PDS)

The Commission publishes a Public Disclosure Statement (PDS) for non-compliance or adverse actions taken by the Commission. The PDS provides context for the Commission's action by including the activities leading up to the non-compliance or adverse action, and a description of additional follow-up activities and timelines required to address the non-compliance or adverse action. The Public Disclosure Statement, along with the SAS, is displayed until Reaffirmation of Accreditation is achieved.

Should an institution choose to appeal an adverse accrediting action taken by the Commission, the PDS will indicate the Notice of Intent to Appeal, the date of the appeal, and will be updated to reflect any developments, including the eventual outcome of the appeal.

Public Statements by Institutions Regarding Non-Compliance or Adverse Actions

In accordance with 34 CFR §602.26(d), institutions are offered the opportunity make an official public statement when the Commission takes a non-compliance or adverse action. The statement may be linked to the PDS from the institution's website or the Commission may include a reference to the institution's website.

V. Notification of Accreditation Decisions

The Commission notifies its member institutions, the U.S. Department of Education, the appropriate State or other licensing or authorizing agencies, and the appropriate accrediting agencies, and the public of accreditation actions taken by the Commission in accordance with 34 CFR §602.26 Notification of accrediting decisions.

All accreditation actions are posted on the Commission's website (www.msche.org) following Commission meetings, Executive Committee meetings, or any time an accreditation decision is made. All accreditation actions are recorded in the Commission's internal Institutional History. In addition, the Commission publishes an online Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS) for each institution which displays the institution's accreditation actions for a period of five years.

Accreditation or Candidacy or Reaffirmation of Accreditation

The Commission provides notification of decisions to grant accreditation or candidacy, or to reaffirm accreditation within 30 business days of the Commission's decision to the institution, U.S. Secretary of Education, the appropriate State or other licensing or authorizing agencies, and the appropriate accrediting agencies. The Commission provides notification to the public within 30 days of such decisions through the Commission website and the institution's Statement of Accreditation Status (SAS).

Non-compliance or Adverse Actions

The Commission provides notification of decisions on non-compliance actions (warning, probation, show cause) and adverse actions (to deny or withdraw candidacy or accreditation) to the U.S. Secretary of Education, the appropriate state or other licensing or authorizing agency, and the appropriate accrediting agencies *at the same time it notifies the institution*, but no later than 30 days after it reaches the decision. The Commission provides notification of such decisions to the public within 24 hours of informing the institution through the Commission website and the Public Disclosure Statement (PDS). Except as otherwise noted in this policy, in accordance with federal regulation, the Commission makes the PDS and any official comments as required by the regulations available to the U.S. Secretary of Education, the appropriate State licensing or authorizing agency, and the public, no later than 60 days after the decision. The Commission will direct further public inquiries to the institution.

Voluntary Withdrawal or Lapse of Accreditation

In the event that an institution voluntarily withdraws from accreditation or candidacy, the Commission will notify within 30 days of receiving notification from the institution of the institution's decision: the U.S. Secretary of Education, the appropriate State or other licensing or authorizing agency, and the appropriate accrediting agencies.

If an institution allows its accreditation or candidacy to lapse, the Commission will notify the same agencies within 30 days of the date on which accreditation or candidacy lapses.

VI. Accurate Representation of Accredited Status by the Institution

The accredited status of the institution should not be misrepresented. In accordance with *34 CFR §602.23(d)*, if an institution makes a public disclosure of its accreditation status, the Commission must ensure that the institution discloses that status accurately. The term *accreditation* is to be used only when accredited status is conferred by an accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and/or the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

The accreditation granted by an institutional accrediting agency has reference to the quality of the institution as a whole. Institutions wishing to make a statement about the relationship of a degree or program to the institution's accredited status should state that the program or degree is offered at an institution that is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education and provide contact information for the Commission (see example provided). The statement also should make clear that MSCHE accreditation does not imply specialized accreditation of the programs offered. The phrase "fully accredited" must not be used, since Middle States does not offer partial accreditation.

Example for an Accredited institution:

The University of _____ is accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. (267-284-5000) www.msche.org The Middle States Commission on Higher Education is an institutional accrediting agency recognized by the U.S. Secretary of Education and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation.

No statement should be made about possible future accreditation status not yet conferred by the

Commission. Institutions granted the status of Candidate for Accreditation must use the statement described below. In addition, the candidate institution should indicate the effective date (month and year) candidate status was granted.

Example for a Candidate Institution:

Effective (month and year), the University of _____ is a Candidate for Accreditation by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education, 3624 Market Street, Philadelphia, PA 19104. (267-284-5000) www.msche.org

Candidate for Accreditation is a status of affiliation with a regional accrediting commission which indicates that an institution has achieved initial recognition and is progressing toward, but is not assured of, accreditation. It has provided evidence of sound planning, appears to have the resources to implement the plans, and appears to have the potential for reaching its goals within a reasonable time.

In the event that an institution misrepresents the accreditation action taken by the Commission or the institution's accredited status, the Commission requires that the institution immediately take steps necessary to correct any misquotes or misleading impressions. When an institution has misrepresented a team report, misquoted excerpts from a report, or otherwise used a report to create a misleading impression about the institution or its accredited status, the Commission reserves the right to release the full report to the public to disclose its position. This may result in a need to breach the usual confidential character of the Commission's relations with an institution. The Commission will endeavor to settle such issues first with the institution.

The MSCHE logo is the property of the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE). Its use signifies that the institution is accredited. Institutions that are accredited by the Commission on Higher Education are encouraged to use the MSCHE logo in the acknowledgement of their accredited status.

The accredited institution must receive written permission to use the MSCHE logo by contacting the Director of Communications and Public Relations. The institution will receive an electronic file of the logo along with acceptable use guidelines, including approved colors and wording to accompany the logo.

If, at any time, an institution's accreditation is withdrawn, it is prohibited from using the MSCHE logo. Use of the logo is prohibited by applicant and candidate institutions.

VII. Communication and Information Sharing with State Agencies and Others

Once an accreditation action is taken by the Commission, the Commission notifies the appropriate state agency regarding institutions that are licensed by the state. See the Commission policy *Government Agencies and the Commission on Higher Education*.

Institutions may share accreditation materials with state agencies. It remains the institution's prerogative, except where explicitly required by law, to determine whether and/or when to share documents with a state agency.

VIII. Communication between the Commission and Accredited or Candidate Institutions

The Commission and its accredited and candidate institutions share a mutual responsibility for understanding and operating in accordance with standards for accreditation and requirements of affiliation. Close communication and active engagement in accreditation-related issues are hallmarks of maintaining a successful relationship between MSCHE and accredited and candidate institutions.

To facilitate this relationship, MSCHE assigns a vice president to serve as Commission staff liaison to each accredited or candidate institution. This Commission staff liaison maintains an overall familiarity with the institution, communicates about accreditation issues with leaders of the institution, consults with the institution during accreditation events, visits the institution on specified occasions, and answers questions and interprets MSCHE policies and procedures as requested.

The Commission considers the president (or chief executive officer) to be each accredited and candidate institution's official representative. The president is the primary recipient of all official correspondence from the Commission regarding the institution's accredited or candidate status. In addition, the president is invited to nominate and vote in the election of Commissioners, to offer comments and vote on standards and policies that require membership approval, and to represent the institution's position in relation to a variety of other Commission requests.

Each institution also appoints an Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO) to serve as the primary contact with MSCHE staff and as a resource to the institution on MSCHE accreditation issues. Official correspondence between MSCHE and the institution's president is typically copied to the ALO. Other types of communication (emails, faxes, phone calls) may occur directly between the Commission staff and the ALO; in such instances, the ALO should ensure that the president is appropriately informed. See the Commission's guidelines *The Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO): Roles and Responsibilities*.

IX. Commission Reporting to the U.S. Department of Education

In accordance with *34 CFR §602.27(a)*, the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (the Commission or MSCHE) affirms its commitment to timely submission to the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) of the following:

1. a copy of any annual report it prepares;
2. a copy, updated annually, of its directory of accredited and candidate institutions, or access to the institution directory on the Commission's website;
3. a summary of major accrediting activities during the previous year, if requested by the Secretary to carry out the Secretary's responsibilities related to this part;
4. notification of any proposed change in policies, procedures, or accreditation or preaccreditation (Candidacy) standards that might alter its scope of recognition or compliance with the criteria for recognition;

5. the name of any institution accredited by MSCHE that MSCHE has reason to believe is failing to meet its Title IV, Higher Education Act (HEOA) program responsibilities or is engaged in fraud or abuse, along with the agency's reason for concern about the institution;

6. and, if the Secretary requests, information that may bear upon an accredited or preaccredited (Candidate) institution's compliance with its Title IV, HEOA program responsibilities, including the eligibility of the institution to participate in Title IV, HEOA programs.

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Federal Regulations: *34 CFR §602.23(a)(4) and (d) Operating Procedures all agencies must have; §602.26 Notification of accrediting decisions; §602.27(a) Other information an agency must provide the Department;*

Standards: Requirements of Affiliation #5, #14

Related Documents: *Accreditation Actions; Appeals from Adverse Accrediting Actions; Government Agencies and the Commission on Higher Education; The Accreditation Liaison Officer (ALO): Roles and Responsibilities; Compliance with Accreditation-Relevant Federal Regulations;*

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