



*Commission on Colleges  
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools  
1866 Southern Lane  
Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097*

## **COMPLAINT PROCEDURES AGAINST THE COMMISSION OR ITS ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS**

### **- Policy Statement -**

#### **Statement of Purpose**

The Commission on Colleges recognizes the value of information provided by students, employees, and others in determining whether an institution's performance is consistent with the Commission's standards for obtaining or maintaining accreditation. The Commission's interest also is in ensuring that member institutions maintain appropriate grievance procedures and standards of procedural fairness and that the procedures are applied appropriately and consistently.

The procedures for the review of complaints involving member institutions enable the Commission to address possible violations of its *Principles of Accreditation*, the Core Requirements, and policies or procedures, as well as to address possible violations of an institution's own policies and procedures, if related to the *Principles*.

Because the Commission's complaint procedures are for the purpose of addressing any significant non-compliance with the Commission's standards, policies, or procedures, the procedures are not intended to be used to involve the Commission in disputes between individuals and member institutions, or cause the Commission to interpose itself as a reviewing authority in individual matters of admission, grades, granting or transferability of credits, application of academic policies, fees or other financial matters, disciplinary matters or other contractual rights and obligations. Nor does the Commission seek redress on an individual's behalf. Under no circumstances does the Commission respond to, or take action on, any complaint or any allegation that contains defamatory statements. Further, the Commission will not serve as a grievance panel when the outcome of institutional grievance or appeal processes is unsatisfactory to the complainant.

The Commission expects individuals to attempt to resolve the issue through all means available to the complainant, including following the institution's own published grievance procedures, before submitting a complaint to the Commission. Therefore, the Commission's usual practice is not to consider a complaint that is currently in administrative proceedings, including institutional proceedings, or in litigation. However, if there is substantial, credible evidence that indicates systemic problems with an accredited institution, the Commission may, at its discretion, choose to proceed with the review.

In order to be considered, formal complaints must be submitted in writing using the Commission's "Complaint Against Institutions: Information Sheet and Form," signed, and sent to the attention of the President of the Commission on Colleges by the complainant(s). The Commission will neither entertain complaints that are not in writing or which are anonymous, nor will it consider complaints sent electronically or through facsimile transmission. In addition, the Commission will not act on complaints submitted on behalf of another individual or complaints forwarded to the Commission.

## Responsibilities of Institutions

The *Principles of Accreditation* states:

The institution has adequate procedures for addressing written student complaints and is responsible for demonstrating that it follows those procedures when resolving student complaints. (Comprehensive Standard 4.5)

In addition, each institution is required to have in place student grievance and public complaint policies and procedures that are reasonable, fairly administered, and well-publicized. The Commission also requires, in accord with federal regulations, that each institution maintains a record of complaints received by the institution. This record is made available to the Commission upon request. This record will be reviewed and evaluated by the Commission as part of the institution's decennial evaluation.

## Procedures for Filing a Complaint against an Institution

An individual may make an inquiry regarding complaint procedures or about issues and concerns that could be considered complaints; however, the Commission's response and its obligations to meet the specific timetables outlined in these procedures will begin only after the complainant submits a formal written complaint.

A formal complaint is one that is (1) submitted in writing using the Commission's "Complaint Against Institutions: Information Sheet and Form," (2) signed, and (3) sent to the attention of the President of the Commission on Colleges by the complainant(s). The Commission will neither entertain complaints that are not in writing or which are anonymous, nor will it consider complaints sent electronically or through facsimile transmission. The "Information Sheet and Form" includes:

- a. A statement describing the complaint in the clearest possible terms.
- b. The section(s) of the *Principles of Accreditation* alleged to have been violated and the time frame in which the significant lack of compliance is alleged to have occurred.
- c. A clear and concise written description of the evidence upon which the allegation is based. (Materials and documentation used to support a complainant's allegations should be limited to and directly related to the reported case.) The evidence should state relevant facts and document and support the allegation that the institution is in significant violation of the standards referenced in the complaint.
- d. A description of the action taken by the institution to date and a copy of the institution's response to the complainant as a result of prescribed procedures.
- e. An acknowledgment that Commission staff may send a copy of the complaint to the president of the institution.
- f. Full disclosure about any other external channels the complainant is pursuing, including legal action.

Once the formal written complaint is submitted, the Commission and the complainant are responsible for the following:

1. The Commission will acknowledge a formal written complaint within 15 business days of its receipt.
2. Within 30 business days after acknowledging receipt of the complaint, Commission staff will review the complaint and its documentation and determine whether it is within the scope of Commission policies and jurisdiction, if there is adequate documentation, whether the complaint identifies issues that may jeopardize the quality of educational programs or the general welfare and integrity of the institution, or whether the complaint raises significant questions about the institution's compliance with Commission

standards. The Commission will inform the complainant regarding the disposition of the complaint to include one of the following:

- a. The complaint will not be processed further because it is not within the scope of Commission policies and jurisdiction or there is inadequate documentation to raise questions concerning the institution's compliance with Commission standards.
- b. Where appropriate, a resolution is suggested to the complainant and/or the institution.
- c. The complaint has sufficient substance to warrant further review. In this case, the Commission will make every effort to expedite the investigation; however, the time required to conduct the investigation may vary considerably depending on the circumstances and nature of the complaint. When a complaint is further investigated, a copy of the complaint will be forwarded to the institution's chief executive officer who will be asked to respond to the Commission within 15 business days. Following the review, the complainant and institution involved will be notified regarding one of the following:
  - (1) The complaint will not be processed further because there is insufficient evidence of significant non-compliance. The decision of the President of the Commission is final.
  - (2) If there appears to be sufficient evidence of significant non-compliance or if Commission staff are unable to determine compliance, then one of the following actions may be taken by the President of the Commission:
    - (a) Authorize a Special Committee to visit the institution. The Special Committee will examine documents and interview institutional personnel to analyze and make a judgment about compliance, and prepare a report. The report of the committee will be forwarded to the Commission, or one of its standing committees, for review and action at the next meeting of the Commissioners. Following that meeting, the complainant and institution involved will be notified of the decision of the elected Commissioners.
    - (b) Forward the case directly to the Commission and its standing committees for review and action.
    - (c) Include the case in an upcoming scheduled visit to the institution.
    - (d) Request additional information. After reviewing the additional information, the President of the Commission may decide to take any of the actions as described in (1), (2)(a), (2)(b), or (2)(c) above.

For items (2)(a), (2)(b), or (2)(c) above, the decision of the Commission is final unless the disposition is one that is otherwise appealable as stated in the Commission policy "Appeals Procedures of the College Delegate Assembly."

3. Individual complaints will be retained in the Commission files. Should a number of individual complaints suggest a pattern of concern which may evidence a significant lack of compliance with the *Principle* that was not evident from any one individual complaint, the Commission may renew its consideration of the matter for whatever action may be appropriate.

### **Complaints against the Commission on Colleges**

Complaints against the Commission are limited to complaints regarding the agency's standards, procedures, and Commission staff or any other Commission representative. In order to be considered a formal complaint against the Commission, a complaint must involve issues broader than a concern about a specific institutional action.

The procedures for filing a complaint are as follows:

1. If the complaint is against a Commission staff member or an agency representative, such as an off-site or on-site visiting team member, the following procedure applies. Examples might include: evidence that a staff member failed to follow Commission policy, evidence of an on-site committee member exhibiting bias against an institution, evidence that a staff member or committee member has a conflict of interest in working with an institutional case, etc.

- The individual should submit a written complaint to the President of the Commission that includes a description of the specific complaint accompanied by documentation supporting the allegation.
- The President will acknowledge the complaint within 10 working days of its receipt.
- Following review, the President will inform the complainant of action within 30 days of receipt of the complaint.

2. If the complaint is against the President of the Commission, the following procedure applies. Examples might include: evidence of failure to follow Commission policy, evidence of failure to attend to allegations of unfair treatment by a staff member against an institution, etc.

- The individual should submit a written complaint to the Chair of the Commission that includes a description of the complaint with accompanying documentation supporting the complaint. Such a complaint should be addressed to "Commission Chair" at the SACS office address.
- The Chair of the Commission will acknowledge the complaint within 10 working days of its receipt and may designate a committee of members of the Executive Council to review the complaint and recommend action to the Chair of the Commission.
- The Chair will review the Council's action with the President of the Commission and inform the complainant of action within 45 days of receipt of the complaint.

3. If the complaint is against a Commissioner or the Commission, the following procedure applies. Examples might include: evidence that a Commissioner failed to recuse him or herself from the discussion and vote of an accreditation case where a conflict of interest existed, evidence that the Commission failed to apply policy, etc.

- The individual should submit a written complaint to the Chair of the Commission that includes a description of the specific complaint procedural error made by the Commission. Such a complaint should be addressed to "Commission Chair" at the SACS office address.
- The Chair of the Commission will acknowledge the complaint within 10 working days of its receipt and may designate a committee of members of the Executive Council to review the complaint and recommend action to the Chair of the Commission. The Chair will review the Council's action with the President of the Commission and inform the complainant of action within 45 days of receipt of the complaint.
- Concern that a Commission action was not in accord with the complainants expectations is not in and of itself cause for review of the complaint.

### **Distinction between Submitting Third-Party Comments and Filing Formal Complaints**

The Commission is interested in ensuring that member institutions maintain **ongoing** compliance with Commission standards and policies **outside the institution's scheduled formal review** and that member institutions maintain appropriate grievance procedures and standards of procedural fairness that are applied consistently. Therefore, if an individual has evidence of an institution's **significant** non-compliance with Commission standards, policies, or procedures, the individual should inform the Commission using these procedures.

Third-party comments are submitted by the public **at the time of an institution's formal, scheduled review** for the purpose of informing the Commission regarding the institution's ongoing commitment to compliance with the Commission's standards and policies. Therefore, if an individual wishes to address an institution's compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* at the time of the institution's formal committee review, it should use the policy "Third-Party Comment by the Public."

*Approved: Commission on Colleges, December 1999*  
*Revised and Approved: Commission on Colleges: June 2003*  
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## **COMPLAINT AGAINST INSTITUTIONS: INFORMATION SHEET AND FORM**

The following is intended to provide information to persons wishing to file a complaint about an institution accredited by the Commission on Colleges. **Before filing a complaint, please read the Commission policy "Complaint Procedures for the Commission or Its Accredited Institutions"**—see [www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org). The Commission reviews complaints submitted by students, faculty, and other members of the public about its member institutions. This information helps the Commission assure that an institution continues to meet the standards of accreditation set by the membership. Procedures have been established, therefore, to provide a mechanism for the Commission to consider complaints that address significant violations of the Commission's standards.

All institutions accredited by the Commission on Colleges are required to have in place adequate procedures for addressing complaints by students, employees, and others. As outlined in the complaint policy, it is the responsibility of the complainant first to attempt to resolve the matter with the institution. The complainant is responsible for providing evidence that all remedies available at the institution have been exhausted. In order to file a complaint with the Commission on Colleges, the complainant must describe these efforts on the complaint form.

### **How to File a Complaint Against an Institution Accredited by the Commission On Colleges**

Please use the attached complaint form to submit a formal complaint. You must complete all applicable sections of this form before the complaint will be reviewed. **It must be submitted in hard copy, not electronically nor through facsimile transmission.** Precisely state the complaint using three sentences or less. Provide the details that support your complaint. Give a description of the steps that were taken to exhaust the institution's grievance or complaint process. For both responses, you may attach additional sheets of paper if you need more space. Include with the form copies of any documents that pertain to your complaint. Please submit two copies of the form and the attachments.

Please refer to the attached Commission policy for a description of the process for reviewing complaints.

# COMPLAINT FORM

## I. COMPLAINANT INFORMATION

A. First Name:

M.I.

Last Name:

B. Street Address:

C. City:

State:

Zip Code:

Country: (If outside of USA)

D. Telephone Number:

Fax Number:

E. Email Address:

F. Name of College or University Named in the Complaint

G. Status in Relation to the College or University:

STUDENT    PARENT    FACULTY    OTHER: \_\_\_\_\_

H. Current Student Status (If applicable):

\_\_\_\_\_ ENROLLED \_\_\_\_\_ GRADUATED \_\_\_\_\_ PROBATION \_\_\_\_\_ WITHDRAWN \_\_\_\_\_ TERMINATED

## II. COMPLAINT INFORMATION

- A. State the nature of the complaint (in five sentences or less).
- B. Briefly describe the details of the complaint in the clearest possible language and indicate how the institution has violated specific sections of the *Principles of Accreditation*. (List sections of the *Principles* and, if necessary, attach additional sheets for the description. Materials and documentation used to support a complainant's allegations should be limited to and directly related to the reported case. The evidence should state relevant facts and document and support the allegation that the institution is in significant violation of the standard(s) referenced in the complaint. Indicate the time frame in which the violations referenced in the complaint occurred.
- C. Describe the steps taken to exhaust the institution's grievance process, describe the action taken by the institution to date, and provide a copy of the institution's response to the complainant as a result of prescribed procedures. (Indicate any channels external to the institution that the complainant is pursuing, including legal action.)

This complaint will not be processed unless all the boxes below are checked and you have signed and dated the complaint.

- I have read the "Complaint Procedures for the Commission or Its Accredited Institutions" and agree this form constitutes my formal complaint.
- As stated in the Commission on Colleges' Complaint Policy, I understand that the Commission: (1) does not intervene in the internal procedures of institutions or perform as a regulatory body, (2) is not a formal adjudicatory or grievance-resolving body, and (3) will not serve as a grievance panel when the outcome of an institutional grievance or process is unsatisfactory to the complainant.
- I authorize the Commission on Colleges to submit my complaint and/or any documents concerning my complaint to the involved institution(s).
- I hereby certify that all of the information I have given above is true and complete to the best of my knowledge.

**YOUR SIGNATURE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_

**YOU MUST COMPLETE ALL APPLICABLE SECTIONS OF THIS FORM**