

Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions

Introduction:

Accreditation by the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (Commission or NWCCU) signifies that an institution of higher education is substantially in compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies. The Commission considers complaints regarding member or candidate institutions only when the reported conditions are related to the eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies of NWCCU. The Commission considers information from many sources in determining institutional compliance with its eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies. However, information must be related to conditions that affect the general welfare of the institution insofar as those conditions determine whether the institution can fulfill its mission as reflected in the quality of programs offered, organization, resources, capacity, and sustainability of the institution.

Further, the Commission assumes no responsibility for adjudicating isolated individual grievances in such matters as admission, granting or transferring academic credit, grades, financial aid, fees, student discipline, collective bargaining, faculty appointments, promotion, tenure, dismissals, or personal lives of individuals connected with the institution. The Commission expects that such matters will be handled through the internal processes of the institution. Moreover, the Commission will not provide dispute resolution, or act as a court of appeal in such matters, including matters seeking any type of compensation, damages, readmission, or any other redress on an individual's behalf. Finally, the Commission will not consider any complaint that is defamatory, hostile, or contains profanity.

In accordance with the purview of the Commission, this complaint policy, including criteria for consideration of complaints, and associated procedures, are solely for the purpose of addressing significant institutional non-compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies.

Criteria for Consideration of a Complaint:

For a complaint to be considered by the Commission, the complaint:

1. Must relate, on an institutional level, to the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies, and not to an individual grievance.
2. Must provide clear evidence of non-compliance with a specific eligibility requirement, standard for accreditation, or policy. Each eligibility requirement, standard for accreditation, or policy relied on by the complainant must be cited within the complaint and the evidence provided.
3. Must provide substantially documented evidence beyond allegations or assertions such that the Commission can determine whether an institution is non-compliant with eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, and policies.
4. Must demonstrate initiation of the institution's appropriate grievance procedures, the date of initiation, and, if the procedures have been completed, the date of completion and the results of the grievance procedures. Except in extraordinary circumstances, the Commission will not

consider complaints if initiation of the institution's grievance procedures did not occur within one year of the events giving rise to the complaint and the complaint was not filed within one year of completion of the grievance procedures.

5. Must be submitted by the complainant and not by a representative such as a parent, a collective bargaining agency, a student group, a friend, or an attorney. The Commission also does not consider anonymous complaints.
6. Must be written in the English language.
7. Must be submitted in writing on paper, including an original inked signature of the complainant, and mailed through the U.S. Postal Service or a common carrier. Electronic emails or facsimiles will not be accepted.
8. Must disclose whether other external channels of resolution are being pursued, including legal action.
9. Must include a statement that the complainant has read the Commission's Policy, *Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions*.
10. Must state a summary of the complaint resolution the complainant is seeking.

Procedures:

1. The Commission staff will acknowledge, in writing, the receipt of a complaint within 30 business days of its receipt.
2. The Commission President, or his/her designee, will review the complaint and, if the complaint is found to not be within the scope of the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, the complainant will be so notified in writing and the complaint will be closed. (Individuals who do not meet the requirement for complaints may be advised to submit a Third Party Public Comment).
3. If a complaint appears to be within the scope of the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, or a pattern or practice appears to be present when considering past complaints against the institution, the chief executive officer of the institution will be notified, in writing, by the Commission President within 10 business days after acknowledging complaint receipt. A copy of the complaint documentation will be shared with the institution, and a written response from the institution regarding the complaint must be submitted to the Commission within 30 business days following the Commission's providing the copy of complaint documentation. Written notification of this action will be provided to the complainant. The Commission reserves the right to share the identity of the complainant with the institution. The institutional response is considered confidential and will not be shared with the complainant.
4. The response from the chief executive officer of the institution will be analyzed to determine institutional compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies.
5. If the Commission President, on behalf of the Commission, judges the institution to be in compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation, or policies, the complainant and institution will be so notified.
6. If the Commission President, on behalf of the Commission, determines that the institution may be out of compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation,

or policies, the matter will be referred to the Commission for consideration and action at its next regularly scheduled meeting. Both the complainant and institution will be notified of the referral.

7. In taking action on the complaint in its next regularly scheduled meeting, the Commission may
 - a. dismiss the complaint;
 - b. make recommendations to the institution suggesting areas for improvement including changes in procedures related to eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation and policies of the Commission;
 - c. determine that the institution is out of compliance with the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards for accreditation and policies, and, require corrective action by the institution within a specified period of time; or
 - d. request a visit to the institution by an ad hoc committee of the Commission to review the areas of non-compliance associated with the complaint.
8. The complainant and the institution will be notified in writing of the Commission's determination regarding the complaint within 30 business days after the Commission meeting.
9. The Commission shall maintain an up-to-date record of all student complaints received by the Commission. If the Commission has received three or more complaints concerning the same matter in the last accreditation cycle, the Commission will provide a summary of those complaints to the chair of an evaluation committee, or evaluator in the case of a single-person visit, for consideration as part of the next regular evaluation of the institution.

During the processing of a complaint, if the complainant becomes argumentative, abusive, threatening, or defamatory, the Commission will cease consideration of the complaint.

Adopted 1982/Revised 1984, 1994, 1998, 2002, 2008, 2012, 2014, 2016