



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

## **FLEXIBILITIES OFFERED TO SACSCOC MEMBER INSTITUTIONS DURING THE PERIOD OF COVID-19 INTERRUPTIONS**

### **Policy Statement**

In March of 2020, the United States was hit with a pandemic known as COVID-19. In light of this emergency situation, the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) has authorized accrediting agencies to permit certain flexibilities to member institutions to ensure the health and safety of institutional employees, faculty and students while respecting the obligations of academic integrity. To that end, the Board of Trustees (Board) of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) has authorized the President to act on behalf of the Board to address the following matters:

- Extend the term of accreditation for no more than one (1) year from its current reaffirmation of accreditation date. Reaffirmation dates will remain in accordance with current policy.
- Extend the time for a required site visit or a meeting on the record for institutions on sanction if it cannot occur due to COVID-19 restrictions:
  - the Board authorizes the President to grant a “Probation for Good Cause” extension, if necessary, for six (6) or twelve (12) months, even if such action will extend the current maximum time allotted for such sanctions.
  - if such meetings on the record must occur in conjunction with a Committee on Compliance and Reports Meeting, then such a meeting on the record may occur virtually as long as it is recorded and transcribed by a court reporter.
- Permit temporary emergency relocation of instruction, including relocation to distance learning (i.e., online), under current guidelines. A relocation notification, by default, is accepted for the maximum of 120 days as allowed by current guidelines to eliminate the need for an institution to provide another notification as their situation unfolds. If relocation extends beyond 120 days, an institution is required to secure approval from the Board. A relocation request must be submitted through the institutional portal (before March 16, 2020, a request could be submitted through email). Additional directions will be provided later on the process for securing approval beyond the 120-day notification.
- Permit virtual site visits, along with in-person campus visits, to conduct accreditation-related committee work. For these visits, the President will offer details to the membership regarding the specifics needed in accordance with USDE guidance. This does not apply to authorized Candidacy Committee visits.
- Record and publish on the SACSCOC website the status and use of the temporary flexibilities granted to each institution in accordance with USDE guidance.

## PROCEDURES

Institutions are permitted to use various technologies to support the continuity of instruction, asynchronously and at a distance. At all times, institutions should ensure and maintain the integrity of educational courses and programs, and its stated learning outcomes.

In order to maintain good information for the public and SACSCOC operations, an institution that suspends *all* operations should send a letter of notification (electronically or hard copy) to the SACSCOC President. That letter should provide the date on which operations will be suspended and information about institutional decisions regarding the remaining portion of the current academic term. Once the institution has resumed operations, a follow-up letter of notification should be sent to the SACSCOC President. Likewise, institutions that have chosen to shorten their academic calendar should also send that information in a letter to the SACSCOC President. The pertinent information will be posted on the SACSCOC website in accordance with USDE guidance.

It is possible that the decision to shorten the academic calendar/term would have significant financial aid implications that would need to be considered (including, among others, the possibility of returning Title IV funds and calculating satisfactory academic progress). Unlike the temporary “relocation” of course delivery to an online modality, suspending operations would not constitute a substantive change for a member institution.

### **Use of Technology to Offer Instruction**

If an institution is not approved to offer 50% or more of any approved program by distance learning (i.e., online), the institution must request an exception to the distance education policy in addition to providing notification of temporary emergency relocation of instruction.

1. Submit a written request for exception to policy to the SACSCOC President (emails are permissible). A brief request is sufficient (example: “To accommodate the temporary emergency relocation of instruction, we are requesting an exception to policy requiring institutional approval for distance learning. The exception is for the sole purpose of temporarily accommodating displaced students.”).
2. Request an exception and include the original relocation date and the estimated date instruction will return to its previous mode of delivery.

### **Academic Integrity of the Degree**

If an institution determines that it will not complete the current semester/quarter, it is expected to make the necessary adjustments to the academic credit granted for work already completed, e.g., “Incomplete” or “I” grades are issued, completing the semester’s work during summer, or by the end of the next academic term in which the course is offered. All decisions should conform with institutional policies. If an exception to institutional policies is required due to the current crisis, it is expected that exceptions will be aligned with good educational practice, done in consultation with faculty, and are limited in scope. In addition, institutions that are part of a system may need to verify that any actions taken align with appropriate system policy as well.

Another option might involve offering students alternative means to demonstrate the competencies required by the course(s) within the current academic term, including a partial “independent study” or “tutorial” format. For courses where that is not an option, institutions may wish to consider conferring temporary grades of “incomplete.”

Other options might include allowing students to reenroll in a subsequent term without paying tuition; or conferring “pass/non-pass or pass/fail” grades and considering providing a reasonable exception to institutional policies regarding completing work for an “incomplete.” During the

spring 2020 term and in addition to letter grades, institutions are encouraged to offer “pass/non-pass or pass/fail” options to students for courses that transitioned from face-to-face to on-line instruction as a result of the COVID-19 outbreak. Institutions should counsel students regarding academic consequences, if any, for selecting this option. If such an option is provided, institutions should approve this option in accordance with its institutional policies.

In addition to moving courses on-line, granting grades of Incomplete (I), and allowing students to enroll in the summer or fall 2020 term at no cost, institutions are permitted to grant grades of Pass/Fail or non-Pass for the spring 2020 semester, as their policies allow. If the institution does not currently have such a policy or needs to amend its policy to accommodate this exception, they should ask their governing board to adopt one as soon as possible.

In the case of complete suspension, however, the coursework would be completed, graded, and recorded at some point after the institution has resumed the appropriate level of operation to perform such administrative functions.

Some institutions may be considering altering their academic calendar and truncating the current academic term. If an institution cannot, with integrity, demonstrate that courses have been “completed” (i.e., course outcomes/competencies have been demonstrated), the institution should either consider students to have been withdrawn for the term or find some formula to determine whether students could be awarded partial credit for the work completed.

**Full course credit when the course was not completed would demonstrate noncompliance with Core Requirement 1.1 (*Integrity*), Standard 9.2 (*Program Length*), and Standard 10.7 (*Credit Hour*) of the *Principles of Accreditation*. Please contact your SACSCOC Vice President for assistance with this matter.**

### **Extend Reaffirmation of Accreditation for Class of 2020, Track B**

The SACSCOC President has the authority to delay the reaffirmation of accreditation for one (1) year of the approximately 30 institutions with On-Site Reaffirmation visits scheduled for spring 2020. For these, SACSCOC Board review of reaffirmation of accreditation would have occurred in December 2020. Institutions and Commission staff must reschedule the visits during the summer of 2020, the fall of 2020 or the spring of 2021.

### **Off-Site Reaffirmation Review Committees**

The SACSCOC President shall schedule Off-Site Reaffirmation Review Committees to occur at a later date than originally scheduled and such reviews may occur virtually.

1. Each Vice President and Cluster Chair will work with the SACSCOC Coordinator to conduct the reviews virtually or in a hybrid format.
2. The Off-Site Reaffirmation Review Committee will issue its final report after the end of the meeting.

### **On-Site Reaffirmation Review and Special Committees**

In the matter of On-Site Reviews related to reaffirmation of accreditation and Special Committees:

1. The visit may be conducted virtually, as long as the SACSCOC Vice President and at least one (1) committee member visits the institution at the time of the review, in accordance with USDE guidance. Any virtual meetings must permit interactive and engaged participation by all parties.

2. During the virtual review, the institution will coordinate with the SACSCOC staff and schedule the individual interviews with pertinent institutional representatives and the appropriate committee member(s).
3. The institution will make documents available for inspection by the Committee members present on site. Committee members may request the on-site team to review additional documents if necessary.
4. The Committee will issue a report at the conclusion of the visit.
5. The initial and closing meeting may be conducted virtually and coordinated by SACSCOC staff.

**Document History:**

*Approved: Executive Council on behalf of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, March 31, 2020*