



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

COMPLAINTS AND UNSOLICITED INFORMATION AGAINST SACSCOC, ITS CANDIDATE OR ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS

Policy Statement

Statement of Purpose

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) recognizes the value of information from students, employees, and public sources in determining whether an institution's performance is consistent with SACSCOC standards. SACSCOC is also committed to the consistent, fair, and timely consideration of information that may raise significant compliance concerns, while protecting procedural fairness for institutions and individuals and ensuring that member institutions maintain and apply appropriate grievance procedures.

This policy establishes procedures for (1) formal complaints submitted to SACSCOC about accredited institutions or SACSCOC (including staff or Board members) and (2) unsolicited accreditation related information received outside normal cyclical reviews, this enables SACSCOC to address possible non-compliance with its *Principles of Accreditation* and policies, as well as possible violations of an institution's own policies and procedures as they relate to the *Principles*.

Definitions

Formal complaint: A written submission by a complainant using the SACSCOC Complaint Form (electronic or mailed) that (1) unless submitted anonymously, is signed (electronically or traditionally) by the person submitting the complaint (complainant), (2) is supported by documentation of stated allegations, and (3) identifies at least one standard of the *Principles of Accreditation* alleged to be violated. The Complaint Form also requires a complainant to provide a description of actions taken at the institution, including exhaustion of institutional grievance procedures, with a copy of the institution's response; full disclosure of other external channels (e.g., legal action) the complainant is pursuing; and acknowledgment that SACSCOC may share the complaint and supporting documents with the institution.

Unsolicited information: A form of complaint in which accreditation related information is revealed about an institution, typically outside normal cyclical review, that appears to raise significant compliance concerns.

SACSCOC will not accept:

- Complaints that are not in writing,
- Complaints forwarded without use of the form.

- Complaints submitted by fax only,
- Complaints filed on behalf of another without appropriate authorization,
- Voice recordings as evidence (unless transcribed, attested to, and notarized)

If a complainant has a demonstrated disability that prevents submission of a formal complaint in accord with the guidelines above, he or she should contact SACSCOC for assistance.

Responsibilities of Institutions

Each institution is required to have in place student complaint policies and procedures that are reasonable, fairly administered, and well publicized. SACSCOC 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 SACSCOC upon request. This record will be reviewed and evaluated by SACSCOC as part of the institution's comprehensive decennial evaluation.

Document History

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Procedures for Complainants and Internal Procedures

Formal Complaint

In reviewing a formal complaint, the following considerations apply:

- SACSCOC's processes are intended to identify and address significant non-compliance with accreditation standards and to ensure institutions maintain appropriate grievance procedures and procedural fairness.
- SACSCOC will not act as a grievance or adjudicatory panel to obtain redress for individual complainants, nor intervene in routine institutional matters unless they implicate accreditation standards.
- SACSCOC will not act on complaints or information that include defamatory or threatening statements.
- When submitted anonymously or by a confidential reporter, the complainant must redact personal information and indicate on the form that it is a confidential complaint;
- Confidential markings by complainants may limit SACSCOC's ability to review allegations fully;
- SACSCOC cannot guarantee anonymity when pursuing resolution of a complaint if the identity of a complainant can be inferred by other means.
- Where possible, complainants should exhaust the institution's published grievance procedures before filing with SACSCOC.

A complaint may be submitted anonymously; however, the submission must meet the definition of a formal complaint as noted above. Refer to the Procedures for Filing a Complaint for additional information.

Unsolicited information: A form of complaint in which accreditation related information is revealed about an institution, typically outside normal cyclical review, that appears to raise significant compliance concerns. The following circumstances warrant SACSCOC review of unsolicited information:

- (1) information revealed about an institution during its off-site or on-site committee reviews;
- (2) information revealed about an institution between periods of scheduled review;
- (3) information revealed by an institution during its meeting on the record with a Committee on Compliance and Reports, a standing committee of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees (See Administrative Procedures for the Meetings of the Committees on Compliance and Reports for procedures);
- (4) information received from the U.S. Department of Education regarding an institution's compliance responsibilities under Title IV of the Higher Education Act, including, as examples, an institution's most recent student loan default rates, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information that may be provided by the U.S. Department of Education; and
- (5) information received from U.S. Department of Education recognized agencies regarding adverse action or the imposition of probation on a SACSCOC candidate or member institution. Institutions are also required to disclose this information to SACSCOC. (See Accrediting Decisions of Other Agencies for procedures.)

In all instances of complaints and unsolicited information, an institution will be given adequate time to respond to the information. In certain instances, if after reviewing the institution's response, SACSCOC staff determines that the information is of factual substance, is accreditation-related and of ongoing concern following assessment of the complaint by staff, the information and documentation, along with the institution's response, will be forwarded to the Board of Trustees for formal review and action, or the President of SACSCOC can authorize a Special Committee to review the institution.

An individual may make an inquiry regarding complaint procedures or about issues and concerns that could be considered complaints via SACSCOC's designated channels (i.e. email account or phone); however, these interactions are classified as "inquiries" only. SACSCOC's official obligations and specific response

timetables begin only after a formal complaint or unsolicited information is received.

Complaints against a SACSCOC Member or Candidate Institution

Initial steps & timeline

- Submit a complaint (formal written).
- Confirmation: Complainant receives electronic confirmation upon receipt.
- Acknowledgment: SACSCOC will acknowledge the complaint within 21 calendar days of receipt. Supplemental materials may be submitted by a complainant within 21 days of the electronic confirmation or receipt of a complaint.

Staff review (within 60 calendar days of acknowledgment) SACSCOC staff will determine:

- Whether the complaint is within SACSCOC scope and accreditation-related,
- Whether documentation is adequate,
- Whether the complaint raises significant questions about compliance.

Possible dispositions after review

- The complaint will not be processed further because it is not within the scope of SACSCOC policies and jurisdiction or there is inadequate documentation to raise questions concerning the institution's compliance with SACSCOC standards. The decision of the President of SACSCOC is final.
- The complaint will proceed to further review if determined by staff to be of sufficient substance. In this case, SACSCOC will make every effort to expedite the review; however, the time required to conduct the review may vary considerably depending on the circumstances and nature of the complaint.

A copy of the complaint will be forwarded to the institution's chief executive officer who will be asked to respond to SACSCOC within 30 calendar days. After review, outcomes include:

- The complaint will not be processed further because there is insufficient evidence of the institution's non-compliance with SACSCOC standards. The decision of the President of SACSCOC is final.
- The complaint will proceed if evidence of significant non-compliance is determined or unresolved questions remain. The President may take one of the following actions:
 - (a) Authorize a Special Committee visit: committee examines records/interviews, issues a report to the Board and relevant standing committee for action at the next Board meeting.
 - (b) Forward the case directly to the Board of Trustees and relevant standing committee for action at the next Board meeting.
 - (c) Include the complaint in an upcoming scheduled institutional visit; the committee incorporates findings into its report and forwards to the Board for action per published timelines.
 - (d) Request additional information, then decide among the above actions. *For actions (a), (b), or (c) the Board of Trustees' decision is final unless appealable under SACSCOC Appeals Procedures of the College Delegate Assembly.*

Other considerations:

- SACSCOC normally considers complaints whose circumstances occurred within two years of filing or two years of completion of the institution's internal complaint process.

- If a SACSCOC staff transition occurs during disposition, the complainant will be notified of the new staff contact and a modified schedule if applicable.
- Complaints are retained until the institution completes its next two comprehensive reviews. New complaints during that period may prompt renewed consideration of a previous submission.

Unsolicited Information against a SACSCOC Member or Candidate Institutions

Initial steps and timeline:

- Unsolicited information is received by SACSCOC staff.
- Confirmation: If the submitter is known, electronic confirmation is sent upon receipt. If submitted anonymously, confirmation will not be sent.
- Acknowledgment: SACSCOC will acknowledge a known submitter within 21 calendar days of receipt. Supplemental materials may be submitted within 21 days of the electronic confirmation or receipt of unsolicited information.

The subsequent procedures for reviewing unsolicited information for each of the circumstances described under the Definitions section of this policy statement follow. Depending on the circumstance and nature of the unsolicited information, the process and timeline to resolution of a complaint initiated by unsolicited information may vary.

(1) Information revealed about an institution during its off-site or on-site committee reviews:

Following submission of a committee report, the institution will be given adequate time to respond to the information before any action is taken by the SACSCOC Board of Trustees. The decision of the Board is final.

(2) Information received about an institution between periods of scheduled review which indicates potential non-compliance with a standard(s) in the *Principles of Accreditation*.

Following review of the information by staff, the institution will be given an adequate period of time to respond to the information. If, after reviewing the response, SACSCOC staff determines that the information is of factual substance and is accreditation-related, the information and documentation, along with the institution's response, will be forwarded to the Committees on Compliance and Reports for formal review at its next scheduled meeting or the President of SACSCOC can authorize a Special Committee to review the institution. The decision of the President or the Board, when forwarded to Committees on Compliance and Reports, is final.

(3) Information revealed by an institution during its meeting on the record with a Committee on Compliance and Reports, which indicates potential non-compliance with a standard(s) in the *Principles of Accreditation*. (See "Administrative Procedures for the Meetings of the Committees on Compliance and Reports" for procedures.)

(4) Information , received from the U.S. Department of Education regarding an institution's compliance responsibilities under Title IV of the Higher Education Act as amended, including, as examples, an institution's most recent student loan default rates, the results of financial or compliance audits, program reviews, and any other information that may be provided by the U.S. Department of Education.

Following review of the information by SACSCOC staff, the institution will be given an adequate period of time to respond to the information. After reviewing the response, SACSCOC staff may 1) determine the matter has been resolved and close the case or 2) determine that the information is of factual substance and is accreditation-related, the information and documentation, along with the institution's response, will

be forwarded to a Committee on Compliance and Reports for formal review at its next scheduled meeting, or the President of SACSCOC can authorize a Special Committee to review the institution. The decision of the President or the Board, when forwarded to Committees on Compliance and Reports, is final.

- (5) Information received from U.S. Department of Education-recognized agencies regarding adverse action or the implementation of probation on a SACSCOC candidate or member institution. Institutions are also required to disclose this information to SACSCOC. (See *Accrediting Decisions of Other Agencies* for procedures.)

Complaints against a SACSCOC Trustee, Representative, or Staff Member (excluding the President)

Complaints against a SACSCOC Trustee, representative (i.e. peer evaluator), or staff member must be directed to the President of SACSCOC. Examples might include evidence that a staff member failed to follow SACSCOC policy, and/or evidence of an on-site committee member exhibiting bias against an institution, or evidence that a staff member or committee member has a conflict of interest in working with an institutional case.

Initial steps and timeline:

- Submit a written complaint to the President of SACSCOC, describing the allegation with supporting documentation. Contact information for the President is published on the SACSCOC website.
- The President will acknowledge the complaint within 21 calendar days of receipt.
- Investigation & response: The President reviews and informs the complainant of action within 60 calendar days of acknowledgment. In instances where additional time is required to conduct the review due to the circumstances and nature of the complaint, the President will inform the complainant.

Complaints against the President of SACSCOC

A complaint against the SACSCOC President must be directed to the Chair of the Board of Trustees to protect the confidentiality of the complainant. A complaint based solely on disappointment with a SACSCOC action (i.e., an action not matching expectations) is not, by itself, grounds for review.

Initial steps and timeline:

- Submit a written complaint to the Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, describing the allegation with supporting documentation. Contact information for the current Board Chair is published on the SACSCOC website.
- The Board Chair will acknowledge the complaint within 21 calendar days of receipt. The Board Chair will also designate a committee of the Executive Council to investigate and recommend action to the Board Chair. The investigation may include review with the President and the complainant.

In instances where additional time is required to conduct the review due to the circumstances and nature of the complaint, the President will inform the complainant.

- The Board Chair reviews the Executive Council's recommendation and informs the complainant and the SACSCOC President of action within 60 calendar days of receipt of the complaint. In instances where additional time is required to conduct the review due to the circumstances and nature of the complaint, the Board Chair will inform the complainant. The decision of the Board Chair is final.

If a complaint concerns the Chair of the Board, the Vice-Chair assumes the Chair's role for the above process and timeline.

Distinction between Submitting Third-Party Comments and Filing Formal Complaints

Third-party comments are submitted by the public at the time of an institution's formal, scheduled review (initial accreditation or reaffirmation) for the purpose of informing SACSCOC regarding the institution's ongoing commitment to compliance with SACSCOC 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, he/she should use the policy [Third-Party Comment by the Public](#).



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COMPLAINTS 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 SACSCOC. **Before filing a complaint, please read the SACSCOC policy “Complaints Against SACSCOC or Its Accredited Institutions” – see www.sacscoc.org.** SACSCOC reviews complaints submitted by students, faculty, and other members of the public about its member institutions. This information helps SACSCOC assure that an institution continues to meet the standards of accreditation set by the membership. Procedures have been established to provide a mechanism for SACSCOC to consider complaints that address significant violations of SACSCOC accreditation standards.

All institutions accredited by SACSCOC 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 documentation that all remedies available at the institution have been exhausted. In order to file a complaint with SACSCOC, the complainant must describe these efforts on the complaint form.

How to File a Complaint against an Institution Accredited by SACSCOC

Please complete the electronic Complaint Form to submit a formal complaint. You must complete all applicable sections of this form, affirm that steps have been followed, and sign (electronically) before the complaint will be reviewed. Precisely state the nature of the complaint within the designated character limit. Provide the details that support your complaint. Give a description of the steps taken to exhaust the institution’s grievance or complaint process. Include with the signed Complaint Form copies of any documents that pertain to the complaint. SACSCOC may share the complaint and any supporting documents submitted with the institution.

Please refer to the attached SACSCOC policy for a description of the process for reviewing complaints. The *Principles of Accreditation* (2018 edition) are the accreditation standards which each member institution must maintain ongoing compliance. The *Resource Manual* provides additional guidance regarding the *Principles*. Both documents are located on the SACSCOC webpage. Please consult these documents also.

Access the electronic Complaint Form [here](#).

COMPLAINT FORM

ALL SECTIONS OF THIS FORM MUST BE COMPLETED

I. COMPLAINANT INFORMATION

A. Title:

☐ MS. ☐ MR. ☐ DR. ☐ OTHER: _____

B. First Name:

M.I.

Last Name:

B. Street Address:

C. City:

State:

Zip Code:

Country: (If outside of USA)

D. Office/Home Telephone Number:

Cell Telephone Number:

E. Email Address:

F. Name of Institution Identified in the Complaint:

G. Location (city and state) of Institution Identified in the Complaint:

City:

State:

H. Status in Relation to the Institution:

☐ STUDENT ☐ FACULTY ☐ OTHER: _____

I. Current Student Status (If applicable):

☐ ENROLLED ☐ GRADUATED ☐ PROBATION ☐ WITHDRAWN ☐ TERMINATED

☐ I would like to keep my complaint confidential.

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*.
1. List sections of the *Principles* and, if necessary, attach additional sheets for the description. Complaints must identify at least one of the standards in the *Principles of Accreditation*.
 2. 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.
 3. Indicate the time frame in which the violation(s) 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, signed, and dated.

[Please note that Confidential Complaints may prevent SACSCOC from fully reviewing the allegations noted herein.]

- ☐ I have read the "Complaints Against SACSCOC or its Accredited Institutions" policy and agree this form constitutes my formal complaint.
- ☐ As stated in the SACSCOC Complaint Policy, I understand that SACSCOC: (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 SACSCOC 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:** _____

PRINT YOUR NAME: _____

ALL SECTIONS OF THIS FORM MUST BE COMPLETED