



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

COMPLAINTS AGAINST SACSCOC OR ITS ACCREDITED INSTITUTIONS

Policy Statement

Statement of Purpose

The Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC) recognizes the value of information provided by students, employees, and others in determining whether an institution's performance is consistent with SACSCOC standards for obtaining or maintaining accreditation. SACSCOC is also committed to ensuring that member institutions maintain appropriate grievance procedures and standards of procedural fairness and that these are applied appropriately and consistently. Reviewing formal, written complaints involving member institutions enables SACSCOC to address possible non-compliance with its *Principles of Accreditation* and policies, as well as to address possible violations of an institution's own policies and procedures, if related to the *Principles*.

Because SACSCOC's complaint process is for the purpose of addressing any significant non-compliance with SACSCOC's accreditation standards or policies, ***this process is not intended to be used to involve SACSCOC in disputes between individuals and member institutions, or cause SACSCOC 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 contractual rights and obligations. Nor does SACSCOC seek redress on an individual's behalf. Under no circumstances does SACSCOC respond to – or take action on – any complaint or any allegation that contains defamatory or threatening statements. Further, SACSCOC will not serve as a grievance panel when the outcome of institutional grievance or appeal processes is unsatisfactory to the complainant.***

SACSCOC 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 SACSCOC. SACSCOC is under no obligation to consider additional information submitted by the complainant subsequent to the receipt of the formal complaint. SACSCOC's usual practice is not to consider a complaint currently in administrative proceedings, including institutional proceedings, or litigation. However, if there is substantial, credible evidence that indicates systemic problems with an accredited institution, SACSCOC may, at its discretion, choose to proceed with the review while these proceedings are being pursued or after they are concluded.

Responsibilities of Institutions

Standard 12.4 (*Student complaints*) of the *Principles of Accreditation* states:

The institution (a) publishes appropriate and clear procedures for addressing written student complaints, (b) demonstrates that it follows the procedures when resolving them, and (c) maintains a record of student complaints that can be accessed upon request by SACSCOC.

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.

Complaints 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 the procedures (referenced later in this document) will begin only after the complainant submits a formal written complaint. A formal complaint is one that is (1) submitted in writing using the SACSCOC "[Complaint Form](#)" (appended to the end of this document), (2) **signed by the person submitting the complaint (complainant)**, (3) *two print copies* of the form and any supporting documentation, and (4) sent via ground mail to:

President
Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
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SACSCOC will not consider the following to be formal, written complaints: (a) complaints that are not in writing, (b) anonymous complaints, (c) complaints submitted electronically, (d) complaints submitted through facsimile transmission, (e) complaints submitted on behalf of another individual, or (f) complaints forwarded to SACSCOC. In addition, SACSCOC does not accept voice recordings, such as recordings of meetings and conversations, as evidence in support of a complainant's allegations. To submit information from voice recordings, the complainant should have the tape transcribed, provide a signature page for the complainant to attest to the accuracy of the transcription, and have the signature page 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 the SACSCOC Public Relations and Data Specialist for assistance.

Complaints against SACSCOC Board of Trustees or its Staff

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

Distinction between Submitting Third-Party Comments and Filing Formal Complaints

SACSCOC is interested in ensuring that member institutions maintain *ongoing* compliance with SACSCOC 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 documentation of an institution's *significant* non-compliance with SACSCOC standards or policies, the individual should file a formal complaint with SACSCOC.

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.](#)"

COMPLAINT PROCEDURES

Procedures for filing a complaint against a SACSCOC member institution

A formal, written complaint against an institution must meet the definitions outlined in the policy statement above. The complaint must be submitted in writing using the SACSCOC "[Complaint Form.](#)" and signed by the complainant. SACSCOC will not entertain anonymous complaints. The "[Complaint Form](#)" includes:

1. A brief statement describing the complaint in the clearest possible terms.
2. The section(s) of the *Principles of Accreditation* with which the institution is alleged to have been out of compliance, and the time frame in which the significant lack of compliance is alleged to have occurred.
3. A clear and concise written description of the documentation upon which the allegation is based should state relevant facts and document and support the allegation that the institution is in significant violation of the standards referenced in the complaint.
4. 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.
5. An acknowledgment that SACSCOC staff may send a copy of the complaint to the president of the institution.
6. Full disclosure about any other external channels the complainant is pursuing, including legal action.
7. Only written and signed SACSCOC Complaint Forms, which include the identified *Principles of Accreditation* and two copies of all materials constitute a formal complaint.

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

1. SACSCOC will acknowledge a formal written complaint within 21 calendar days of its receipt.
2. Within 60 calendar days after acknowledging receipt of the complaint, SACSCOC staff will review the complaint and documentation and determine (1) whether it is within the scope of SACSCOC policies and is accreditation-related, (2) if there is adequate documentation in support of the allegations, and (3) whether the complaint raises significant questions about the institution's compliance with SACSCOC standards. Normally, SACSCOC considers reviewing a formal complaint if the circumstances leading to it occurred within one year of the formal filing of the complaint or one year within completion of the complaint process at the institution. SACSCOC 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 SACSCOC policies and jurisdiction or there is inadequate documentation to raise questions concerning the institution's compliance with SACSCOC standards.
 - (1) 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.
 - b. The complaint has sufficient substance to warrant further review. 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. 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 SACSCOC is final. Requests for reconsideration will not be entertained.
 - (2) If there appears to be sufficient evidence of significant non-compliance or if SACSCOC staff are unable to determine compliance, then one of the following actions may be taken by the President of SACSCOC:
 - (a) Authorize a Special Committee to visit the institution. The Special Committee will examine documents and interview institutional personnel, make a judgment about compliance, and prepare a report. The report of the committee will be forwarded to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees and one of its standing committees for review and action at the next meeting of the Board. Following that meeting, the complainant and institution involved will be notified of the decision of the Board.
 - (b) Forward the case directly to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees and one of its standing committees for review and action at the next meeting of the Board. Following that meeting, the complainant and the institution involved will be notified of the decision of the Board.

(c) Include the case in an upcoming scheduled visit to the institution. The Committee will examine documents and interview institutional personnel, make a judgment about compliance, and incorporate its findings into the appropriate narrative(s) of its report. In such cases, a section will be added to the Committee's Report providing pertinent information and outlining the substance of the committee's review related to the complaint. The report will be forwarded to the SACSCOC Board of Trustees and one of its standing committees for review and action according to the published timeline for such a committee review. Following that meeting, the complainant and the institution involved will be notified of the Board's decision.

(d) Request additional information. After reviewing the additional information, the President of SACSCOC 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 SACSCOC Board of Trustees is final unless the disposition is one that is otherwise appealable as stated in the SACSCOC policy "[Appeals Procedures of the College Delegate Assembly](#)."

3. If there is a change of staff during the disposition of a formal complaint, the President of SACSCOC will notify the complainant(s) regarding the change, provide the name of the staff member assigned to review the complaint, and outline a modified schedule for the review of the complaint.
4. Individual complaints will be retained in the SACSCOC files until the institution's next two comprehensive decennial reviews have been completed. Based on complaints submitted during this period of time, and/or on a series of notification letters to previous complainants that suggest a pattern of concern which may evidence a significant lack of compliance with the *Principles of Accreditation* that was not evident from any one individual complaint, SACSCOC may renew its consideration of the matter for whatever action may be appropriate.

Procedures for filing a complaint against SACSCOC Board of Trustees or SACSCOC Staff

1. If the complaint is against a SACSCOC 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 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.
 - a. The individual should submit a written complaint to the President of SACSCOC that includes a description of the specific complaint accompanied by documentation supporting the allegation.
 - b. The President will acknowledge the complaint within 14 calendar days of its receipt.
 - c. Following review, the President will inform the complainant of action within 30 calendar days of receipt of the complaint.

2. If the complaint is against the President of SACSCOC, the following procedures apply. Examples might include evidence of failure to follow SACSCOC policy or evidence of failure to attend to allegations of unfair treatment by a staff member against an institution.
 - a. The individual should submit a written complaint to the Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees that includes a description of the specific complaint. It should be addressed to “Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees” at SACSCOC’s Decatur, GA address.
 - b. The Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees will acknowledge the complaint within 30 calendar days of its receipt and will designate a committee composed of members of the Executive Council to investigate the complaint and recommend action to the Chair. The investigation may include review of the complaint with the SACSCOC President as well as with the complainant.
 - c. The Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees will review the Council’s action and inform the complainant and the SACSCOC President of action within 60 calendar days of receipt of the complaint.
 - d. Concern that a SACSCOC action was not in accord with the complainant’s expectations is not, in and of itself, cause for review of the complaint.

3. If the complaint is against SACSCOC or a member of its Board of Trustees, the following procedures apply. Examples might include: evidence that a Board member failed to recuse him or herself from the discussion and vote of an accreditation case where a conflict of interest existed or evidence that SACSCOC failed to apply policy.
 - a. The individual should submit a written complaint to the Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees that includes a description of the specific complaint. It should be sent via ground mail to:

Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees
 Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges
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 - b. The Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees will acknowledge the complaint within 30 calendar days of its receipt and will designate a committee composed of members of the Executive Council to investigate the complaint and recommend action to the Chair. The investigation may include review of the complaint with the SACSCOC President, the Board of Trustees member, as well as with the complainant.
 - c. The Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees will review the Council’s action and inform the complainant and SACSCOC President of action within 60 calendar days of receipt of the complaint.
 - d. If the complaint concerns the Chair of the SACSCOC Board of Trustees, the Vice-Chair of the Board will assume the Chair’s role in the timeline above.
 - e. Concern that a SACSCOC action was not in accord with the complainant’s expectations is not in and of itself cause for review of the complaint.

Document History

Approved: Commission on Colleges, December 1999
Revised and Approved: Commission on Colleges: June 2003
Revised and Approved: Commission on Colleges, December 2006
Revised: Executive Council, November 2007
Revised and Approved: Commission on Colleges, December 2007
Revised: Board of Trustees, June 2011
Revised: Executive Council, March 2012
Revised: Board of Trustees, June 2012, December 2012, December 2013
Revised: Executive Council, March 2016
Edited for the 2018 Edition of the Principles of Accreditation: August 2018
Revised and Edited: Board of Trustees, December 2019