

# Accrediting Agency Complaint Process

May 9, 2011

Institutions must provide enrolled and prospective students with contact information for filing complaints with the accrediting agency. Below is a list of the regional accrediting agencies with their address and states included in their region:

**Middle States Association of Colleges and Schools  
Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE)**  
3624 Market Street, 2nd Floor Annex, Philadelphia, PA 19104  
Phone: 267-284-5000, Fax: 215-662-5501  
Web: [www.msche.org](http://www.msche.org)

Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, Pennsylvania, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands

Individuals can submit at any time information regarding an institution's alleged non-compliance with Commission requirements of affiliation, accreditation standards, or policies. Complaints can also be lodged regarding an institution's alleged non-compliance with its own policies or procedures. The Commission expects individuals to first attempt to resolve issues through the institution's own published grievance procedures. Therefore, the Commission's practice is to not consider a complaint which is currently in administrative proceedings with a municipal, state or federal agency; in institutional proceedings; or in litigation. When formal complaints are submitted to the Commission, they must be submitted in writing and signed by the complainant. The Commission will not act on anonymous complaints.

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**New England Association of Schools and Colleges  
Commission on Institutions of Higher Education (NEASC-CIHE)**  
209 Burlington Road, Bedford, MA 01730  
Phone: 781-271-0022, Fax: 781-271-0950  
Web: <http://cihe.neasc.org>

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont

## COMPLAINTS

Complaints are more formal expressions of concern regarding an institution's compliance with the [Standards for Accreditation](#). A required [Complaint Form](#) exists to help organize complicated information. Complaints must meet five criteria to be accepted for consideration:

1. Focus on **institutional conditions**, not individual experiences;
  2. Cite specific **Standards** and provide substantial **evidence** beyond general allegations that the standard may have been violated;
  3. Indicate that a **serious effort has been made to resolve** the issue through the institution's internal procedures.
  4. Be **signed** and include **permission to forward** the complaint to the institution. (Anonymous complaints or requests to keep complaints confidential cannot be accepted.)
  5. Be submitted in a **timely** manner (Normally, the Commission will not consider matters that occurred more than three years prior to the filing of the complaint.)
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**North Central Association of Colleges and Schools  
The Higher Learning Commission (NCA-HLC)**

230 South LaSalle, Suite 7-500, Chicago, IL 60604-1413

Phone: 312-263-0456, Fax: 312-263-7462

Web: [www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org](http://www.ncahigherlearningcommission.org)

Arizona, Arkansas, Colorado, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, North Dakota, Ohio, Oklahoma, South Dakota, West Virginia, Wisconsin, Wyoming

**Instructions for Filing a Complaint with the Commission**

Individuals interested in bringing an appropriate complaint to the attention of the Commission should take some time to compile a complete submission as outlined below. There is no complaint form.

1. Write a cover letter directed to the Commission containing a brief narrative of the facts of the complaint. In most cases, such a narrative need be no longer than a few pages.
2. Indicate in your complaint why you believe the issues raised in your complaint are accrediting issues. If possible, please review the Commission's Criteria for Accreditation on the Commission's Web site prior to writing this section. You should also indicate how you believe the Commission can assist you with this matter. Remember that the Commission cannot assist you in understanding your tuition bill, arranging for a refund of tuition, obtaining a higher grade for a course, seeking reinstatement to an academic program, etc.
3. Attach documentation to support your narrative wherever possible. (For example, if you make reference in your complaint to an institutional policy, include a copy of the policy with your complaint.) Helpful documentation might include relevant portions of the catalog, letters or e-mail exchanged between you and the institution, learning agreements, etc.
4. A few reminders--
  - o Please type your complaint or print very neatly.
  - o Please do not use abbreviations or nicknames (e.g., NMS or USC or U of N).
  - o Sign and date the cover letter.
  - o Include contact information for future correspondence, with a street address.
  - o If you are writing on behalf of someone else (son/daughter or client), be sure to provide that person's consent in writing to allow you to communicate with the Commission on his/her behalf.
5. Mail the letter and its attachments to the Commission's office at 230 South LaSalle Street, Suite 7-500, Chicago, IL 60604-1413. The Commission does not have an online complaint system and does not accept complaints via e-mail.

Please note that The Commission will not consider those complaints that are not in writing and do not contain the elements noted here. The Commission's complaint policy precludes it from considering matters more than five years old.

The Commission will acknowledge your complaint within thirty days of receiving it and let you know whether your complaint is complete and whether it raises issues that are related to accrediting requirements or whether it is an individual dispute outside the jurisdiction of the Commission's complaint policy.

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**Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities (NWCCU)**

8060 165th Avenue, NE, Suite 100, Redmond, WA 98052

Phone: 425-558-4224, Fax: 425-376-0596

Web: [www.nwccu.org](http://www.nwccu.org)

Alaska, Idaho, Montana, Nevada, Oregon, Utah, and Washington

The Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities considers complaints regarding member or candidate institutions only when the reported conditions are substantially documented and are related to the Commission's eligibility requirements, standards, and policies. Complaints must be submitted in writing with an original signature of the complainant and addressed to the [President](#).

The Commission assumes no responsibility for adjudicating isolated individual grievances; however, it may investigate individual complaints and reports to determine whether they reflect conditions within an institution that affect the quality of its programs or are detrimental to the general welfare. Before considering a complaint against a member or candidate institution, the Commission requires evidence that all relevant institutional grievance procedures have been exhausted. Complaints reviewed by the Commission are judged against the Commission's accreditation criteria in accordance with [Policy A-14 Complaints Regarding Member or Candidate Institutions](#).

The Commission interprets its complaint procedures to defer to courts when litigation is instituted over the same issue brought to the Commission by a complainant. This shall be Commission procedure unless a preliminary review by Commission staff of the complaint and the institution's response clearly indicates serious non-compliance with a Commission standard.

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### **Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) Commission on Colleges**

1866 Southern Lane, Decatur, GA 30033

Phone: 404-679-4500, Fax: 404-679-4528

Web: [www.sacscoc.org](http://www.sacscoc.org)

Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia

### **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.
3. 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.

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**Western Association of Schools and Colleges  
Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges (WASC-ACCJC)**

10 Commercial Boulevard, Suite 204, Novato, CA 94949  
Phone: 415-506-0234, Fax: 415-506-0238

**Accrediting Commission for Senior Colleges and Universities (WASC-ACSCU)**

985 Atlantic Avenue, Suite 100, Alameda, CA 94501  
Phone: 510-748-9001, Fax: 510-748-9797

Web: [www.wascweb.org](http://www.wascweb.org)

California, Hawaii, the Territories of Guam and American Samoa, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, the Republic of Palau, the Federated States of Micronesia, and the Republic of the Marshall Islands.

A person desiring to file a complaint (the "complainant") must satisfy the following seven criteria:

- (1) The complainant must answer fully all of the questions on the Complaint Form (See [www.wascsenior.org/wasc](http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc) for a copy of the Complaint Form). These questions include indicating the identity, address, and phone number of the complainant. The Complaint Form must be signed by the complainant, indicating that he/she has read and understands the WASC complaint process.
- (2) The complaint must disclose the existence of a grievance against the member institution and must further indicate that the institution dealt with the situation giving rise to the grievance in a manner that draws into substantial question the institution's compliance with a Commission Accreditation Standard or policy. The mere fact that the institution ruled in a manner that was adverse to the complainant does not raise a question as to whether a Commission Standard or policy has been violated.
- (3) A complaint must be properly documented and provide supporting evidence or documentation beyond general allegations.
- (4) The complainant must have attempted to resolve the underlying grievance with the institution prior to the filing of a complaint with the Commission. The complainant must indicate on its face that a serious effort to resolve the grievance was made prior to the filing of the complaint.
- (5) Ordinarily, the Commission will not investigate complaints where (1) the matter is currently in administrative proceedings, (2) litigation has been commenced, or (3) the matter involves criminal conduct by the complainant. For this reason, the complainant must confirm (page 3 on the Complaint Form) that none of these circumstances is present. However, in extraordinary circumstances, when it is determined in the preliminary review of the complaint by Commission staff that the complainant raises issues which are so immediate that delay may put the institution's accreditation in jeopardy, or delay has the potential to cause harm to students or to the campus community, the Commission may, at its discretion, choose to proceed with the review of the complaint.

Alternatively, if litigation has been commenced but the complainant and the member institution execute the Form Litigation Agreement, in which both agree not to involve the Commission's investigation in the litigation, the Commission will proceed to process the matter as a complaint if all other criteria have been satisfied (See Form Litigation Agreement on the WASC website).

(6) The complainant must agree that his or her identity and the nature of his or her grievance may be shared with the institution. In order to investigate a complaint, it is always necessary to share the particular grievance with the institution and obtain the institution's response to the complainant's allegations. This requires that the identity of the complainant and nature of the complaint be shared with the institution. The complainant should not reveal any fact or opinion to the Commission that he or she does not want to be shared with the institution.

(7) The complaint must be submitted in a timely manner. Because of the need for information to be current, except in extraordinary circumstances, the Commission will not consider complaints if one year or more has passed since the complainant completed the institution's grievance procedure.