

ACCSC Alert!

Information for
our member schools

To: ACCSC Accredited Institutions and Other Interested Parties
From: Michale S. McComis, Ed.D., Executive Director
Date: December 1, 2020
Subject: Guidance to the Standards of Accreditation and Revisions to the AACSC Bylaws

Guidance Issued:

- Distance Education Approval Requirement
- Leave of Absence Policy
- Program Discontinuation
- Utilization of Online Learning Tools in a Program Not Approved for Distance Education

Revisions to the AACSC Bylaws:

- Sustaining Fees

For additional information related to this *Accreditation Alert*, please contact Michale S. McComis, Ed.D., Executive Director, at 703.247.4520 or mccomis@accsc.org.

Guidance Issued: Distance Education Approval Requirement

As issued in its May 27, 2020 Guidance, the Commission indicated that schools issued temporary approval to offer distance education that intend to continue offering distance education after December 31, 2020 must submit the [Application for Initial Distance Education](#) or the [Application for Expansion of Distance Education](#), as appropriate. Anticipating a significant influx of applications, the Commission requested that schools submit the applications by September 15, 2020. Given the continued uncertainty regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission is reminding schools that intend on offering programs/courses via distance education after December 31, 2020 to submit the appropriate application as soon as possible but no later than December 31, 2020. As long as the Commission has received an application and corresponding fee by December 31, 2020, the school's temporary approval to offer distance education will remain intact until such time as the application has been approved.

A school that does not submit the appropriate application by December 31, 2020 and continues to offer a program/course via distance education after that date will be deemed to be offering distance education without approval.

Guidance Issued: Leave of Absence Policy

Section VII (A)(c)(3), Rules of Process and Procedure, Standards of Accreditation states that:

A leave of absence period may not exceed 180 days within any 12-month period. A school may grant more than one leave of absence provided that the combined leaves of absence do not exceed 180 days within the 12-month period and that each leave of absence is properly requested by the student in accordance with the school's policy and standards set forth here.

Given the current COVID-19 pandemic, the Commission is expanding its rule in this area for the period March 15, 2020 through June 30, 2021 and will allow a leave of absence period to be up to 365 days within any 12-month period. However, no 12-month period may be back-to-back. That is to say, the 12-month period cannot simply roll forward each day to allow for more than 365 consecutive days in the leave of absence period.

For example, a student whose leave of absence began on April 1, 2020 may have that leave extend to March 31, 2021. However, if the student does not return by April 1, 2021, then the school would need to follow its normal policy for students who do not return from a leave of absence within the allowable timeframe.

In cases where a school grants a leave of absence to a student who could not provide a request prior to the leave of absence period due to unforeseen circumstances such as a positive COVID-19 test, the school may secure the request at a later date so long as it is accompanied by the reason(s) for the leave of absence along with documentation to show that the leave of absence could not have been requested and approved in advance. In these cases, the beginning date of the leave of absence period can be no earlier than the date that the circumstances prevented the student from attending school.

In cases where a school has been forced to close due to COVID-19, the school may place students on an "administrative leave of absence" for the period of the closure. In such instances, the school does not need to have leave of absence requests signed from each student; however, the school must:

- Notify each student that the school is temporarily closed due to a COVID-19 related issue (e.g., government mandated closure, COVID-19 outbreak, etc.), the anticipated length of the closure, and that the student has been placed on an administrative leave of absence for the duration of the closure;

- Provide each student with a copy of the school's leave of absence policy;
- Provide each student with an explanation of the impact of the leave on the student's academic progress and financial aid as applicable and a school point of contact for student questions; and
- Require and have on file for each student a signed acknowledgement of receipt of this notification and leave of absence information.

The Commission will revisit this topic at its May 2021 meeting to decide whether the leave of absence expansion should be extended beyond June 30, 2021.

Guidance Issued: Program Discontinuation

In instances where a school chooses to discontinue a program, for reasons related to COVID-19 or otherwise, the school must properly notify ACCSC of this decision. In cases where there are no enrolled students, then the school must submit the [Notice of Discontinued Programs](#) form. In cases where the school chooses to discontinue a program while there are students currently enrolled in the program, then the school must submit the [Programmatic Teach-Out Approval Form](#). In the latter case, the Commission expects that schools will take every available step either to complete the training of all enrolled students or to ensure that all students have a transfer option so that they can complete their program of study in a comparable manner. A school that fails to fulfill its obligation to students will be deemed out of compliance with accrediting standards and will be required to demonstrate that the Commission can continue to express confidence in the school's ability to operate in a manner expected of an ACCSC-accredited institution.

Guidance Issued: Utilization of Online Learning Tools in a Program Not Approved for Distance Education

The allowance for schools to utilize online, or other, learning tools as a supplement in a program not approved for distance education is not new; however, given circumstances related to COVID-19 the Commission felt it useful to provide guidelines in these regards. Schools may establish policies that allow students who are subject to circumstances that limit their ability to attend in-person coursework to "attend" classes for a limited period using online learning supplemental resources. The school's policy should minimally cover the following types of components:

- The circumstances that would warrant such an accommodation for students – for example a student quarantining due to COVID-19 exposure or a student recovering from an accident;
- The limits of the accommodation regarding time and qualifying course types – for example up to three weeks and only for the lecture/didactic portions of courses;
- The resources the student would need in order to take advantage of the accommodation – for example access to a computer, webcam, and the internet or the ability to receive and access recorded classroom lectures;
- Any requirements for access to learning materials – for example, the student's ability to use the school's learning resource system remotely as required to complete assignments; and
- Any requirements and allowances for make-up work in cases where accommodations could not be made – for example, requirements to attend a hands-on lab make-up section outside of normal course schedules.

These guidelines offer but a few examples; however, there are several other scenarios and circumstances that could qualify for such accommodations and which would not require distance education approval from ACCSC. The Commission does not require notification or approval of these types of learning accommodations and expects that in making such accommodations:

- The school establishes appropriate policies and practices conforming to the spirit and intent of these guidelines;
- Such practices are limited in duration, application, and in scope to only those students whose circumstances qualify; and
- Such practices are not used to replace entirely the approved delivery method of a program.

Conflicting Guidance

The Commission’s guidance in the above areas may be different from and may be more or less stringent than guidance provided by other regulatory agencies such as state approving agencies or the U.S. Department of Education. Pursuant to ACCSC’s *Rules of Process and Procedures*, in all instances the more stringent requirement applies and schools should make a concerted effort to know and understand the guidance being given across all applicable governing regulatory agencies.

Revisions to the AACSC Bylaws

Based upon the results of an affirmative vote at the Annual Meeting of the Accreditation Alliance of Career Schools and Colleges (“AACSC”), the Commission has revised the *AACSC Bylaws* in the area regarding the annual sustaining fee calculation. The new language is as follows:

New language in **bold, red, & italicized text**; deleted language in ~~blue strikethrough text~~.

ARTICLE III – DUES AND FEES

Section 3.01 – Dues

- a. Amount: Effective ~~July~~**January** 1, 20**17**~~22~~, members of the Corporation shall pay dues annually in accordance with the following:
 - i. If the gross tuition of the member is ~~\$1,000,000~~***\$850,000*** or less, the dues shall be \$1,500 plus .00286 times gross tuition over \$200,000;
 - ii. If the gross tuition of the member is greater than ~~\$1,000,000~~***\$850,000*** but not more than ~~\$3,000,000~~***\$2,500,000***, dues shall be \$3,500 plus .0011 times gross tuition over ~~\$1,000,000~~***\$850,000***; and
 - iii. If the gross tuition of the member is greater than ~~\$3,000,000~~***\$2,500,000***, dues shall be \$5,500 plus .000165 times gross tuition over ~~\$3,000,000~~***\$2,500,000***.

Based on this revision, the four Sustaining Fee Tiers (I-IV) are as follows:

Tier	Sustaining Fee Due
I	If the gross tuition of the member is \$200,000 or less, the dues shall be \$1,500
II	If the gross tuition of the member is greater than \$200,000 up to \$850,000, then the dues shall be \$1,500 plus .00286 times gross tuition over \$200,000

III	If the gross tuition of the member is greater than \$850,000 but not more than \$2,500,000, dues shall be \$3,500 plus .0011 times gross tuition over \$1,000,000
IV	If the gross tuition of the member is greater than \$2,500,000, dues shall be \$5,500 plus .000165 times gross tuition over \$2,500,000

As discussed in the September 1, 2020 Accreditation Alert and during the presentation made at the AACSC Annual Meeting, in order to reduce the impact of the changes on the school the Commission will delay the implementation of the change for one year and the revisions to *Article III, Section 3.01(a)(i-iii)* of the *AACSC Bylaws* will go into effect January 1, 2022. In the interim, the Commission will cap the Tier II sustaining fee at \$3,500 and the Tier III sustaining fee at 5,500.