

March 17, 2020

SACSCOC General Guidance for Institutions Which Must Suspend Operations Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

We at SACSCOC are aware that our member institutions are making decisions with the health and welfare of students, faculty, and staff – and their families – uppermost in mind. We also know that decisions made by the federal, state, and local governments will have a profound effect on institutional options. In some cases, institutions may choose (or be forced to) suspend all operations for a time in order to preserve public health. Given our best information about this pandemic, such a suspension could well extend beyond the scheduled end of the current term.

At this point, most institutions appear to be using various technologies to support the continuity of instruction, asynchronously and at a distance. Many are raising questions about the integrity of educational courses and programs, however, should institutions be forced to suspend operations to the point where they can no longer support the continuity of instruction. Some institutions are already planning to accelerate course delivery in order to ensure that the stated learning outcomes and competencies of the courses are met. Another option might involve offering students alternative ways to demonstrate the competencies required by the course(s) within the current academic term dates, 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 re-enroll in a subsequent term without paying tuition, or conferring “pass/fail” grades and considering providing a reasonable exception to institutional policies regarding completing work for an “incomplete.” 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. In addition, the suspension of operations would likely mean that events like commencement would be postponed or cancelled.

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 would probably either consider students to have been withdrawn for this term or find some formula to determine whether students could be awarded partial credit for the work completed. In all likelihood, 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. In order to maintain good information, however, an institution that suspends all operations should send a letter of notification to me as President of SACSCOC. 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 my office. Likewise, institutions that have

chosen to shorten their academic calendar should also send that information in a letter to me. If you need any additional guidance, please feel free to contact me.

STAY SAFE AND HEALTHY!!!

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